

Tuesday
30 June 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Tuesday 30 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

Tuesday 30 June 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

JUSTICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Magistrate Numbers

1. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the number of magistrates. [900697]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): Magistrates play a vital role in delivering local justice, and we value their contribution as volunteers. Up to 2029, we are increasing the number of magistrates to 21,000, which is a 50% rise. We have quadrupled investment in magistrate recruitment with a new national campaign, which I hope hon. Members have seen—it launched in the autumn—and we will have more frequent regional campaigns going forward.

Warinder Juss: Although I support the Government's reform of the justice system to tackle the courts backlog, it is clear that more cases will be going to the magistrates court. Estimates suggest that will require the recruitment of an additional 6,000 to 7,000 magistrates by 2029, but previous attempts to increase their numbers have been unsuccessful. Will the Secretary of State please tell me what the Government are doing differently this time around? What practical steps is his Department taking to recruit and retain magistrates? Finally, what contingency plans are in place if the recruitment target is not met?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is true that our target is ambitious, but it is achievable. We are recruiting the same number of magistrates into the system as was the case back in 2014, so we have done it before and we can get there. What has changed this time is that there is a national taskforce to fast-track the process and halve recruitment times, and we are working with the judiciary to ensure that magistrates feel more appreciated. It is also important to say that I will provide an update on the numbers, which will be published on 9 July, and while I do not want to pre-empt that publication, it is good news that we are already seeing progress.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Magistrates are a humongous volunteer force, which the Magistrates' Association says are close to breaking point. With the Government aiming to increase the number of magistrates to almost 21,000, what will the Secretary of State do to attract more young people and working-age people in full-time roles to that challenging volunteer role, for which they might have to give up some of their paid employment?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Member makes a good point. The reform of expenses in this area is important. We are seeing more self-employed people come forward for the magistracy, and we are seeing good numbers in relation to ethnic minorities and diversity right across the country. It is important that younger people feel able to volunteer in this way.

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

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I wish the Lord Chancellor luck with the recruitment campaign—I wish him luck generally—but even if he is successful, those magistrates will be newly recruited, and he is also asking magistrates to try much longer and more complex cases by increasing their sentencing powers. Those two things do not really square up. Is his solution to recruit a lot more district judges and therefore have a lot more judge-only courts in the magistrates court as well as the Crown court?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend's point is apposite and on the money. Alongside this recruitment, we are appointing more judges to the magistrates court. We are recruiting up to 30 new district judges to start sitting in the second half of 2027 in addition to the latest round of recruitment, which should result in more than 100 new judges sitting from December 2026 onwards.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Yesterday I joined members of the Justice Committee, including the Chair, on a trip to Nottingham as part of our review into youth justice. I want to press the Secretary of State a little further on the age of magistrates, because we were told that there is a real concern about recruiting people who have only a few years of work to go, as that is not a sustainable way forward. There was also a concern about the lack of legal advisers, which, although more are being recruited, is still causing a problem. Will he comment on the relationship between legal advisers and magistrates?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady makes a good point. We are reforming legal advisers' pay and career progression. She is right that our magistrates courts need those legal advisers—they have to be in place across the country. We are funding more legal advisers and recruiting 100 new trainee legal advisers each year for the next three years.

Mr Speaker: You could always reopen the court in Chorley—plenty of magistrates.

Strategic Lawsuits against Public Participation

2. **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to tackle strategic lawsuits against public participation. [900698]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): I recognise the profound financial and psychological impact of so-called SLAPPs and the threat that they represent to democracy and free speech. Last year we implemented new laws to tackle SLAPPs relating to economic crime and to stop wealthy elites from effectively silencing critics, journalists and activists. I have confirmed that we intend, when parliamentary time allows, to introduce legislation that comprehensively tackles all SLAPPs.

Dr Huq: Within our ancient, unwritten constitutional democracy, e-petitions have quickly established themselves as a way for the public to have their voices heard. So imagine the shock of my constituent Jason when he was served with a scary legal notice to desist by one of the world's largest law firms, instructed by a megabucks developer, for collecting signatures on Change.org against a local planning application. Will my right hon. Friend tell me when the legislation will be introduced? I know that the Prime Minister wrote in *The Guardian* in October 2024 that the rich and powerful should not intimidate the little guy through such legal processes. Right now, this feels for Jason like a bit of a slap in the face.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for continuing to champion this issue. She is right that SLAPPs go well beyond journalism and issues of free speech; we have heard harrowing stories of SLAPPs being used to silence sexual abuse survivors, cosmetic surgery patients unhappy with the quality of their treatment, and even tenants who have complained to landlords. The economically related SLAPP measures represent a positive step forward, but there is more to do. We will bring forward legislation, and we are also working across the House to see what more we can do over this next period. We are determined to move in this area before the next general election.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): Self-swab rape kits are not admissible in court, yet the company Enough is using SLAPPs to attack rape charities and survivors who dare to speak out against it. This is exactly why we need the sort of legislation that has been mentioned to come forward: to protect the victims and survivors of sexual violence who have been ruthlessly targeted. I implore the Government to please bring forward the legislation at the earliest possible opportunity and to ban Enough from having its illegal equipment in our country.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that very serious issue. We are aware of it, it is hugely concerning and it underlines why we have to legislate. I hope that, by working cross-party, we can move swiftly in this area.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): I am hugely concerned about the manner in which SLAPPs are being used to intimidate and harass individuals in public service. In my constituency alone, I have seen two separate instances of parish councillors being bullied out of public office. Both Hemingford and Ellington parish councils have been targeted due to planning concerns—one by a local company and one by a wealthy individual. Such an attempt to stifle democracy is unacceptable. Parish councils are the bedrock of democracy and the brazen attempt to railroad individual parish councillors is unacceptable. What are the Government doing to protect local councillors from being left exposed to SLAPPs, which deters people from participating in democratic representation?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman's question shows the range of people we see being intimidated before the court. He will be aware of Catherine Belton and her

book "Putin's People", Tom Burgis and his book "Kleptopia", and Tom Latchem and his care home investigation. They have all been on the receiving end of a SLAPP. We have to act, as I have said. We will work cross-party. There are some vehicles by which we might well be able to see progress over the coming months and, on Second Reading, we will set out our position regarding some of the private Member's Bills that the hon. Gentleman's colleagues have tabled.

Jury Trials

3. **Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the potential impact of proposed changes to jury trials on the criminal justice system. [900699]

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): This Government inherited a criminal justice system in crisis, with record and rising Crown court backlogs. We simply cannot accept the intolerable delays currently faced by victims, witnesses and defendants alike. Sir Brian Leveson's conclusion was clear and emphatic: it is only with investment, efficiencies and pragmatic structural reform that we can begin to turn the tide on the backlog and deliver swifter justice for victims. Those are the measures being brought forward in the Government's Courts and Tribunals Bill.

Mr Mohindra: Will the Minister confirm that the Deputy Prime Minister's legacy is that he will be the first Justice Secretary in the United Kingdom to restrict the centuries-old right to jury trials?

Sarah Sackman: There is no right to a jury trial in this country; there is a right to a fair trial, and timeliness is a key ingredient of a fair trial. If someone has to wait years for their day in court, that simply is not fair, whether they are a defendant or a witness. Of course, there is precedent for this, including from someone who is perhaps the hon. Gentleman's hero: the late, great Mrs Thatcher. The fact is that we have always made a policy choice about who can access jury trial, and we are going to make that policy choice again to deliver swifter justice for victims.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): There are concerns that the changes the Government have made will give more power to judges to make decisions on their own, so what is the Minister doing to monitor the impact of these changes and ensure that there is transparency at all stages? Can I add, following your comment, Mr Speaker, that we would like to see Harlow magistrates court reopen as well as Chorley magistrates court?

Sarah Sackman: My hon. Friend, as always, is an outstanding advocate for Harlow. Our judges take the judicial oath to act without fear or favour, which is why our judiciary is the finest in the world, but of course transparency matters, which is why the recording and transcription of proceedings and the review that we have committed to, to test the impact of our reforms, are so important. I observe directly the training that our judges receive, which is first class.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Justice Secretary.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Justice Secretary and his ministerial team say that the attack on jury trials is needed to deal with the backlog in the courts. When the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) takes over and scraps the policy on jury trials, does the Minister predict that court backlogs will get worse?

Sarah Sackman: The hon. Gentleman mischaracterises the Government's policy, as so many do. We are preserving jury trials as a cornerstone of British justice, but it is no justice at all if someone is waiting years for that jury trial. When witnesses and complainants pull out of the process and those trials collapse, that is no justice at all, whoever is in charge. The dereliction of duty by the Conservatives—the so-called party of law and order—allowed the Crown court backlog to run out of control. They buried their heads in the sand, but we will not do so. We will take on Sir Brian Leveson's recommendations and make the difficult choices to bring down our backlog and deliver justice for the British people.

Nick Timothy: I listened carefully but do not think the Minister answered my question—[*Interruption.*] We will see, won't we? I am replying to the Justice Secretary's comment from a sedentary position. I think the Minister has just made it very difficult for herself to stay in the Ministry of Justice when the right hon. Member for Makerfield takes over. The Government are continuing to say that the attack on jury trials is vital and there is no alternative, but we know that is not what the next leader of the Labour party thinks. He has made it clear that he is going to scrap the policy, so will the Minister spell out what this means? She is saying that the right hon. Member for Makerfield is wrong, isn't she?

Sarah Sackman: I think the hon. Gentleman is referring to an interview with my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield that took place in December, well before this House voted conclusively on Second Reading. Any ministerial team would have to take on this challenge. Unlike the Conservatives, we will not duck it. What my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield actually said was that we need to pause and reflect. The evidence base is clear. Sir Brian Leveson offered a blueprint. We cannot bring down the backlog without structural reform—[*Interruption.*] The hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) says we can. As so often happens, the Conservatives ignore the experts and the evidence. They crashed the justice system, and we know who suffers: it is the British citizen. We will not allow it.

Women's Prison Estate: Biological Males

4. **Douglas Lumsden** (Aberdeen South) (Con): How many biological male prisoners are held in the general women's estate. [900700]

15. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): How many biological male prisoners are held in the general women's estate. [900711]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): There are fewer than five transgender women in the general women's estate. The exact figure cannot be provided without breaching data protection legislation obligations.

Douglas Lumsden: In Scotland two weeks ago, the Court of Session ruled it unlawful to hold biological males anywhere on the women's prison estate, and even the SNP Government, after a year of dither and hundreds of thousands of pounds of public money wasted, have now been forced to accept this and move biological males out of women's prisons. Can the Minister set out a timeline for all women's prisons right across the UK to remove biological males so that they can fully comply with the Supreme Court ruling brought about by For Women Scotland?

Jake Richards: The judgment in Scotland relates to prison rules that apply in Scotland only—England and Wales have separate rules, as the hon. Gentleman will no doubt know. I gently remind him that the rules in England and Wales were introduced in 2023. They mean that transgender women with male genitalia or any history of violent or sexual offending are not held in the women's estate, except in truly exceptional cases that are signed off at a ministerial level. This Government inherited those rules, and Ministers have not approved the placement of any transgender women in women's prisons. This is a classic case of this iteration of the Conservative party spending all its time in opposition criticising the very policy that it introduced.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): We have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) that the Supreme Court has clarified the meaning of sex in the Equality Act 2010 and that Scotland has taken the relevant steps. The Minister responded to my hon. Friend with a fairly vague answer about what needs to happen in England. We know that there are women who are not biological females in the women's estate in England and Wales. When will women get the same protections as in Scotland?

Jake Richards: The policy that we are implementing in England and Wales is lawful; it complies with the Prison Rules 1999 and the Equality Act 2010. The guidance from the Equality and Human Rights Commission has come out. We have 40 days to consider and ratify it, and we will do so.

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): Given that we are thinking about the women's prison estate more generally, and given that the Swansea residential women's centre was due to open in 2024 but now does not look like it will open at all, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Welsh women can access alternatives to custody?

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we are determined to drive down the population of women who are in prison where it is safe to do so. That is why Lord Timpson set up the women's justice board, which has taken huge steps not just in improving resources for women in custody, but in ensuring that we have plans to reduce the population wherever possible.

Prisoner Releases in Error

5. **Dr Caroline Johnson** (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of prisoners released in error since July 2024. [900701]

14. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What estimate he has made of the number of prisoners released in error since July 2024. [900710]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): Official statistics for the year to March 2025 show 262 recorded releases in error, and the latest figure will be published next month. In April we also released ad hoc data from April 2025 to March 2026, which was published alongside Dame Lynne Owens's independent review into releases in error.

Dr Johnson: I understand that the total is 441, which over a two-year period is the worst on record and means that, in less than 24 months, Labour has released more prisoners in error than were released in the previous six years combined. That is a disgrace. How many of those released in error early were convicted of rape?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Lady was not listening to the figures I gave. We are seeing a reduction in the numbers because of the review that I asked Dame Lynne Owens to lead. We are implementing the recommendations so that the numbers come down, but I have to ask the hon. Lady: who left us with the mess? Who saw 800 releases under their watch? When did they update Parliament? When did they set up a review? They did absolutely nothing. We have a paper-based system. That is why we are introducing digital ID.

Jack Rankin: It is a disgrace that hundreds of prisoners have been released in error under this Government, but more concerning are the thousands it will have been an error to release early. The Secretary of State did not answer the previous question, so let's try another. As we heard in this House yesterday, child groomers and rapists are due to be let out years early, with their victims being informed by letter, so will he tell my constituents exactly why, under this Government, dangerous criminals will be in their communities rather than in prison?

Mr Lammy: Because you almost broke the prison system. You built just 500 places in 14 years, and we had to fix that system. You had 17 different forms of guidance on early release in the last year, all done in secret. That is why we introduced the Sentencing Act 2026, which got Royal Assent in January, and why we are doing everything we can to build more prison places—14,000 prison places by 2031.

Mr Speaker: Order. I gently say to the Justice Secretary, who was saying "you", that I have no responsibility for any of this.

Support for Victims of Abuse

6. **Ashley Dalton** (West Lancashire) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support women and children who have experienced abuse to access support services. [900702]

7. **Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support women and children who have experienced abuse to access support services. [900703]

20. **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What steps his Department is taking to support women and children who have experienced abuse to access support services. [900716]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): This Government are supporting victims with more than £1 billion of funding, including £499 million for safe housing for victims of abuse, and the largest ever investment—£550 million—in victim support services, over the next three years. Under the victims code, all victims are entitled to referral to victim support services.

Ashley Dalton: I recently visited the Liberty Centre in my constituency, a fantastic charitable organisation that supports individuals and families who have been affected by domestic abuse and violence. It told me that it could fill its refuge places three times over, but it does not have the resources. Will the Minister say what the Government are doing to ensure that voluntary and charitable organisations that do such excellent work in this space continue to be supported and sustained?

Catherine Atkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the hugely vital work that the Liberty Centre does. Local authorities in England have a statutory duty to assess and address the need for support, with safe accommodation for all domestic abuse victims, including children who need to flee their home. Lancashire county council has been allocated more than £3.3 million to support important local services, such as those delivered by the Liberty Centre—part of the £499 million the Government have committed to councils to commission lifesaving accommodation support for victims, in our mission to halve violence against women and girls within a decade.

Dr Sullivan: In Gravesham, I recently visited the new Maltings child contact centre hosted by the City Praise Centre in Chalk. It is the only one in north Kent, and provides a calm, safe place for parents to meet their children. It takes place on a Saturday once a month from 10 am to 12 noon. Given the vital role that local organisations play in supporting families to connect and reconnect safely, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that services such as these are more widely available?

Catherine Atkinson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Child contact services provide safe and neutral spaces for children to meet parents or other family members that they do not live with as part of supervised or supported contact arrangements. I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the work done at the new Maltings centre. This Government are committed to supporting this sector and we provide £450,000 to assist supported child contact centres in England and Wales, as well as funding their national association for its work on training standards and monitoring.

Melanie Onn: The brilliant Denise Farman has been the chief officer of Women's Aid in Grimsby for the last 25 years. She has pioneered move-on accommodation for those women and children leaving refuge to start to build the foundations of their new life, which has been remarkably successful. She notes, however, that there

are more than 2,000 empty properties across north-east Lincolnshire. Has the Department had any discussions with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about how we can better integrate projects such as Denise's for this move-on and supported accommodation, and about linking it up with an empty home strategy?

Catherine Atkinson: It is powerful to hear about the impact that Women's Aid is having in my hon. Friend's constituency. I visited Black Country Women's Aid and Solace Women's Aid in London and listened to victims and survivors who told me what it meant to them to have been provided with a place of safety and sanctuary. The Government's strategy for halving violence against women and girls is truly cross-departmental, and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have committed £499 million to councils for safe accommodation for victims. The Government want more empty homes brought back into use and intend to strengthen the ability of local authorities to do so.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): I recently met a constituent whose child was subject to repeated sexual abuse. She found access to justice very difficult and is still awaiting trial, but now fears that the accuser will not be found fit for trial and will be subject to a trial on the facts. She is now fearful that if the accuser is found guilty on the facts, they will not be subject to appropriate sanctions—for example, being subject to DBS checks. What reassurances can the Minister give my constituent about the resources allocated to such prosecutions, both by the police and the criminal justice service, about whether the bar for somebody being appropriate to stand trial is correct, and what sanctions will be applied, because they are fearful that this person will be at liberty in the wider community, subsequent to conviction?

Catherine Atkinson: Under this Government, prosecutions and convictions for child sexual abuse have gone up, but I would be willing to meet the hon. Member to discuss this case.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Children are often forgotten when abuse has taken place in a household. Following the brutal murder of Natalie McNally and her unborn son, Dean, in my constituency in December 2022, why does the law still fail to recognise the death of an unborn baby caused by criminal violence as a separate offence? On the day Stephen McCullagh murdered Natalie, he murdered her unborn child, too, yet there has been no conviction and no acknowledgment that baby Dean was of inherent value. Will the Government commit to reviewing the law, and will the Minister meet me to discuss it?

Catherine Atkinson: I am very happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss this issue. Domestic violence and all its ramifications are absolutely the priority of this Government, which is why we are determined to halve violence against women and girls within a decade.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Disgracefully, there are some in this House who believe that it is for the England football team to prevent domestic abuse, whereas we all know that it is for perpetrators to stop their abuse. As for those making more positive and valuable

contributions in this space, will the Minister join me in celebrating the amazing work of Eastbourne Survivors, who support folks on an entirely voluntary basis to recover from the abuse they have experienced throughout their lives?

Catherine Atkinson: I absolutely join the hon. Gentleman in celebrating the work of Eastbourne Survivors. He is right that domestic violence is a choice for perpetrators; it is not about the score when the final whistle goes. To frame it in any other way does a significant disservice in allowing perpetrators to try to deflect from their actions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dr Kieran Mullan (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): One thing that we know children will contact victim support services about is the letters they receive telling them that their abusers will be getting out of prison earlier. Victim Support supports more than 814,000 victims every year, and its CEO, Katie Kempen, had this to say:

"Having already endured long waits for justice—often with their lives on hold—and the distress of going to court, many will feel shocked and frightened to learn that offenders may now be released months or even years earlier than expected."

She is right, isn't she?

Catherine Atkinson: It is important that there is transparency and communication with victims, unlike what we saw under the Conservatives; when they were letting people out, they did so with almost no notice, if any at all. I absolutely acknowledge the concerns from victims, but what is not in the interests of victims is having prisons so overcrowded that perpetrators cannot be housed in cells. What the last Government did to our prisons—leaving them so full that the entire criminal justice system was at risk of collapsing—is an absolute disgrace, and yet again, it is this Government who are clearing up their mess.

Dr Mullan: I am in wholehearted agreement with the Minister that transparency is really important. One thing that would help Victim Support and other organisations to plan their response is knowing how many people are getting out and what offences they have committed, but like us, they are in the dark.

I thank you, Mr Speaker, because your intervention yesterday prompted the Department into publishing a response to my question, but it was not an answer. Shockingly, the Government now officially say that they do not know how many people they are letting out in September. If the Minister and the Government refuse to tell us, can they at least let victim support services and victims know when they will tell this House, victim support services and the wider public how many perpetrators of serious offences they are letting out and when that will start?

Catherine Atkinson: The Government have published the victim impact assessment and are ensuring that people are communicated with. What is essential is that the Government have a violence against women and girls strategy, which will ensure that we are pursuing perpetrators, supporting victims and stopping violence in the first place. This Government, yet again, are clearing up the Conservatives' mess, whether it is to do with prisons, backlogs or the investment we are making to support victims.

Family Justice System

8. **Max Wilkinson** (Cheltenham) (LD): What steps he is taking to reform the family justice system. [900704]

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): The Government are reforming the family justice system to better support families and children. We are rolling out the successful child-focused courts nationally. That means that in Northamptonshire, Coventry and Warwickshire, Northumbria, north Durham, Cleveland and south Durham, Lancashire, Cumbria, York and North Yorkshire, and Cheshire and Merseyside, you have a child-focused court coming to a court near you. We are developing a cross-system family justice strategy and legislating for new child safety measures that ensure child welfare continues to be prioritised.

Max Wilkinson: When family courts decide that care is to be split between parents 50:50, we might expect that fair financial arrangements follow. However, when courts make that ruling, and the Child Maintenance Service makes decisions based on which parent is the recipient of child benefit, one parent often finds they are significantly worse off than the other. Will Ministers have a word with their colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions to ensure that the justice system and the CMS work more closely to achieve financial fairness for both parents in cases where courts rule for 50:50 care splits?

Sarah Sackman: In individual cases, how those financial settlements are made is a matter for the judiciary. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that, as in so many cases, the family court is downstream of decisions that have been made elsewhere, and it is quite right that there should be join-up between areas of Government. I am happy to take away his direction that we should liaise with DWP colleagues to ensure that child maintenance is addressed fairly.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): Will the Minister reassure me that we remain committed to repealing in this Parliament the presumption of contact in family courts, to bring full justice to the 67 children murdered at the hands of abusive ex-partners with whom contact should never have been granted?

Sarah Sackman: We are resolute and committed to repealing the presumption of parental involvement in the Children Act 1989. The campaigning efforts of the likes of Claire Throssell have been little short of heroic, and we will redouble our efforts to ensure that the repeal of that presumption comes about through the Courts and Tribunals Bill.

Prison Smuggling: Drones

10. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help tackle the smuggling of contraband by drones into prisons. [900706]

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): One of the first things I announced when appointed as the Secretary of State for Justice was a £40 million extra investment to strengthen prison security, including £10 million for counter-drone measures

such as netting and wire. I recently visited Woodhill prison to look at how we are tackling this growing threat and committed a further £35 million to install heavy-duty grilles on windows at 17 of our most high-risk prison sites.

Ms Minns: Will my right hon. Friend outline what learnings the Government have taken from international expertise to develop and shape counter-drone measures in UK prisons?

Mr Lammy: My hon. Friend knows that, because of the war in Ukraine, drone technology is moving at pace. That is why, when I was in Ukraine in January, we announced that we are working with the UK defence innovation fund—an innovative fund—to set up an international business competition to ensure that the Prison Service keeps up at pace with moving technology. We are also working with our French and Italian colleagues, who are experiencing the same threat. I have spoken to Justice Ministers about how we share best practice.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): The use of drones by criminal gangs to smuggle contraband into prisons is of particular concern, especially in open prisons such as Kirkham prison in my constituency, where there is a vast amount of open estate to be able to drop it off. While I was the police and crime commissioner for Lancashire, we invested in counter-drone units. The brilliant thing is that they use signals to jam the drones, which forces them to shut down and return to the point from which they were deployed, often leading the police to the place where the criminals are hiding. Will the Secretary of State consider working closely with police forces deploying this technology to use it more broadly in countering the drone threat in the UK?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. The director-general of the National Crime Agency has directed police chiefs to work with the Prison Service to jointly tackle the threat from criminal drones. We saw that recently in a large-scale joint operation that resulted in more than 200 arrests. He is absolutely right; that blocking technology is available to the system. I was in Doncaster visiting our specialist unit that does this work, often at night, to ensure that we are bringing down those drones.

Modernising Wills: Law Commission Report

11. **Fabian Hamilton** (Leeds North East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to implement the recommendations in the Law Commission report entitled “Modernising Wills Law”, published on 16 May 2025. [900707]

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): The law governing wills has not changed substantially since 1837. It is in that context that the Government welcome the Law Commission’s comprehensive and thorough review; we will be taking our time to consider it, and will respond in due course. Innovations such as electronic wills could improve accessibility and increase the number of people making wills, putting them and their loved ones in a more secure position.

Fabian Hamilton: In 2018, I began my campaign to abolish the rule that stipulates that in England and Wales, remarriage revokes any previous will. It is clear that such a rule is no longer fit for purpose and opens the door to abuse—unscrupulous individuals often marry vulnerable people, enabling them to inherit their estate upon death. Will the Government now commit to accepting the Law Commission's recommendation that that archaic rule be abolished?

Sarah Sackman: I commend my hon. Friend on his work, looking at how we can combat predatory marriages and those who prey on the vulnerable. The Law Commission's recommendation that the rule that marriage revokes a will be abolished is well evidenced. We will take a holistic look at the issue, but we will certainly consider carefully.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I welcome the hon. Member for Leeds North East (Fabian Hamilton) back after his operation. It is good to see him again, and I wish him a speedy recovery.

I thank the Minister for her answer. What steps is her Department taking to ensure that the insights and the drafting expertise in the "Modernising Wills Law" report are taken on board by the Northern Ireland Executive, to ensure families in Northern Ireland can benefit from similar modernised protections against predatory marriage through updated legislation?

Sarah Sackman: As we consider the Law Commission's recommendations, we will of course consider how they might lead to law changes and law reform across the United Kingdom. However, where matters are devolved, we respect that as well.

Knife Crime: Custodial Sentences

12. **Mike Wood** (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people receiving immediate custodial sentences for knife crime offences. [900708]

21. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What assessment he has made of trends in the number of people receiving immediate custodial sentences for knife crime offences. [900717]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): Knife crime is a serious offence, and the courts rightly treat it as such. Immediate custodial sentences continue to be widely used, particularly for repeat possession, with sentence lengths increasing over time. Alongside this, the Government have strengthened powers through the Crime and Policing Act 2026, including tougher penalties and new offences to keep communities safe. No one should believe a word the Opposition say on knife crime—they broke their promise that anyone caught carrying a knife would face a presumption of immediate imprisonment, and they slashed neighbourhood police numbers as knife crime soared under their watch.

Mike Wood: I thank the Minister for that answer, but the latest figures show that the average custodial sentence for an adult knife or offensive weapon offence is just over eight months. Under the Sentencing Act 2026, there has been a presumption since March that any

sentence below 12 months should be suspended, so what action is the Minister taking to ensure that that presumption does not effectively decriminalise many knife offences?

Jake Richards: I am incredibly proud of this Government's work on knife crime, whether that is taking zombie knives off the streets or ensuring early interventions are used more effectively for children caught carrying knives. That is why knife crime is going down under this Government, having soared under the last Government.

I have two points to make about the presumption introduced by the Sentencing Act. First, it is just that—a presumption. The Conservatives keep talking about scrapping short sentences, but that is nonsense; it is a presumption. Secondly, that presumption was first proposed by the Conservative Government in their final few years in office. They now oppose the very policies they were suggesting.

Bob Blackman: The fact is that more and more young people are carrying knives, supposedly to defend themselves. That leads to knife crime on our streets—certainly in my constituency, it is a serious problem, particularly between young people. We have now experienced stabbings in schools, which is disastrous. Those who are caught carrying knives should face a custodial sentence, because unless we have a deterrent, people will continue to carry knives and, when threatened, they will use them. Will the Minister take the action required to ensure the message goes out that if you carry a knife, you are likely to end up in prison?

Jake Richards: The hon. Member is right that deterrence is an important factor. He raises significant cases from his constituency. In my neighbouring constituency, in Sheffield, a young boy was murdered just last year as a result of knife crime, so the issue is close to my mind in my role as a constituency MP and as a Minister. This is a long-standing problem, one that requires education and early intervention. The hon. Member is right that custodial sentences and deterrence play a part, but it is a much more wide-ranging problem and we need to be careful about those interventions early on, particularly with children who carry knives because they feel they need to do so to protect themselves. I am not convinced that a custodial sentence is the right solution in every case.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): Ten days ago, 17-year-old Jamal Coombes was killed in my constituency as a result of knife crime. Every young person deserves to live safely and fulfil their potential. His life was taken too soon. What actions are this Government taking right now to have a more co-ordinated approach with schools, public health and the police not only to prevent such awful tragedies, but to ensure that our young people feel safe and do not feel the need to have to carry a knife?

Jake Richards: On behalf of the Government, I send my condolences to Jamal's family. Every incident of knife crime is a tragedy. Through our plan to halve knife crime over the next decade, we are undertaking a comprehensive, cross-Government approach to reduce violence and protect communities. That includes measures

such as banning dangerous weapons and tightening rules around online sales, which has a real effect. We are funding more targeted enforcement activity, in particular in the 280 hotspots where we know, because the data suggests it, that knife crime is happening. We are making sure that our interventions are focused, but there is a lot more to do. Knife crime is coming down, but we are not celebrating that for a minute. Every incident is a tragedy, and we will continue to work hard to bring the rate down.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I know that you are a great supporter of the Parliamentary Knowledge Foundation. Next Thursday, it will be bringing MPs to Empire Fighting Chance, a boxing gym in my constituency that has been involved in the Government and Idris Elba-led anti-knife crime coalition. Does the Minister agree that listening to youth perspectives is crucial in the battle to reduce knife crime and that we should be commending the young people at Empire Fighting Chance for their involvement in what is often a deeply personal issue for them? They have lost friends and family to knife crime, but they want to be part of the efforts to address it.

Jake Richards: My hon. Friend is right that community initiatives are at the heart of how we confront knife crime and crime more generally. I credit the boxing gym in her constituency. I know that Dinnington boxing club does great work in my constituency, too, and I have been there on numerous occasions. Just last month we published the youth justice White Paper, and at its heart is ensuring that we involve children's voices so that our interventions, as policymakers in this place and in government, are tailored to the challenges and issues that children are facing. She is absolutely right, and we are getting on with the job of doing it.

Court Transcripts

13. **Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): What steps he is taking to make all court transcripts free for victims. [900709]

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): The Government are committed to greater transparency and access to justice in our courts. Transcripts are an important part of that, and I know that there has been a lot of cross-party campaigning on this issue. Victims of sexual offences and bereaved families of homicide can already request a free copy of sentencing remarks. From spring 2027, eligibility will be extended so that all victims can request them.

Tessa Munt: I am particularly keen that this matter is progressed at speed, because the fees for victims who want to get their transcripts are eye-watering. My constituent is a victim of domestic violence and her barrister needs transcripts of her hearing in the family court now to appeal against procedural irregularities and errors in the published judgment, but the transcripts will cost her thousands of pounds. Will the Minister address this gross inequality and waive court transcript fees as soon as she can for all victims, including for the family courts—with the requisite redactions to protect anonymity of the parties—to ensure robust justice, transparency and fairness for all?

Sarah Sackman: I am sorry to hear about the hon. Member's constituent's case. Technology in this area is a potential game changer. However, as with all technological adoption, particularly in the justice arena, we have got to ensure accuracy for the very reason she says. The transcript has to be accurate, and redactions have to be made where necessary to protect individual participants in the case and to ensure reporting restrictions. That all has to be done safely, but I can assure her that the Ministry of Justice is progressing at pace with the adoption of AI, which will be a game changer in the years to come.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I listened carefully to what the Minister has just said. Court transcripts are important to a victim's sense of justice served, but does she agree that access to this very important information should never be dependent on the victim's ability to pay?

Sarah Sackman: Equality before the law should mean just that, and as my hon. Friend says, it is an important principle to bear in mind when we talk about barriers to access to justice, whether we are talking about the cost of representation, which we try to address through legal aid, or about the cost of transcripts. In the current context, the targeted approach that we have taken—prioritising the victims of the most serious crimes, and now extending eligibility so that all victims can request court transcripts through the Sentencing Act 2026 from the spring of 2027—constitutes a big step forward. I hope that developments in technology will enable us to lower the costs and make that freely available to all in due course.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): Charlotte Meijer will never have access to her transcript, because her case was heard in a magistrates court where no recording was made. The Government are seeking to address that, but Charlotte has continued to campaign for all victims of crime so that they can gain access to free transcripts, given that some are still being quoted costs of thousands of pounds. Her campaign, Open Justice for All, is calling on the Government to go further and faster to make the justice system fair, transparent and open.

This is a cross-party issue, and I know that many Back Benchers in the Minister's party feel passionate about it. Will she assure the House that the job is not done, and recognise the desire for all court transcripts eventually to be made free and accessible for all victims?

Sarah Sackman: I know that the hon. Lady is a great advocate in this regard. I have had the pleasure of meeting Charlotte on a number of occasions, and I know how important her campaign is. The hon. Lady is right: owing to the Government's commitment to audio recording and the capital investments that we are making to enable it to happen, change is coming soon and fast. We will seek to go as far as we are able while preserving the accuracy of those transcripts.

Topical Questions

T1. [900722] **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): One in five homicides are domestic homicides, with women and girls overwhelmingly the victims of these brutal crimes: mothers, sisters and daughters, such as Ellie Gould, Poppy Devey Waterhouse and Megan Newborough, who were cruelly murdered by their current or former partners. However, the gravity of these crimes is not always fully reflected. Under the current sentencing framework, higher starting points place particular weight on a weapon being taken to the scene with intent, whereas domestic homicides often happen in the home involving weapons already present. Today I can announce that we will introduce a 25-year starting point for domestic murders, a change made possible thanks to the Government's grip on the prison population through the Sentencing Act 2026.

I pay tribute to the mothers of Ellie, Poppy and Megan—Carole, Julie and Elaine—and my hon. Friends the Members for Pontypridd (Alex Davies-Jones) and for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips). They have all campaigned tirelessly for this change, which means that those who kill their partners or former partners will spend longer in prison.

Dr Evans: The Fuller inquiry called for a strengthening of the safeguards and the law in relation to looking after the deceased, but last week's mortuary report on Nottingham hospital described some of the abuses and horrors that have taken place—bodies mislabelled, or even left decomposing. Does the Secretary of State share my fear that this could be a pattern across the system, and will he and the Health Secretary look into this to ensure that it certainly is not?

Mr Lammy: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. What we have heard is devastating—absolutely horrific. I will discuss this issue with the Health Secretary. His Department obviously has responsibility for human tissue while we have responsibility for the coroner service and the law regarding death, and we will work together on this issue.

T2. [900723] **Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): This month I was delighted to award my community champion award to Afzaal Hussain. After his best friend was stabbed and died in 2021, he set up In This Together Bucks, which has now removed more than 1,500 knives from the streets while also addressing underlying causes of knife crime through mentoring, mediation and support for families. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating Afzaal on his work, and does he agree that organisations such as his in our communities are vital to the tackling of knife crime?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Jake Richards): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's constituent Afzaal Hussain for the work that he does alongside Adele Webb. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have heard in this morning's session about the tragic consequences of knife crime, and it is so important that the Government and wider society work together to do anything we can to reduce it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Justice Secretary.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Government referred the sentences of the teenage gang rapists who attacked two schoolgirls to the Court of Appeal as

unduly lenient, but the Government also say that they want to increase the age of criminal responsibility, and the Bar Council has said that age should be 14. That is one year older than the age of one of those rapists—proof that young criminals can commit terrible crimes. Will the Justice Secretary rule out increasing the age of criminal responsibility to 14?

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question, but when the Bar Council do a detailed piece of work, it is the responsibility of the Secretary of State to look closely at what it has recommended. That is what I will do in the coming months, and I am sure that when that process has concluded, we can have this discussion in a serious way. I urge the hon. Gentleman to be serious. He often takes to Twitter on these issues, but I think we should take the Bar Council of England and Wales seriously.

T4. [900725] **Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you will be alarmed to know that one in seven NHS staff in England experienced a physical attack while on shift last year. Our paramedics, doctors, nurses, police officers and firefighters go to work every day to save lives, yet they face unimaginable abuse. We have to clamp down on those who perpetrate these vile attacks. Will the Secretary of State commit to reviewing sentencing guidelines for such heinous crimes?

Jake Richards: That is an absolutely shocking figure, and I pay tribute to all NHS staff and frontline public service workers, who often put their bodies on the line, quite literally. I meet the chair of the Sentencing Council regularly to discuss issues, and I will raise this one with her as well.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): *The Guardian* reported last week on the case of a US air force officer accused of drugging, strangling and raping a British woman in his apartment. Although the incident took place off duty, off base and on English soil, the case was removed from the jurisdiction of the English courts and was instead tried by US court martial at RAF Lakenheath, with an all-male panel who were all from his base. Does the Secretary of State agree that victims of crimes on English soil should see justice served in our justice system?

Mr Lammy: Halving violence against women and girls is a decade-long mission for this Government. That case is extremely concerning, and our thoughts are with the victim, Sarah. Given the cross-agency nature of this case, my officials are working across Government, and we are raising it with the US Government to establish the full facts.

T5. [900726] **Samantha Niblett** (South Derbyshire) (Lab): A constituent of mine in South Derbyshire, Sarah Page, is associate professor for social justice at University of Staffordshire, which I visited last week. She and her colleagues told me about their "From Harm to Hope" research. It highlights the unique challenges that women prisoners face, including being held far from family due to the limited number of women's prisons. They also raised concerns that the national drug strategy is not

sufficiently gender-sensitive, particularly in addressing the impact of child abuse and domestic abuse on women in the criminal justice system. Will my hon. Friend meet me, Sarah and her colleagues to ensure that these women-specific issues are properly reflected in our criminal justice system?

Jake Richards: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and her constituent. Lord Timpson set up the Women's Justice Board, which is considering the issues with the women's estate. We are determined to bring down the population of women prisoners where it is safe to do so. There is a lot more work to do, but we are making progress.

T3. [900724] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Hundreds of women are secretly filmed on nights out. The clips are then put online, accompanied by horrible, misogynistic comments. They are viewed millions of times, often to make a profit. What steps is the Department taking to close the current gaps in legislation and stop this vile of abuse of women on nights out?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Justice (Catherine Atkinson): Non-consensual intimate images, and the kinds of images that the hon. Lady talks about, are absolutely disgusting. This Government have taken action to ensure that they will be taken down within 48 hours, as well as our banning of deepfakes. We want to ensure that women are safe—whether in their homes, on their streets or online—and there is still more action to take.

T6. [900727] **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Recently, a domestic abuse victim came to my office. She was scared and considering returning to her abusive ex-partner because she had nowhere else to go. I intervened, and Portsmouth city council found her a flat, but it was in an area known to be regularly frequented by her abuser. When she raised this with the council, it said that if she did not accept the property, it would withdraw its support. I intervened again, and the council agreed to find her somewhere else to live, but she is still waiting for a safe place. What steps is the Minister taking to join up support across national and local government, so that domestic abuse victims do not fall through the cracks?

Catherine Atkinson: I thank my hon. Friend for all her actions to support her constituent. Local authorities in England are legally required to assess and address the need for safe accommodation for domestic abuse victims who need to flee their home. All our thoughts will be with her constituent; I hope she secures suitable safe accommodation soon. Considering how tenacious and determined her Member of Parliament is, it will, I hope, be very soon indeed.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

T7. [900730] **Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): The Secretary of State knows how fond I am of him personally, and I want him to keep his job, so will he please his new boss—the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham)—virtually the entire legal establishment and the English people, whose only wish is to keep their 1,000-year-old right to trial by a jury of their peers when their liberty is at stake?

Mr Lammy: I am very grateful to the Father of the House. He may not have noticed, but he made me blush. He knows that the right to a fair trial, and the component of it that requires a jury, is an important right, and we are not abolishing it, but we are seeking to bring down the backlog, so that people can get swift justice. We are making a decision that has been made previously by other Prime Ministers, including Margaret Thatcher, to change the threshold for jury trial, while ensuring that justice is done. I think it is also important to acknowledge the tremendous work done by our magistrates.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I welcome the Government's £500 million of investment in victims' services, which is a serious investment after years of neglect. In my constituency, Staffordshire Women's Aid has been supporting survivors of sexual violence and domestic violence for 50 years. For every £1 spent on victims' support services, £10.80 is returned to the public purse. What steps are being taken to ensure that brilliant local organisations, such as Staffordshire Women's Aid, can access this funding, so that no area falls into the gaps?

Catherine Atkinson: I have met victims and survivors supported by Women's Aid in other parts of the country who have been able to rebuild their life, and it is inspiring that Staffordshire Women's Aid has been supporting survivors for 50 years. The Staffordshire police and crime commissioner is receiving over £4.5 million over the next two years for victims' support services. That is additional to the funding that councils get to provide safe accommodation for victims, including refugees, such as those run by Women's Aid.

T8. [900731] **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): Magistrates are the backbone of the justice system, yet magistrates in Worcestershire increasingly talk to me about the pressures on their workload and the difficulty of attracting new volunteers. What steps are the Government taking to increase the attractiveness of the magistracy?

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): I agree with the hon. Gentleman that our magistrates are the backbone of our justice system. I meet magistrates from across the length and breadth of the land, and I have met the Magistrates Association. We have to make being a magistrate more attractive. That is why our reform of their expenses, allowing for greater flexibility, is so important. We are transforming the application process and the training that magistrates receive to make it more attractive for people to volunteer their time. I want to put on record that we are incredibly grateful to our army of volunteers who keep the justice system going.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): Ranby Prison in my constituency is undergoing a £70 million expansion. The main prison car park is across the very busy A620 road. On 1 December last year, prison officer Phillip Tetley was knocked down and killed as he crossed the road to get to work. He leaves behind his wife Eve and seven children. Eve Tetley is campaigning for a crossing to prevent such an awful accident happening again. Will the Minister meet me and Eve to discuss this further?

Jake Richards: I thank my hon. Friend and constituency neighbour. My thoughts are of course with the family of Phillip Tetley, and with Eve in particular. I know that stretch of road very well, as it is on my commute to Retford station, and I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and Eve to see if I can do anything to help.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): My constituent was repeatedly sexually abused by a family member, who received four concurrent 28-year prison sentences. He threatened to murder her during the trial. After serving about 10 years, he was transferred to the Netherlands, where he was released immediately. My constituent lives in fear of his returning to the UK and carrying out the threats that he made towards her. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this complex case, and will he commit to reviewing international prisoner transfer arrangements that have the practical effect of allowing dangerous offenders to be released far earlier than the UK courts intended?

Jake Richards: I thank the hon. Member for her question. She raises very serious points. I am, of course, happy to meet her, and her constituent. We are determined to bring down the number of foreign national offenders in our prisons. We need to do that safely. We recently agreed a memorandum of understanding with Latvia. We have a similar agreement with Italy, and I have been speaking with officials in the Netherlands to try to pursue a deal there, too. It is important that we do that safely, and I am very happy to have further discussions with her about that.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): Street Whyze was set up by Danny Mondesir after the tragic stabbing of Oliver Freckleton in 2021. It undertakes targeted work with young people to prevent knife crime, knife carrying and youth offending. In the light of the new cross-Government knife crime strategy, can the Minister say how such programmes will be used to cut youth knife crime?

Mr Lammy: Our plan to halve knife crime seeks to give young people the best start in life, to stop those who are at risk of turning to knife crime from doing so, and to ensure that perpetrators are caught and brought to justice. I have been out with a number of community groups over the last few weeks to see that work in action. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is good to see the numbers beginning to fall, but there is more work to do over the coming months and years.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): My constituent is here. Her ex-husband sexually assaulted her children, and attempted to murder them and her by removing the brake pads from her car, yet the court appeared to listen more to the abuser's allegation of parental alienation syndrome, a concept discredited by the World Health Organisation, than her evidence. The abuser today has unsupervised access to the children. What steps will the Government take to prevent discredited concepts from obstructing criminal justice, leaving children at risk of rape and murder?

Sarah Sackman: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising such a moving case, and I pay tribute to his constituent, who is here today. Let us be absolutely

clear: the Government's position is that parental alienation has no evidential basis and is a totally discredited concept. We are working carefully with the Family Procedure Rule Committee to limit the instruction of unregulated experts, including those who hold that they are parental alienation experts. I hope that will ring the changes and prevent this sort of thing in future.

Alex Davies-Jones (Pontypridd) (Lab): I welcome the announcement from the Deputy Prime Minister today about changing the disparity in sentences for domestic homicide. Carole, Julie and Elaine have campaigned tirelessly for this change, following the murder of their daughters, and it will make a huge difference to how violence against women and girls is treated in this country. The campaigners have met seven Lord Chancellors, and the Deputy Prime Minister is the first of them to commit to doing this. Can I implore him to do it as soon as possible? It is this Labour Government who are committed to tackling violence against women and girls.

Mr Lammy: I thank my hon. and dear Friend for her campaigning on this issue. We met the families and were hugely moved by their stories. There was a sense that they felt very let down by the previous Governments and Lord Chancellors whom they had met. For that reason, I think this move is the right thing to do, and I am very grateful to her and my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips) for continuing to press on this issue behind the scenes.

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): A high-profile child sex offender was released into a village near a school in my constituency. I was told about this by local residents. Over three months ago, I wrote to the Deputy Prime Minister expressing huge concern. He refused to meet me and said that this was down to the Probation Service. Why is the safety of South Shropshire's children not worth a meeting to discuss this issue? This is a huge issue for my constituents.

Mr Lammy: Of course, I recognise that this will be an issue for the hon. Gentleman's constituents. It is right that these matters are dealt with by the Probation Service. We are investing a lot of money in the Probation Service over this period to make sure that we reduce caseloads, so that such cases can be managed properly, but I will investigate and get back to him as soon as possible.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): One of my constituents experienced horrific abuse at the hands of her ex-husband. Deepfakes were put online on porn sites. This is something he did to other women as well. He is now in prison, but when my constituent tried to divorce him, she could not get access to legal aid for the arbitration service, or to further legal aid, because of his bail conditions. Will the Minister meet me to discuss access to legal aid for people who have suffered domestic abuse in such circumstances?

Sarah Sackman: Of course I will meet my hon. Friend about that case. She is a tremendous advocate for her constituent. It is important to say that we have ensured that legal aid is available for domestic abuse victims, and we have also changed the evidence thresholds that

must be met in order to access that aid. I will look into the case that she raises, and I look forward to meeting her to discuss it.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): Following an attack that led to long-term mental and physical health difficulties, a constituent got a disappointing offer of compensation from the Criminal Injuries Compensation Authority, after a two-and-a-half-year delay. It took an appeal and my intervention for her to finally be offered fair compensation. What steps will the Minister take to ensure that victims of crime receive a good service when applying for criminal injury compensation?

Catherine Atkinson: Applicants for criminal injury compensation have often endured horrific, traumatic experiences, and no financial award will ever fully compensate for that. Last year, over £164 million in compensation was paid to victims seriously injured or bereaved by violent crime, and two thirds of new applications were decided within 12 months. I thank the hon. Member for his correspondence on that matter. CICA is working to improve the experience of applicants and modernise its systems.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Mr Speaker, 68 is far too late. When will prison officers achieve a fair, just and—crucially—lower retirement age?

Jake Richards: I thank my hon. Friend for his continued championing of this cause. We regularly meet the Prison Officers' Association and will continue to do so. Prison officers do incredible work every day, up and down the country, and we will continue that dialogue.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): In their 2024 manifesto, the Government made a promise to set up specialist rape courts in every Crown court location. Two years on, how many have been set up?

Mr Lammy: We are two years in, and I assure the right hon. Gentleman that we will come forward with announcements in that area shortly.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): The stalker of my constituent Sophie Hall was arrested and deported. Post deportation, there was no monitoring of him at all. The stalking recommenced, and he is now back in prison in the UK. This Government's progression model means that he will be released early, and will again not be subject to active probation supervision. Can my hon. Friend, who promised this would not happen, tell me how on earth Sophie will now be kept safe?

Jake Richards: I met my hon. Friend and Sophie at the end of last year, and as a result of that meeting, we made changes to the guidance on deportation of offenders. I have not been kept updated on what has happened since then; I will meet her and Sophie expeditiously.

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): Will the Minister join me in thanking and paying tribute to Carole Gould and Julie Devey from the action group Killed Women? They are constituents of mine and of my hon. Friend the Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine), who unfortunately cannot be here due to ill health. Will the Minister pay tribute to the enormous dedication, persistence and courage that they have shown in trying to get changes to sentencing for domestic abuse?

Mr Lammy: As the father of a daughter, I pay tribute to the constituents mentioned for their doughty campaign over many years, in which they have been fighting for this moment. There will be women out there now whose lives will be saved as a result of the sentence that perpetrators of this terrible crime face.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): What work is the Department doing to learn from international best practice—for example, in Estonia—when it comes to using technology in the justice system to help deliver swifter justice for victims?

Mr Lammy: When I moved to this Department, I was pleased to see the work on digital and artificial intelligence. The Department is a Whitehall leader; for example, we are freeing up probation staff for the frontline, rather than them having to go through lots of bureaucracy. I am particularly excited by the work that is going on in our courts.

Speaker's Statement

12.44 pm

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question, I note that Members have asked me when they can see the defence investment plan report. It is odd that we cannot get it earlier. I appeal to Government: do the right thing by Members of this House and let them see the report. I am told that it is market sensitive, but if it is, why has it been all over Sky? Why has it been everywhere but this House, once again? It is unfair that Members of Parliament are not getting the report before everybody else. I put that out there; hopefully the Secretary of State for Defence will do the right thing and ensure that Members get it.

Steel Tariffs: Northern Ireland

12.45 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade to make a statement on steel tariffs in relation to Northern Ireland.

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): I hope you would agree, Mr Speaker, that I have always done my level best to come to the House first with any new announcements.

As I told the House last Thursday in written and oral statements, the Government's new steel trade measure comes into force tomorrow, immediately succeeding the expiry of the steel safeguard, ensuring that there is no gap in protection for our domestic steel industry. The European Union has today also announced the details of its trade measure, which comes into force tomorrow. Since the announcement of its measure on 7 October last year, we have engaged extensively with the EU and agreed an approach that reflects the UK and the EU's highly interconnected supply chains. This will provide stability for UK-EU steel trade from 1 July while we continue to work together to strengthen UK-EU steel trade for the longer term.

As Members would expect, our engagement has also covered the matter of Northern Ireland in some detail. This ensures that specific arrangements are and will be in place to facilitate the continued smooth movement of steel to Northern Ireland from Great Britain, guaranteeing that movements of steel within the UK market will not pay EU tariffs. These arrangements, which are aimed at comprehensively protecting the UK internal market, include the retention of the seven tariff-rate quotas—for categories 7, 8, 9, 13, 17, 25A and 28—and specific arrangements for other categories that will continue to mean that UK-origin steel can move tariff-free to Northern Ireland.

The arrangements will operate from tomorrow, 1 July, and taken together will serve to protect the operation of the UK internal market and flows of goods within it. His Majesty's Revenue and Customs is now taking steps to confirm the arrangements with industry, including business representative organisations in Northern Ireland. The Government will continue to provide guidance and support to traders moving goods from Great Britain to Northern Ireland through the trader support service, and we will work closely with the EU to ensure that these arrangements operate effectively in practice.

We are doing two things. First, we are protecting the UK internal market; secondly, we are giving UK steel production the protection it needs so that we have strong UK steel production that is able to meet at least 50% of the UK's steel needs.

Jim Allister: I am grateful to the Minister for coming to the House. I have to say, there is an inherent absurdity, and indeed a constitutional offence, in having to come to the sovereign Parliament of the United Kingdom to ask whether there will be any tariff arrangements on moving steel from one part of the United Kingdom to another. Indeed, one recalls that last Thursday, the Minister said that he could not tell us because he had to await the EU decision, which underscores how absurd it is that these matters are governed by a foreign jurisdiction and not by ourselves.

[Jim Allister]

I have three specific questions for the Minister. First, is there any quota differential in regard to any class of steel, and if so, in respect of which classes?

Secondly, will the EU's new traceability rules, which it calls the "melt and pour" rules, be applied to steel being imported into Northern Ireland? If they are, they will impose an extra layer of bureaucracy, with form filling and certificates having to be obtained that are not required when steel is brought into Great Britain. Could we have clarity on that?

Thirdly, last Thursday the Minister said that 74% of steel imports to Great Britain will not be covered by the UK trade measure. Can the same be said of Northern Ireland? Is it the same level of exemption—if we want to call it that—in respect of Northern Ireland, given the import of the EU governance? I ask those questions because in Northern Ireland we do not make steel; we rely exclusively on importing it. Many businesses in Northern Ireland depend very much on steel imports, yet here they are facing a new regime tomorrow and only hearing about it today.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but I think that the absurdity all lies with the hon. and learned Member. He seems to be trying to create a difference between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, which we are striving in every way to prevent. We have made it absolutely clear that the existing—[Interruption.] If he chunters from his seat he will not be able to hear what I am saying; I might be able to enlighten him.

There are seven key categories that are most important to Northern Ireland. Category 7—steel plate—is important for shipbuilding and defence. Category 8—stainless, hot-rolled sheets and strips—is important for automobiles. Category 9—stainless, cold-rolled sheets and strips—is also important for automobiles. Category 13—rebar—is important for construction. Category 17—steel beams—is also important for construction. Category 25A—large tubes—is vital for the oil and gas industry. Category 28—alloy wire—is important for fencing.

In all those categories, we have maintained the tariff-rate quotas. There is no difference. From the initial conversations I had with the European Union back in December last year, we have made it absolutely clear that we want to make sure that there is a single market between Great Britain and Northern Ireland and that there is no border down the Irish sea.

All this shows the patent nonsense of having left the European Union. I know that the people of Northern Ireland agreed with me on that and disagreed with the hon. and learned Member. The truth is that we would not have to negotiate with the European Union on these matters if we were still a member, and there would not be any of these quota issues. It is true that there is a problem with overcapacity of steel around the world, but the UK is not the problem for the EU, and the EU is not the problem for the UK, so, frankly, we should come to a very sensible arrangement. That is what we have mostly managed to do so far, but we will continue to discuss it with the EU.

Seventy-three per cent of steel imports into the whole of the UK, which includes Northern Ireland, are completely excluded from the measure, and the tariffs only apply

above the quota levels. For many categories, we have managed to create quota levels that are above existing trade flow levels, so I do not expect there to be problems in those. But in some areas we are deliberately trying to make sure that people use British steel, because Britain now produces only 4 million tonnes of steel. If we do not continue to make steel in this country, a significant problem will accrue to us into the future.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I thank the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) for bringing this important urgent question to the Chamber. I welcome the Government's ambition on British steel, but British Gypsum in my constituency has raised concerns about the short-term impact of tariffs and called for transitional arrangements for steel to avoid unintended consequences in the construction industry. Will the Minister comment on the idea of better, stronger transitional arrangements?

Chris Bryant: As I explained last Thursday, we have introduced transitional arrangements to make sure that for the first quarter, imports are possible where people already have contracts to bring stuff in. As I say, 73% of UK imports of steel will not be in scope of the measure at all and can come into the UK easily. We are simply trying to make sure that for the categories of steel that we produce in the UK, people turn to British production. That is the way in which we can ensure that we still have strong steel production in the UK into the future. If my hon. Friend has specific issues relating to a company in his constituency, I am very happy for my officials to meet with them.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I congratulate the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) on securing this urgent question. The Conservatives have made clear for a number of weeks how concerned we are about the incoming steel tariffs that will take effect tomorrow. We have heard from businesses, not just in Northern Ireland but across the country, that the 50% tariff on steel imports above the quota will do great damage to upstream British manufacturing, our defence and aerospace sectors, and those who construct the nation's infrastructure.

We acknowledge that on Thursday the Government brought forward some changes to the quotas after reflecting on concerns raised by industry, but we have now heard at the last minute that the EU has cut a significant chunk of the UK's export quota. Businesses have been warning us for months about the damage that these proposals could cause, and they are now expected to adapt in a matter of hours, not days. Will the Minister publish the full impact assessment and communicate properly with the affected sectors? He mentioned a few ways in which he is going to communicate with them, but I cannot stress enough the urgency of getting clarity for every business across this country in the upstream steel industry.

Have any Northern Ireland businesses specifically lodged applications with the Trade Remedies Authority? I know that the Minister for Industry, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), has kindly let us know that he cannot attend oral questions on Thursday as he will be visiting businesses in Northern Ireland. Is that to do with the serious concerns over steel tariffs?

Finally, may we have an update on the negotiations the Government are having in this area with the US and India, because it seems that whenever the UK Government negotiate on behalf of our steel industry, the industry loses out? This is all shaping up to be a disaster for steel, and we would appreciate an update.

Chris Bryant: I will start with the question about the Minister for Industry and his visit to Northern Ireland. He is visiting shipbuilding and aerospace companies. The visit does not specifically relate to steel at all.

On steel generally, the Conservatives' record is absolutely shocking, and we will not be going down the route that they went down. When they came to power in 2010, the UK was producing 12 million tonnes of steel, and when they left power we were producing 4 million tonnes. That is an existential crisis that happened entirely on their watch. We need to address it, and we are serious about doing so.

Incidentally, countless contracts for major infrastructure projects in the UK that were awarded by the previous Government, including through the Ministry of Defence, regularly went to steel produced in other countries. I am not going to follow the route that the hon. Lady's party went down. In fact, the then Prime Minister even refused to meet with steelworkers. That shows the level of concern that the Conservative Government had with steel. We are determined to make sure that we have a proper steel production industry in the UK, and that means that we have to take some tough measures.

In relation to the European Union, to be fair to the hon. Lady, she was not a leaver. She was in favour of remaining in the European Union. The UK has now secured 1.05 megatonnes of guaranteed access through country-specific quotas and 1.09 megatonnes of access through competitive pools—a total access of up to 2.14 megatonnes through the EU process. UK steel exports to the EU averaged 1.82 megatonnes between 2022 and 2024 when including products covered by the EU steel measure, so we did end up with a good result.

The truth of the matter, as I have said before and as we have said repeatedly to many others, is that it would be much more sensible if there was an exemption between the UK and the EU in relation to steel measures, so that neither of us was facing quotas or tariffs, because frankly we are not the problem for each other. There is a danger that in specific instances, some companies might be facing tariffs going in both directions, such as Marcegaglia, which is a part-Italian, part-British steel manufacturer.

I just want to correct one other thing. The hon. Lady has repeatedly said on her X account that there will be a 50% tariff on all steel imports. This is patently untrue, and I really hope that she starts correcting the record.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his work and engagement on this issue over the last few weeks and months. I have been contacted by a range of defence and aerospace companies both in my constituency and across the UK—including some with a footprint in Northern Ireland—that are concerned that some of the quotas and exclusions do not take into account some of the relevant codes suggested by industry, which could lead to increased costs, project delays and threats to jobs in the future. Will he assure me that he will meet the industry again to discuss the codes that it feels are outstanding? Will he or his officials meet me to discuss this issue in more detail?

Chris Bryant: I have regularly and repeatedly met industry downstream and producers—I did so again yesterday—as has my hon. Friend the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, the hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), the Minister for Industry, who is sitting by my side. We have striven at every point to ensure that where possible we are including only those categories of steel that are manufactured in the UK. One of the reasons we changed the quotas in what we announced last week from the original suggestions made in March was that Speciality Steel is not up and running and therefore it is not able to supply some of the categories that my hon. Friend spoke about. In many areas, the quota is larger than existing trade levels. Yesterday afternoon, a variety of MPs came to meet me and officials to talk this through, and I am happy for my hon. Friend to meet my officials if he has specific concerns for constituency businesses.

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

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Businesses across Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom are concerned that from tomorrow they may face tariffs on the steel that they are importing even if that steel is not manufactured in the United Kingdom in the quantities or grades they need. The Under-Secretary has requested that we write to him with specific examples, and I did so on 19 June on behalf of Hewland Engineering in my constituency, but it is concerned that it has not heard back yet and 1 July is coming quickly.

The Minister mentioned in his response to the urgent question that he was working hard to ensure a single market in this area between us and the European Union. The Liberal Democrats are really grateful to hear that, because we have long argued that this friction is an inevitable result of our leaving the European Union and the single market. Will he help support the Liberal Democrats' campaign to ditch the Government's red lines and have a new, bespoke UK-EU customs union, along with joining the single market for our new growth and defence partnership with the EU, to help protect British companies and help get Britain growing again?

Chris Bryant: He's a cheeky one! No, I am not going to sign up to the Lib Dem campaign. However, there is a serious point here: it would be much better if the UK and the EU were to have a mutual exemption in relation to quotas and tariffs in this area. I have made the point already, but I will make it again: we are not the problem for EU steel manufacture and it is not the problem for us. The real problem is about overcapacity, and all the countries in the world that are facing this same issue should be joining together to try to tackle it.

I was asked a question about the Trade Remedies Authority. I am not aware of a particular company in Northern Ireland having approached anybody about whether a TRA investigation should be launched, but certainly there are areas where steel production in the UK could look at whether a trade remedy ought to be sought.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): The world has moved on and we no longer live in a free trade utopia, as some might wish. It is clearly difficult to impose protections for our steel industry, but it is the right thing to do. Does the Minister agree that failing to

[Mr Jonathan Brash]

impose such protections would surrender our steel industry, surrender our national defence and surrender our sovereignty to other nations, which can never be acceptable?

Chris Bryant: Of course I agree with my hon. Friend. I am, broadly speaking, in favour of free trade, but it has to be free and fair trade, and one of the issues in relation to overcapacity in steel is that there is not a level playing field across the world because of subsidies and anti-competitive practices that make it impossible for UK steel to compete. It is an existential moment.

I have heard from some Conservatives that there has been an argument that we should delay introduction of the measure or that we should have lower tariffs or whatever. The truth of the matter is that, with the EU already implementing its measure, along with the US and Canada, if we were not to implement a similar measure, the danger is that we would be the dumping ground for all the cheap steel in the world, which would kill stone dead every single steel mill in the UK. This is not a Government who will put up with such a strategy.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): The Minister may have met representatives of the industry, but the question is: has he even listened to their concerns? They still say that the problems caused by his imposition of tariffs will abide with the industry. He said that he is relying on UK producers to be able to produce steel, but Tata has said that it will not be able to supply all the steel required, and one of the firms in Rotherham that he is relying on is in administration. How can he say with assurance that the supply of steel will be available?

The question for Northern Ireland is this. If Northern Ireland producers have to bring steel from the UK, they need first to be sure that the UK quota has not been exceeded, so will the Minister assure us that they will not have to be concerned about whether there is any EU quota left? Otherwise, they may have to pay tax twice.

Chris Bryant: I am sorry, but the right hon. Member simply is not listening to some of the things I have said. He referred to the business in Rotherham, which is Speciality Steel. Precisely one of the things that we changed—because we listened to people's concerns—were the quotas that would have been met by Speciality Steel, because it is not up and running as we had envisaged. We have precisely listened and acted on that.

If the right hon. Member had been in the Chamber on Thursday, he could have taken up the offer I made to meet my officials and me to go through specific details. I have often found that businesses are being given completely misleading information about how the tariffs will or will not apply to them. If he has specific businesses about which he wants to go through the details with my officials, of course we can make that opportunity available to him.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I will take the Minister up on that offer. I wrote to him asking him to meet companies in South Antrim over two weeks ago and I am still waiting on a response to that. In his initial response, he said that the TSS and HMRC are able to support Northern Ireland companies with advice and guidance. Will he assure the House and Northern Ireland companies that they will know what they are talking about? Up until now, they have been found lacking.

Chris Bryant: If the hon. Member wants to write to me about how HMRC or the support is lacking, I would be happy to respond. Again, as I said, if he had been in the House last Thursday, he could have taken up the opportunity—[*Interruption.*] I made a statement in the House last Thursday on precisely all these issues, and he would have been able to take up the opportunity yesterday afternoon, as many MPs did. It is difficult to arrange precisely that same set of meetings again, but I am happy to ensure that officials speak directly to the companies he talked about so that they get the best information they need.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): The Minister talks about protecting the steel industry, and we can all agree with that, but steel users in Northern Ireland have been left with confusion, uncertainty and rising costs, and price gouging from suppliers is already happening. Whether he likes to admit it or not, Northern Ireland is collateral damage and often caught between UK trade policy and EU diktats, so we can understand the confusion.

Despite repeated requests, the Minister has not met businesses from Northern Ireland—indeed, I got a commitment in the House a couple of weeks ago and we are still waiting on that to happen. He needs to allow his officials to meet urgently with the industry and speak directly to it—not to trade bodies or even to us—because the industry and these businesses know exactly the answers they need to get from the Government. Will he organise that with immediate effect?

Chris Bryant: First, I note that the hon. Member's first sentence started, "Yes, we want to protect steel production, but"—yet nobody wants us to take the measures that we believe are necessary and proportionate to do that. That is one of the problems here: of course there are trade-offs. We want to protect steel production in the UK, which we believe is essential to our national security and to having a strong defence sector into the future, and that is why we are taking these measures.

I am not sure whether I can meet every single business. We have been rigorous about pursuing every single meeting that I have committed to. If I have got this wrong, I apologise to the hon. Member, but, again, if she had been in the Chamber on Thursday, she could have come to the meeting yesterday afternoon when lots of people took up the specific issues relating to their businesses.

If it is all right, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a correction. I said earlier that 1.5 megatonnes were being allowed under the EU measure; it is 1.05 megatonnes.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I welcome the Minister's announcement about no EU tariffs for steel coming into Northern Ireland. If we can do that for steel, can we not do that for other commodities that come into Northern Ireland? Will he look at reviewing that to see whether there are other items coming into Northern Ireland that do not need to have the same regulations?

Chris Bryant: I want to achieve frictionless trade, both within the UK internal market—I am determined to protect it as much as I possibly can—and with the whole of the European Union, because it is our single biggest trading partner. It was an act of monumental self-harm when we left the European Union that we did not achieve the frictionless trade that we need.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Minister has been very clear and open about offering the problem companies that are having difficulties a meeting with his officials. He has heard the number of people who have requested meetings. Will he agree to inform each Northern Ireland MP before the summer recess in 14 days' time that either those meetings have taken place or of the dates when they will take place, to avoid any possible ambiguity going forward?

Chris Bryant: If the hon. Gentleman is not prepared to take me at my word, I am sorry but I will never be able to satisfy him. The truth is that I have been very open: I came to the House to make a statement last Thursday; we laid a written ministerial statement as well, which is obviously available to all Members; and I made a commitment that any Member who wanted to meet me and my officials to talk about these things could do so. Sometimes it is other people's diaries and sometimes it is my diary that is the problem. I will not make the specific commitment that he asks for, because I think all he is saying is that he does not trust me.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers and his endeavours to find solutions for Northern Ireland. Strangford is home to a robust network of engineering and construction firms that rely on global supply chains to remain competitive and fulfil their live contracts. As a result of the Government's new steel quotas and out-of-quota tariffs, those businesses are facing cost increases of some 18% on active projects and crippling delays. Furthermore, due to the Windsor framework, our Northern Ireland businesses are uniquely vulnerable to a double whammy of UK tariffs and EU-related red tape. If Strangford's engineering companies fold, the Treasury will lose corporation tax and pay-as-you-earn contributions, and will ultimately have to pay out benefits for staff made redundant. Given the gravity of the situation, respectfully—the Minister knows that I always do things respectfully—will the Minister commit to providing exemptions from these punitive tariffs for specific grade sizes and specifications of specialist steel that are not manufactured domestically?

Chris Bryant: We have always said that we want to provide protection for the categories of steel that are manufactured in the UK and that people can source in the UK. That is our primary aim. We need to keep that under review. As I said last Thursday—the hon. Gentleman will know this, as he was present—we will keep it under review from day one, and there will be a formal review process at the end of the first year. We need to make sure that that is true.

The hon. Gentleman referred to a double whammy. I would say that Northern Ireland also enjoys a double benefit, because it is both within the UK internal market and, in many ways, within the European market. That is a significant advantage for Northern Ireland that other parts of the UK do not necessarily enjoy. I am very happy to meet any Member—I have always held the view that no Minister should ever refuse a meeting with another Member. I made that offer last Thursday, as the hon. Gentleman knows, and that offer still stands.

National Maternity and Neonatal Investigation

1.14 pm

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

Less than a week ago, I stood at this Dispatch Box to respond to the report by Donna Ockenden that exposed devastating failings over more than a decade in Nottingham. As many right hon. and hon. Members rightly made clear following my statement, the shocking report into what had happened was far from the first: in 2015 we learnt of the failures at Morecambe Bay; in 2022 we were appalled to hear about what had happened at Shrewsbury and Telford; and that same year the Kirkup inquiry exposed failings in East Kent. There were also other reviews and reports over the years on specific issues related to maternity care, and it is deeply upsetting to recognise that Donna Ockenden is preparing to undertake further reviews into failings in Leeds and Sussex. Despite all the warnings, the NHS is still failing women, babies and their families on a scale that shames our society.

Bereaved and harmed families are hearing once again the unbearably painful and distressing consequences of the opportunities that have been missed to put things right. As I stand here, I think of how they must be feeling. I know from meeting some of the Nottingham families that their unwavering determination is accompanied by a sense of exhaustion—a sense that however many times they have told their stories, however hard they have campaigned for justice and accountability, and however strongly they have fought to stop what happened to them from happening to others, hardly anything has changed. That feeling will be shared by mothers and their families up and down the country who have suffered so appallingly too, and there will be deep sadness and distress as they are forced to relive their trauma. The burden they bear must sit with us all.

That is why my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) decided last year to announce a national investigation into maternity and neonatal services. That investigation has been carried out by Baroness Amos, whose report is published today. I put on record my thanks to her and her team for the comprehensive and compassionate way they have carried out their work.

The Amos investigation gathered evidence from more than 10,500 people, with Baroness Amos and her team personally meeting more than 450 affected families. They visited 12 NHS trusts and heard from over 9,000 staff through surveys, site visits and one-to-one discussions. Although they found that many women experience good and safe care, the report paints a bleak picture of failings at every stage for too many: from pregnancy, labour and delivery to the first hours, days and weeks after birth. When I read about those systemic failures, I found them not only shocking and upsetting but devastatingly familiar, because they are explicitly repeated in review after review. Baroness Amos found a system that is fragmented, overly complex and far too slow to learn. It needs to be radically overhauled.

[James Murray]

Last week I spoke about the need to avoid having review recommendations accepted but then sitting on a shelf gathering dust. Other hon. Members agreed with the need to break that cycle, so that is what we will do. As I told the House last week, the national maternity and neonatal taskforce, which I chair, will create a comprehensive action plan by the end of this year.

Today's recommendations from Baroness Amos include a proposal for a modern service framework in line with the 10-year health plan to support system change and drive consistent, quality care. Those recommendations, along with the national-level recommendations from Donna Ockenden, will feed into our plan, which will make sure that women and babies receive safe, compassionate care no matter where they live. But I do not want people to have to wait for the plan to be completed for us to start making progress, so I am also taking immediate measures in response to Baroness Amos's investigation, which I shall now set out for the House.

In considering Baroness Amos's recommendations, the words of a Nottingham mother I met ring loudly in my ears. She said that "accountability drives action", so today I can confirm that, in response to these recommendations, the Government will appoint the first ever maternity and neonatal commissioner. The holder of this new statutory role will have responsibility for driving change across all parts of the NHS, including those who provide, regulate and investigate care. They will co-chair the national taskforce, along with me. They will hold the system to account, and their role will be to champion the voices of women, babies and families; to ensure that those voices are heard within Government when decisions are made and implemented.

Last week I announced that the Government would roll out Martha's rule, so that women and their families can demand a second opinion if they feel their concerns are being ignored. That meets a key and familiar concern that the Amos investigation pointed to: women not being listened to as a common factor in maternity failings. Because those concerns are too often batted away before women even arrive at hospital, I can today confirm that we will this week publish new national standards for maternity triage, so that care is consistent across the NHS and women's concerns are recognised, valued and acted upon at every turn. I expect every trust to prioritise the implementation of these standards and I have asked NHS England to make sure that this is the case and to report progress directly to me.

Some of the starkest examples of racism, discrimination and inequality happen in maternity and neonatal settings, as the Amos report laid bare. The result is that the risks are notably higher for some women and babies and, as Baroness Amos points out, this is a critical safety issue. Black babies are still more than twice as likely to be stillborn as white babies, and black women are almost three times more likely to die during pregnancy or shortly after birth than white women. While tackling inequalities will be a core component of the national action plan, we will make a start straightaway by rapidly expanding the roll-out of the perinatal equity and antidiscrimination programme to every trust. All teams will be mandated to receive hands-on support, to hear first-hand experience, and to undertake face-to-face

learning and development programmes. Every trust will have completed the programme by the end of next year.

Births that are safe for mothers and babies depend on health services having skilled, trained midwives. As Baroness Amos rightly identified, staff shortages can have a dangerous impact, with examples of some services being forced to delay admissions when they get too busy. Since coming to office, we have recruited 2,000 more midwives, and last year our graduate guarantee gave 850 more newly qualified midwives an immediate route into the profession. I can tell the House today that we have now created a further 1,000 temporary roles to help newly qualified midwives join the NHS. These new posts will be accompanied by investment, too, and I can confirm that we are investing an extra £41 million, on top of the £145 million already invested, to upgrade outdated and rundown maternity and neonatal facilities.

Alongside these practical measures comes a far more profound challenge that we must face. It is clear from my conversations with affected families, with Donna Ockenden and with Baroness Amos, and from the findings of all the reports, that culture is where so much of the responsibility lies. That culture is the most deep-rooted cause of the failures we have seen, and the most fundamental thing we must change. We know that when families have been in distress and looking for answers, they were too often ignored, sneered at, disbelieved, blamed and lied to. We know from review after review that wrongdoing is covered up and that bullying towards staff who try to sound the alarm is rife, so we will dismantle toxic dynamics, boost staff morale and support better teamwork between midwives, doctors and other clinicians.

We need not only the right policies, procedures and processes to be in place, but a fundamental reset in the culture of a service that too often puts the desire to protect itself above its duty to protect women and babies. That culture change must come from the top. It is time for trust leaders, executives and senior clinicians to pay attention to what is happening on their watch, to put professional tribalism aside, to lose the bunker mentality when things go wrong and to ensure that the safety of women and babies always comes first.

This has to be a watershed moment. We must break the cycle of recommendations sitting on a shelf gathering dust. We cannot go on having review after review while women and babies, as well as their fathers and other family members, continue needlessly to suffer injury, death and lasting trauma. We should all feel a responsibility to ensure that this opportunity is not squandered. We owe nothing less to every family the NHS has failed in the past, and to every family who will rely on it in the future. I commend this statement to the House.

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

1.25 pm

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, and I thank Baroness Amos and her team for their compassionate work. As I said last week, I pay tribute to the women and families who gave evidence and to the babies at the heart of the inquiry. Many revisited the most painful moments of their lives after years of fighting to be heard. Their courage places a responsibility on us all.

Last week, the House confronted Donna Ockenden's devastating findings in Nottingham. Today we face the wider national picture. Successive investigations expose the same failures: women dismissed, deterioration missed, staff silenced, inequalities unchallenged and leaders failing to learn. The problem is no longer a lack of evidence; it is a failure to act. Donna Ockenden said this morning that, sadly, so much in this report is stuff that we already knew. She also raised concerns about waiting until December, and I welcome the fact that the Secretary of State has just announced some of the work. She also said that no commissioner alone can fix a system needing action from every level from the Secretary of State right down to every ward. Donna Ockenden commands enormous respect and we should all listen to her, because she is right.

When will the Leeds and Sussex reviews produce their reports, and how will Ministers act on concerns before they conclude, so that families in those areas can see the change that they need as soon as possible? Families should not have to keep proving the scale of harm. Their testimony must now lead to action. The Birth Trauma Association says that the report has overlooked serious injury to women and brain injury to babies, so will the action plan address those harms, and how will families shape and scrutinise it?

We welcome the work beginning immediately on triage, discrimination, staffing and urgent estate risks. This is so important, and we must get on with that work, but families cannot wait until the end of the year for the wider plan. Those expecting babies now need reassurance about what will change and when. So many must be anxious, and we need to do all that we can to reassure them. The new triage standards will be published this week. By when must every trust meet them? Will the Secretary of State commit to update the House, by oral or written statement, on trust-by-trust progress? Will the estates funding include accommodation for parents close to neonatal units so that families are not separated from their critically ill babies?

We do not oppose a statutory maternity and neonatal commissioner, but Ministers must be clear about the role's purpose, powers and accountability, because just one person cannot bring the change that is needed; local leaders have a responsibility too. When will the commissioner be appointed, and what will they be able to compel trusts, regulators and national bodies to do? How will local leaders be held accountable when care remains unsafe?

The additional midwifery posts are welcome, but temporary roles are not a sustainable workforce plan. Donna Ockenden has warned of rota gaps and of staff leaving obstetrics and midwifery. The 10-year workforce plan has been promised, delayed and pushed back repeatedly. When will it finally be published, and will it provide the permanent workforce that these recommendations require? With women having babies later and pregnancies becoming more complex, how will those at higher risk receive early specialist care?

I agree with the Secretary of State that the culture has to change. Listening to women is a clinical duty, not a courtesy; as I said last week, it is at the core of our safety issues. When concerns are dismissed, warning signs are missed, and mothers and babies are put at risk. That duty must apply equally in respect of every woman. A woman's safety must not depend on her ethnicity,

first language, disability, income or ability to fight through the system. As I said last week, both to the House and to the Secretary of State privately, I want us to work together constructively. Where the Government act with the urgency that the report demands, they will have our full support. We all have a duty, and ours is to support these changes.

Women and families will not judge today by new structures, promises or another report. They will judge it by what happens when a woman says that something is wrong. Is she heard? Are warning signs acted on? Is senior help available when needed? Are maternity units safely staffed? Can staff speak without fear? Do families receive honesty and compassion when harm occurs? Are fewer mothers and babies coming to harm? When decisions are taken, will they be fully explained?

The evidence has been gathered. Families have told their stories. The system has been warned. Now it must change.

James Murray: I thank the shadow Secretary of State not only for his questions, but for his tone and approach. When I gave the statement about Donna Ockenden's report last week, we all agreed that the responsibility to deliver real change is shared by everyone in this House, so I appreciate his approach.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the investigations in Leeds and Sussex, to which Donna Ockenden will be turning her attention over the rest of this year. It might be helpful for the House to understand that in developing a comprehensive action plan through the national taskforce, a framework will be devised so that any recommendations from future reviews can be incorporated into that plan and its implementation. That will ensure that we do not have a situation in which the plan is developed and future reviews come to conclusions or recommendations without a clear way for those to be integrated into the action plan. I hope that that gives him some reassurance over the process.

The right hon. Gentleman spoke about recognising families who have been harmed, as well as babies who survived and have grown up into children and adults while living with the harm of failings in maternity care. I am very conscious of them, not least because of the people I have met who sometimes feel forgotten or feel that their children are forgotten when we have these conversations. They live with the impact of brain injuries or other issues that arise during birth. They must not be forgotten, and I will ensure that they are included in the process.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the roll-out of the new national triage standards, which will be published this week. The NHS England chief executive is meeting with NHS system leaders today to begin the process of ensuring that the triage standards, along with some of the other urgent measures that I have spoken about today, are rolled out. Although it is right to take time to get the comprehensive action plan in place by the end of the year, we do not want to waste time before we get on with the measures that we have decided should progress more quickly. NHS England leadership is progressing with those today.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the funding for critical safety works in the maternity estate. Those critical safety measures are important, but the action

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plan will set out a more comprehensive approach not just for the physical infrastructure, but for the culture, which we have spoken about many times. We cannot invest money in culture in the same way as we can do so in physical infrastructure, but it is something that we need to address. We all agree on that. I sense that I had agreement from the House when I raised the importance of addressing cultural problems in maternity services.

The right hon. Gentleman asked about the responsibility being placed on the commissioner as just one person. I reassure him that my vision is for the commissioner to play a crucial role, but not on their own: they will co-chair the national taskforce with me, help to ensure that the national action plan is implemented, hold the system to account and, crucially, be a voice for women in the system. One way of the Government starting to address the issue of women being ignored in maternity services—an issue I have heard about so many times—is by ensuring that the commissioner is a voice for them when decisions are taken.

The temporary roles are an immediate step this year to ensure that newly qualified midwives have a way into making a contribution to NHS maternity services. Funding for those will be baselined in future years, and trusts will decide, trust by trust, how the funding is distributed among different roles. That will vary depending on needs in local areas.

The right hon. Gentleman also spoke about the importance of identifying women who are at higher risk because of different circumstances or problems they may face in giving birth. That is exactly what I hope the new triage standards will begin to address. If the triage standards can identify issues before they escalate and ensure that women get the right support more quickly, we will have an opportunity to avoid the extra, avoidable harm caused to women by delays in getting the right support.

The shadow Secretary of State closed his remarks by talking again about the need for a change in culture. He talked about the support from the Opposition, who will of course robustly challenge us where appropriate but support the aims that we are seeking to achieve. I thank him for that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before I call the next Member, I wish to say three things. First, the Secretary of State for Defence will commence his statement at 2.30, so time is limited; Members may help each other if they ask short questions. Until then, the Macmillan Room in Portcullis House and Committee Room 7 are available as reading rooms for the defence investment plan. The plan will be made available from the moment that the Secretary of State for Defence begins his statement at 2.30.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): May I add my thanks to Baroness Amos? I join the Secretary of State in emphasising the importance of culture change, but culture change will not happen without accountability. In all the conversations I had with families who were suffering bereavement, harm to themselves or harm to their children, what shocked me most was the cover-up

culture in the NHS, which persists to this day, and was exposed once again by Donna Ockenden in her report last week.

There is a legitimate debate to be had about whether we continue with place-based inquiries or have a national statutory public inquiry, and we must have that debate. But whatever the answer to that question, any report will be worth the paper it is written on only if all those involved in decision making and care are held to account through a duty of candour. Given that, where is the Hillsborough law? The law is important not just for justice for the 97, but for justice for these families and in preventing future harms. Will it at least go through this House before the summer recess? Until it is on the books, people will continue to duck the real questions.

James Murray: I thank my right hon. Friend for his comments, and again put on record my thanks and tribute to him for having initiated the investigation that Baroness Amos published today. He has been a committed champion of change in maternity services in this country.

I could not agree with my right hon. Friend more about the importance of accountability in culture change. Without accountability, we will not have culture change across maternity services, and the culture of cover-ups will continue. Senior clinicians will feel that they can continue to get away with any mistakes. They will feel that they can avoid scrutiny when investigations take place, and will continue, in too many cases, to be more concerned with protecting themselves than with protecting women and babies.

On what we can do to change that culture, culture is deep-rooted and requires us to take a number of different actions, but the duty of candour is the single most powerful change we can make clearly, loudly and publicly, because the message it will send to senior clinicians thinking about what to do in the future if they make a mistake, or if they are tempted to cover up things that go wrong, is that one day they will be held to account, and there is no avoiding that. With a duty of candour in place, there will no longer be an opportunity for clinicians, in particular senior clinicians, to refuse to engage in that process, to refuse to be held to account and be part of the justice process. People will face up to two years in prison if they refuse to co-operate, so it is a serious measure. I very much agree with him on the importance of ensuring that the Hillsborough law gets on the statute book so that this duty of candour can apply to future maternity investigations.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): May I also add my thanks to the Secretary of State, to Baroness Amos and her team, and to the families that have relived the pain of their experiences to bring about this report? But the Amos report tells us little that we did not already know—indeed, it confirms our worst fears. Maternity services in England are fundamentally broken with the cost of political neglect being paid in trauma, injury and lost lives. Figures revealed by the Liberal Democrats in the last week show that the first quarter of 2026 saw the worst rate ever recorded for maternity injuries. In fact, while the number of reviews into NHS maternity services has steadily ticked up, we have also seen rising maternal mortality rates.

Four years ago, I spoke in this Chamber in response to the findings of the Shrewsbury and Telford review, which were devastating for my community. Last week, I stood here really distressed, actually, as we heard further traumatic reports from the Nottingham review. But anger is not enough. The Government must meet this moment now and implement Baroness Amos's recommendations in full and without delay, or the families simply will not forgive them. To do this, we need genuine accountability through the NHS and the Department of Health and Social Care, accompanied with the investment needed to make Britain the safest country in the world to have a baby.

I welcome the Government's commitment to a national maternity commissioner—a long-standing Liberal Democrat campaign—and the other urgent and immediate actions that the Secretary of State has outlined in the last week. They are all urgent and are signs that this is being taken seriously. But we need to recognise that a commissioner alone cannot fix the broken system. I urge the Secretary of State to work with us and look at our maternity rescue package for inspiration for his action plan—it has a great degree of overlap with Baroness Amos's recommendations. Our package would ensure one-to-one midwifery care for every woman in labour, additional senior midwives, an obstetrician on every ward, and mandatory updated annual training. Will the Government commit here and now to implementing all those recommendations and working with us to deliver the change we need?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and she puts it well when she talks about Baroness Amos's investigation confirming our worst fears. I was shocked but not surprised, sadly, to read the investigation report. It was devastatingly familiar to read what it set out as being the failings across the country. The report's recommendations will now become part of the work of the taskforce, which I chair, to produce the comprehensive action plan by the end of this year. My intention is that the taskforce will take all the national recommendations from Baroness Amos's report, as well as the national-level recommendations from Donna Ockenden's report last week and recommendations from any other investigations and reports, and ensure that the action plan it produces comprehensively addresses all the issues raised. I think that we would all agree that there is not—one, two, three—a small number of actions that we need to take; this has to be a comprehensive plan to truly transform the service.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Mother of the House.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): The Secretary of State will know that many women are never more vulnerable than in childbirth. It is about not just the vulnerability, but the horror of what women and their babies are exposed to in childbirth. We see inquiry after inquiry, and nothing seems to improve. Very many of those who suffer during childbirth are black women and their babies. The Secretary of State said himself that

“Black babies are still more than twice as likely to be stillborn than white babies, and black women are almost three times more likely to die during pregnancy or shortly after birth than white women.”

The whole House wants to see progress, but it is not enough to have another inquiry or another report; what black women want is equity of treatment and fewer black women and their babies dying.

James Murray: I thank my right hon. Friend for her comments and agree about how shocking the failures in maternity services are, particularly because these failings and the failure to listen to women happens at a point when they are at their most vulnerable. It is at that moment when they are let down. When they need the NHS the most is when the NHS fails them, and that is one aspect of this that makes it truly devastating.

My right hon. Friend also rightly highlights the impact on black women and their babies, who are at more risk than white women and their babies, and the inequalities that exposes. As I mentioned during my earlier statement, we will begin by ensuring that the perinatal equity and anti-discrimination programme is extended to all trusts by the end of next year, but that is an immediate measure we are taking rather than the sum of all measures that we will take on this front. Inequality, racism and discrimination will be a central part of the action plan that the taskforce develops.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): I strongly agree with the comments of the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), about the need for getting the culture right with accountability. When I was Secretary of State, we passed the duty of candour regulations. They were supposed to make it—well, they do make it—a criminal offence for trusts not to tell the truth to families when a tragedy has happened. Yet to this day, trust lawyers advise doctors, nurses and midwives not to be open about what has happened when there is the prospect of legal action further down the line. Does the Secretary of State—I know he is very committed to this—agree that we will clear up this anomaly in the Hillsborough law so that it is just not possible for trusts not to tell the truth and so that trust lawyers always advise their own doctors, nurses and midwives that they must tell families exactly what happened?

James Murray: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his comments. Again, I agree with him and my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) on the importance of accountability for changing culture. During the statement on Donna Ockenden's report last week, he commented that this is about having accountability structures embedded throughout the system, because this is not something that the top of the NHS, the NHS chief executive, the Secretary of State or the ministerial team can control throughout the NHS. The structure has to be embedded to ensure that accountability happens at every level—something I very much took to heart and agree with when it comes to what we need to do next.

On the right hon. Gentleman's specific point about the Hillsborough law and how that will address the issue that he refers to about legal departments effectively advising a cover-up, that sounds concerning, so I will look into that as part of our work to ensure that the system works properly. The expectation with the duty of candour, which will come in under the Hillsborough law, is to ensure that we never again have a situation as

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happened in Nottingham—I could not quite believe it, if I am honest—where many senior clinicians simply refused to take part. It is outrageous. It is unacceptable that so many senior clinicians were able to, and felt able to, just say no. That is not accountability if it is optional, and that is what we need to change.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I hugely welcome the report and join in the thanks to all those who made it possible, but most fundamentally the families who shared their experiences and showed extraordinary courage through the whole process. Many of those stories were shared with us in the all-party parliamentary group on baby loss, and I assure those families that we will carry on listening to and being a voice for them through this process.

The reports makes many powerful recommendations—I welcome the action plan and the maternity commissioner—but the Government must retain responsibility for the ultimate outcomes. Following the expiration of the national maternity safety ambitions in 2025, will the Secretary of State recommit to meaningful targets to reduce stillbirths and neonatal deaths and introduce a target to finally fully eliminate inequalities in baby loss?

James Murray: My hon. Friend draws out an important point: a key part of developing the national action plan is to ensure we have the right metrics and mechanisms for monitoring its implementation and the right structures in place to make sure it is implemented across all trusts. In working with members of the taskforce, I will ensure that those accountability mechanisms for the delivery of the plan are in place, because I have spoken many times today about the importance of recommendations not sitting on shelves. We need to ensure we have the structures in place such that the actions in the national action plan are implemented, we can see they are being implemented, and we can give people confidence that that is the case.

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

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I, too, thank Baroness Amos, her team and, most especially, the families who so bravely gave the evidence that has formed this report. Further to the conversation about accountability, the Secretary of State will have noticed that some families are concerned that the commissioner is just one person, and that there is too much for them to do. Can he make clear that the buck stops with him and, indeed, the PM, and that he will not let go of this? The commissioner will report every six months to the Health and Social Care Committee—we welcome that—and once a year to Parliament. Further to that, will he personally commit that the Secretary of State will seek permission from Mr Speaker to make a statement to the House once a year, so that they can be held personally accountable for the progress made too?

James Murray: In describing the role of the commissioner, the hon. Lady is right to emphasise that it cannot all be on one person. The commissioner is a vital role, and it being on a statutory basis will give the position real weight within the system to hold the system to account and help the Government to ensure the implementation of the comprehensive national action

plan. But she is right to say that accountability has to include the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister, because it is a duty that we all hold as MPs, that the Government hold and that I hold as Secretary of State, and the Prime Minister ultimately holds that responsibility too.

It is not in any sense intended to be a passing of responsibility to a commissioner. The commissioner role is being established to support the effectiveness of the work we are seeking to do as a Government to implement the national action plan, but crucially, when accountable politicians are taking decisions, the commissioner will be a voice for women in the system. I have heard so many times that women's voices are not being heard in the healthcare system, particularly when things go wrong and women have concerns in maternity services. This commissioner will be a way of making sure those voices are right at the heart of decision making.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Secretary of State for making this statement. I pay tribute to the noble Baroness Amos for her work and the care and dedication with which she has produced this report, and to the many women who came forward with their testimonies. I think back to the concerns that I raised just over nine years ago, when I was giving birth to my second son. Nine years on, women are still being dismissed, still not being listened to and still being silenced when they raise those valid concerns.

I pay tribute to the hard-working midwifery team at St Thomas' hospital across the river, who continue to care for many women. I also want to highlight the Southwark Maternity Commission, led by Councillor Evelyn Akoto, and the work of organisations like Five X More, which continue to expose the issues faced by black and minority ethnic women. We also have to highlight the concerns of black and minority ethnic staff, who are told by some patients that they do not want to be served and helped by them. When will the real action plan be published? How will it create accountability to ensure that doctors and clinicians actually listen to these women?

James Murray: The action plan, which will be developed through the taskforce that I chair—the commissioner will co-chair it when that position is established—will publish its national action plan by the end of this year. That will consider all the recommendations from Baroness Amos's report, as well as Donna Ockenden's reports.

My hon. Friend makes a point that is worth drawing attention to, which is that many midwives and others working in maternity services do a really important job and work really hard to provide excellent care to women. That is not to diminish the scale of the failings, but it is to give the right perspective on all those midwives who do a really important job and work hard to care for women and their babies. That is evidenced by the fact that 9,000 members of staff came forward to give evidence in Baroness Amos's investigation—they are concerned, and they want to see change as well. While this is, of course, primarily about women and their babies and families, staff also have a really important voice in this, and we need to improve the system so that they can make their contribution as well.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): This week last year, I had multiple pulmonary emboli only a few weeks after giving birth. I am very grateful to Dr Laura Stephens, who saved my life and then was punished for ordering the test which found the emboli. Blood clots are the No. 1 cause of death in pregnant and post-partum women, and yet there is not a word about their risk in any pregnancy pack given out in this country. The national action plan will fail if it does not tackle blood clots as the No. 1 cause of maternal deaths. Will the Health Secretary kindly meet me and work with me, so that together we can save lives?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for sharing her experience and raising the importance of this issue for the benefit of maternity services more widely. I am very happy for myself or one of the ministerial team to meet her to discuss this in detail, because it is very important that that is part of the national action plan and our wider response.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): I very much welcome the report and Baroness Amos's work to highlight the failings across our maternity system. It is pure and utter medical misogyny that has led us here. The value that we place on the lives and experiences of women has been brought to the fore, and it is very, very low. The throughline of this report and the ones before it is that women's voices were not heard, their pain was not believed, and their experiences were completely and utterly disregarded. That must change.

I would like to add my voice to the calls for measures to address the disparity in treatment for black and ethnic minority women. There must be proper training and continuing professional development to ensure that black women do not have the experiences that we have seen to date. I also plead with the Secretary of State to ensure that any proposals contain real accountability measures. I have a maternity unit in my constituency that is inadequate and has always been rated inadequate or "requires improvement", but I have never seen a senior member of staff ever hauled over the coals. That cannot be right and it has to change.

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to call this what it is in many cases, which is misogyny in maternity services, and to draw attention to the different impact on different mothers and the racial and ethnic inequality within the system. The anti-discrimination programme that I mentioned, which is being rolled out over the next year and a half, will be an important first step, but it cannot be the sum total of what we do to address discrimination and inequality. That will be a focus of the national taskforce, as will—to repeat a point many Members have rightly made—accountability, because it is only by embedding accountability throughout the system that we can be truly confident of change.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): Like others, I welcome this report. The Secretary of State referred to Dr Bill Kirkup, who resigned from the Amos review as an adviser because he felt that it was skirting around certain birthing ideologies and caesarean targets. The Secretary of State said that "staff shortages can have a dangerous impact", and indeed they can. Although he and Baroness Amos refer to culture, a lot of that culture is to do with budgetary and other pressures that result

in members of staff on the frontline being belittled and discouraged from blowing the whistle about unsafe staffing levels. Will the Secretary of State look again at the report, and consider for the first time introducing mandatory safe frontline staffing levels for these services?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point about ensuring the right levels of staff and training, and about ensuring that the right structures are in place. I know from seeing Baroness Amos's report, and from the recommendations in Donna Ockenden's report last week, that those questions will be central to the work of the taskforce in developing the national action plan. As I have said a few times today, it is not the case that there are simply one or two levers that we need to pull, or actions that we need to take, to bring about change; however, the issues that the hon. Gentleman mentions are clearly central to what we need to do.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I echo what was said by my colleague from the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). Baroness Amos pointed to workforce challenges and their impact on care and safety, and she noted that 67% of midwives reported burnout. Meanwhile, a General Medical Council survey found that 63% of obstetrics and gynaecology trainees had a high or very high workload. That is higher than the 42% average. The workforce plan has to address those problems—but will it?

James Murray: My hon. Friend asks a question about staffing, and ensuring not only that we have the right levels of staffing, but that people in the service have the right responsibilities, so that we do not have members of staff suffering from burnout or having a workload that they cannot cope with. Those are critical issues that the taskforce will consider in its development of the national action plan.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Last Wednesday, and again today, the Secretary of State expressed his shock at the number of senior clinicians who refused to take part in the Nottingham review. May I repeat a suggestion that I made last Wednesday? Those clinicians should be named publicly. That is a step that he could take straight away. If a parliamentary question for written answer is tabled, asking him to name those clinicians, will he answer it? I cannot think of a better or more justifiable use of parliamentary privilege.

James Murray: I will take away the right hon. Gentleman's suggestion and think on it, because it is critical that we have accountability. As I said in response to earlier questions, I find the decision of senior clinicians not to take part in the Nottingham inquiry utterly unacceptable, and incomprehensible on a personal level. We must ensure that that never happens again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Dr Ben Coleman.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am not a doctor, but thank you so much, Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps I am a doctor from the university of life—who knows?

[Ben Coleman]

I pay tribute to Baroness Amos for this excellent report, and to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) for commissioning it. It is a remarkable piece of work. It follows on from Ockenden, and the report on black maternal health done by my Health and Social Care Committee—its Chair, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), sits on the Opposition Benches. We see the same problems again and again: misogyny, racism and a lack of accountability. I am therefore delighted that this plan will be developed in six months, through the taskforce, and that we will have a maternity commissioner. I know that my constituent Louise Thompson, who has been campaigning hard for this position to be created, will be delighted. However, like me, I think she will have a question about timing. Will it be possible for the commissioner, who will be introduced on a statutory basis, to be brought in quickly enough for them to have a full role in shaping and creating the plan that will be before us in six months? If not, why not?

James Murray: My hon. Friend asks about the timing, and the process for establishing a commissioner. As a first step, in the next two weeks, I will meet members of the taskforce to agree the scope, and a detailed role for the commissioner, because I want that scope and role to be agreed with them, given that they will be developing the national action plan. We then need to get the commissioner on a statutory basis, and I want to do that as quickly as possible. I am keen to look for options to do that through the Health Bill, but that will obviously be subject to discussions with the usual channels. Once that is in place, we can appoint the commissioner as quickly as possible.

It is worth emphasising that the role of the commissioner will be to implement the national action plan, so work on developing the plan and on establishing the commissioner will begin immediately. When the commissioner is appointed, they will have a role in implementing the national action plan. The issue is not simply about developing a national plan; it is about ensuring that it gets implemented, and that we hold trusts and other organisations across the system to account.

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): Our APPG on birth trauma report in 2024 was the first in Parliament on that subject. We heard from more than 1,300 women and families. The report was titled, “Listen to Mums”. I am glad that an independent maternity commissioner will finally be implemented, after our years of calls for one. Bill Kirkup’s headline finding in his 2023 review of east Kent was also that we should listen to women. The Health Secretary has repeated the importance of listening to women—the mothers, midwives, and experts, and even the MPs who have worked for years on this issue. Why does he think that we have not been listened to, and are often not even invited into the room? How will he work to demonstrably change that in his time in the Department?

James Murray: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to draw further attention to the issue of women being ignored in health services generally, but specifically when it comes to maternity services. That goes back to the culture in maternity services. It is a devastating

conclusion to come to, but we see a culture there of misogyny, of women being ignored, and of their concerns not being listened to and acted on. We need to change that culture, and one of the first actions that we can take to do so is to have accountability. We must ensure accountability, through the duty of candour that we have discussed, and through other actions that we can take to enhance accountability throughout the system. That is a critical first step in ensuring that we change the culture.

Michelle Welsh (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): I welcome Baroness Valerie Amos’s review, and I thank her and her team for their commitment to this vital work. Once again, this review confronts us with a very uncomfortable but real truth. The reality is that this inquiry and the Donna Ockenden inquiry did not come about because of a system, NHS England or a regulatory authority; it came about because families have to keep on speaking up, over and over again, about one of the most horrific and traumatic things ever to happen. All the while, there is a culture within of mutual protection, and a code of silence, which has enabled some staff to shield each other from consequences.

I welcome the recommendation on the national maternity and neonatal commissioner—a strong, independent voice with the power to challenge—but we know that one appointment alone will not solve the problems. We need fundamental reform of the wider system of oversight and accountability. Regulators, NHS bodies and inspection regimes must change. Reviews do not save lives, but action does. We need strong leadership; big, bold decision making; and a determination to implement change, rather than simply to recommend it.

James Murray: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I again put on record my thanks to her for supporting families in their fight for justice and accountability. She is absolutely right to say that families have driven this work. It is families who have had the determination, persistence and stamina. It is quite hard to imagine people having those qualities when they are dealing with such unimaginable pain that lasts their whole life, but that is what families have done. That is why I feel that it is our responsibility to ensure that they do not have to drive these changes alone. We as MPs, Government Ministers and Secretaries of State support families in the drive for accountability, justice and change. My hon. Friend is absolutely right; this must be about fundamental reform to all parts of the system, including the regulators, which have let women down far too often.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the Secretary of State keep an open mind as to whether it is right to abolish the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, which was specifically designed to provide for a duty of candour? Clinicians would be obliged to give evidence to HSSIP; they could not refuse, and there would be criminal penalties if they did. As we have already established, the duty of candour, as conceived in the Hillsborough law, does not work, and I suspect there will be no improvement unless HSSIP is allowed to carry out completely independent investigations that have proven that they can carry the confidence of the public, patients and clinicians. Will the Secretary of State keep an open mind about keeping HSSIP?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. I know that this is an issue that he feels strongly about, and he has raised it with me before. The Minister of State for Health, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), who is taking the NHS modernisation Bill through Parliament, is leading on the changes that we are seeking to make around HSSIP and the Care Quality Commission. I hear what the hon. Gentleman is saying, but my hon. Friend has clearly set out the Government's rationale for the changes we are seeking to making and what they will accomplish.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): I pay tribute to Baroness Amos for the report she has published, which lays bare the scale of racism and discrimination in maternity and neonatal care. This is not a surprise to anyone; it is an issue that I and many other hon. Members in this place have been raising for years. I welcome the recommendation to root out racism and discrimination in these services, but more broadly, we all know that structural inequalities exist across the NHS, whether we like it or not, and we need to hold those responsible accountable. Can the Secretary of State say a little bit more about how he intends to be held accountable in this place, and about how senior clinicians will be held accountable for their actions? We need to root out racism and discrimination.

James Murray: My hon. Friend is right to again draw attention to the importance of accountability in making maternity services operate as they should. That applies to the racism, discrimination and inequality that it is important that we tackle, as she says. Ultimately, it is right that I as Secretary of State and all Government Ministers are held to account by Parliament for our actions in this space, but we also need to make sure that accountability is spread throughout the system. Our decision to extend the anti-discrimination programme across all trusts by the end of 2027 is an important first step in making sure that all trusts are held accountable for tackling discrimination and racism where it exists. More broadly, the national action plan, which we will publish by the end of the year, will explain exactly how we will embed accountability for racism and discrimination throughout the system.

Liz Jarvis (Eastleigh) (LD): Recommendation 3 of the report calls for improvements to how the system responds when something goes wrong, including providing a sincere apology. Will the Secretary of State apologise now to my constituents Charlotte and James, who lost their baby Norah at Winchester hospital, and to the thousands of families who have suffered the loss of a baby due to systemic failures in NHS maternity care?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments, and I am incredibly sorry to hear about her constituents Charlotte and James and their baby Norah. I met some of the families in Nottingham two weeks ago, and the depth of pain was numbing—that is a word that someone in the room said to me—because what was said was so heavy to hear and to understand. What made me feel even more numb was recognition that this deep pain is replicated so many times; there is also the breadth of the pain—the sheer scale of it. The hon. Lady's constituents Charlotte and James and their baby Norah are just one more example of families being let down by NHS

maternity services. The responsibility to do something about it weighs heavily on all of us, and on me as Secretary of State.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's statement and the work of Baroness Amos on this vital report. Disabled women are 44% more likely to suffer a stillbirth than non-disabled women. Drawing on the evidence session I chaired with our MaternAble campaign of disabled mothers, Baroness Amos's report highlights the devastating discrimination and structural barriers that are causing such inequalities for disabled women, from devastating assumptions that we are not sexually active or capable of parenting to the lack of accessible maternity spaces and medical equipment, as well as insufficient access to British Sign Language interpreters. It sets out the appalling lack of co-ordination and continuity of care across maternity pathways and services for disabled mothers. Will the Secretary of State meet me to ensure that disabled women's voices are central to the Government's taskforce and in implementing the report's recommendations to overcome the inequalities we face in our maternity care?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is an incredibly powerful advocate on the issue of the discrimination that disabled mothers face in the health service, but particularly in maternity services. She has spoken about both the discrimination and the barriers to accessing care; she is right to say that those barriers are wide and systemic, and that needs to be addressed as part of the comprehensive action plan. I would be very happy for myself or a member of my ministerial team to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue in more detail.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome Baroness Amos's investigation, which has shone a light on the fact that these failings in maternity services are not isolated to one hospital or another, but exist across the piece. The Secretary of State rightly identifies that culture is at the centre of this issue, and that we must listen to the voices of women and of whistleblowers. That applies not just to maternity services, but across the NHS and, indeed, in public life more widely.

The Secretary of State has spoken about accountability starting from the top, but I noticed that he swerved the question about whether he would come back to the House to report on progress against the goals he has set himself. It is shocking and shameful that black women are three times more likely than white women to die in maternity. Will he commit to coming back to the Chamber, reporting and holding himself to account on changing those racial disparities and ensuring true equity in healthcare?

James Murray: I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady that I, as Secretary of State, must be held to account, and that is the role of this House. I will take that away and work out the best way of making sure that that happens, on a basis and to a timetable that people can understand, because I would like to make sure that I am held to account for delivering the whole action plan in the right way. I will take that point away and come back to the hon. Lady with an update.

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): I, too, put on the record my thanks to Baroness Amos and her team, and to the families who relived their pain so that this report could exist—they are the real heroes here. I welcome the report, as well as the announcement of the new maternity and neonatal commissioner. It is vital that the report recognised structural racism, but that will mean nothing unless it leads to national standards that tackle inequality and deliver high-quality care for every mother and their baby.

I note that the report stops short of recommending a target to bring racial disparities in maternity care to an end. Perhaps that is because the commitment was ours to keep from our manifesto. In April, the Minister for Secondary Care told the House that the target to end racial disparities in maternity outcomes would be informed by this report's recommendations. They have been published now, so will the Secretary of State finally give us a timetable for delivering on that target? I remind him that black women are three times more likely to die in pregnancy and childbirth, and their babies are twice as likely to be stillborn. These are not statistics; they are mothers and children who are still dying. We promised a target at the last election. Without one, we cannot measure progress, and we cannot end that disparity.

James Murray: My hon. Friend is right to draw attention to the disparity in what black women and their babies experience in the health service and the extra risks they face, particularly in maternity services. The taskforce will produce a comprehensive action plan by the end of the year, and I anticipate that it will include metrics for delivery and ways of monitoring progress. I will make sure that my hon. Friend's comments are fed into the work of the taskforce.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): To deliver on this review's recommendations in full will require serious capital investment. Just last week, we heard that St Helier, the hospital in my constituency, was considering closing its maternity unit altogether due to potentially unsafe pipework. Will the Government commit to reviewing the phasing of the new hospital programme, or at the very least providing the funds required to keep those buildings safe and open until the delivery of a new building?

James Murray: On capital investment, I set out in my statement that we have announced an extra £41 million specifically to address critical safety issues in maternity and neonatal services. That funding is on top of the funding already in place, and it will help address those critical safety issues. The wider action plan will set out our overall approach. While funding will be a consideration in what the Government do, I again draw attention to the importance of deep-rooted issues such as culture, which must be addressed as part of the plan.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I start by commending my right hon. Friend on his thoughtful and considerate approach to this investigation and other matters during his time in office. He rightly spoke about culture, and others have spoken about ideology. Does he agree that the only ideology that matters as we try to change this culture should be rooted in science and evidence?

Will my right hon. Friend therefore consider ensuring that women in maternity are the first in line to be the beneficiaries of that science and evidence, whether through the single patient record or having access to their maternity care records? That data can make sure that poor care has nowhere to hide. We need to finally get AI-enabled scanners and replace the 19th-century equipment that is currently being used to listen to babies' heartbeats.

Finally, will my right hon. Friend share the findings of this report formally with the Scottish Government, because many of the findings on training, culture and clinical pathways will resonate there? Unfortunately, the Scottish Government have been less than forthcoming with their own investigations into this matter.

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for his emphasis on the need for us to tackle the deep-rooted cultural problems in maternity services. He talks about how the only ideology that we should follow should be based on science and evidence. I agree with him on the importance of science and evidence, and of making sure that women are aware of the risks and benefits of the different options available to them, so that they can make informed choices. I add that the only ideology I would be comfortable signing up to is one that says that women must be listened to. That is a principle that I think we can all agree on, and we should make sure that it is embedded in our maternity services.

My hon. Friend mentions investment in technology, including the single patient record. The single patient record can be of real benefit and make a difference, particularly in maternity services, and it will be enabled by the NHS modernisation Bill that is going through Parliament. I want to make sure that the single patient record is available to maternity services as quickly as possible. I am happy to share a copy of the report with the Scottish Government.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The Secretary of State's announcement of 1,000 extra midwives is welcome, even if the funding is temporary. However, this is a review of maternity and neonatal services. In Baroness Amos's review of Sussex, she noted that in the 12 months ending in October 2025, only 50.1% of shifts at the Royal Sussex county hospital in Brighton were staffed according to British Association of Perinatal Medicine guidelines. What provision is the Secretary of State making to ensure that neonatal staffing is safe?

James Murray: I thank the hon. Lady for welcoming the additional 1,000 positions to make sure that newly qualified midwives can find a way to contribute to the NHS. She raises staffing and training, as other Members have rightly done. The taskforce will consider questions about ensuring that we have the right staffing in place, with the right training to support it, ahead of the publication of the national action plan at the end of the year.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): This report is welcome, but that does not make its existence any less tragic. Far too many mothers and babies have been failed, including mothers like my constituent Amie, who late last year was turned away repeatedly, despite reporting reduced movements. Her baby Seren was born stillborn. The NHS spends almost as much on clinical negligence payouts as it does on maternity care itself. Can the Secretary of State update

us on progress made following the Lock review into clinical negligence? It is about time we started investing in better care, rather than paying out for failure.

James Murray: I was incredibly sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent Amie, who was turned away repeatedly from services despite asking for their help. We have heard that story far too many times as part of the work that Baroness Amos and Donna Ockenden have done and from our constituents. My hon. Friend is right to point out the amount of money that goes on clinical negligence, rather than making sure that services are better in the first place, which would avoid the need for clinical negligence payouts. I have met David Lock KC to discuss his ongoing work on that issue, and I will be working with him closely on it in the months ahead.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Yeovil hospital was included as part of the review after the temporary closure of its unit last year. Since then, families, frontline staff and I have repeatedly raised concerns with Government and NHS leaders about working culture, bullying, staffing levels and support. Today's review backs that up, after months of feeling that our concerns have not been properly acted on. Can the Secretary of State detail what the Government are doing to improve staffing levels in rural maternity units and to address working culture, leadership, accountability and whistleblowing?

James Murray: The hon. Gentleman is right to draw attention to the impact that bullying and a poor working culture can have on maternity services. That focus on culture and on what we can do to change it will be a key part of the national action plan that the taskforce will develop. We want to make sure not only that staffing levels are correct and that staff have the right training, but that different members of staff work together across different disciplines and roles, because that is one way to make sure that the service improves.

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): The Secretary of State, like countless other Ministers over the years, has stood at the Dispatch Box to outline and apologise for yet another state cover-up. Can we agree that enough is enough? Will he personally intervene and beg the Prime Minister to pass the Hillsborough law in full—it has been promised to us on numerous occasions—before summer recess and end this culture of cover-ups?

James Murray: My hon. Friend is right to point to the importance of the Hillsborough law, because it will enable greater accountability and justice across society, as well as being crucial for future maternity investigations. That is why one of the commitments I made last week following Donna Ockenden's report was to apply the duty of candour, which the Hillsborough law will enable, to all future maternity investigations, so that never

again can we have a situation where senior clinical leaders choose not to participate and choose to avoid accountability.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): A retired paediatrician and constituent told me recently that after giving 50 years' service to the children of the NHS, she was devastated by the treatment of mothers and babies and loyal staff, whose concerns are routinely ignored, as when Yeovil's specialist baby unit was recently closed without notice. While I welcome the Government's commitment to a new maternity commissioner, will the Secretary of State set out how the commissioner will intervene in a trust like Somerset, rather than simply reporting on failures after harm has been caused?

James Murray: In the coming two weeks, I will be meeting the national taskforce, which I chair, to establish the scope and role of the new national maternity commissioner. I want to make sure that that is agreed with the taskforce. The taskforce will produce the action plan, which the commissioner will help to implement. I want to ensure that this is all done with the same principles in mind.

The hon. Lady also raised an important point about not only mothers being ignored, which they are far too often, but staff being ignored. A few Members have made that point today, and it bears repeating. We know that 9,000 staff contributed to Baroness Amos's report, which underlines the fact that they want a better maternity service, too.

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): The lack of national maternity triage standards has been of huge concern to a number of my constituents, in some cases through bitter and heartbreaking experience. The Secretary of State said that NHS England would be responsible for rolling out and monitoring triage standards. Will that responsibility pass into his Department by April next year, and how will he ensure that those standards are genuinely implemented in every trust?

James Murray: My right hon. Friend is right to point to the impact that national triage standards can make by ensuring that when there are problems, the women concerned are seen earlier and those who need support can receive it at the right time, in order to prevent greater harm from occurring whenever possible. The national triage standards are currently being set out by NHS England, because that organisation still exists. The chief executive is meeting representatives of the trust today to begin the work of rolling out triage standards across all the different trusts. When NHS England becomes part of the Department for Health and Social Care, we will of course continue to monitor that, and the taskforce will also consider it as part of its national action plan.

Defence Investment Plan

2.31 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dan Jarvis): With permission, I will make a statement on the defence investment plan.

Our armed forces represent the very best of us, from our sailors patrolling the High North and protecting the seabed, to our pilots, aircrew and air defence teams in the middle east defending the skies, our Paras in the south Atlantic and our Marines in the channel. As I speak, we have personnel supporting the humanitarian mission in Venezuela, submariners beneath the waves maintaining our unbroken chain of protection, and planners at Permanent Joint Headquarters making the most extraordinarily complex challenges appear routine. Our servicemen and women rightly inspire respect, gratitude and pride across the House and across the nation. We all recognise that they serve at an increasingly dangerous and unpredictable moment in history. The central purpose of the defence investment plan, which we publish today, is to ensure that they have the kit and the technology they need in order to do the difficult job we ask of them. I know at first hand just how important that is, and when I was appointed Defence Secretary a couple of weeks ago I promised to get it right. Today, I make good on that promise.

Before I set out the details, I want to take the opportunity to thank the many hundreds of colleagues in the Ministry of Defence, in and out of uniform, who have worked so hard to prepare this plan. Over the last few weeks it has been a privilege to work with them, as it has been to work with my ministerial team. In particular, I pay tribute to the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who I know has invested many months in getting the plan right.

I also want to place on the record my profound thanks to my right hon. Friends the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer for their support, and for the spirit of good will that has guided our negotiations over the past fortnight. They have, for two years, demonstrated steadfast commitment to our national security, and as a consequence our armed forces are better prepared and better supported today. It is important to add that Ukraine is still strong in the fight, and that over the past two years Britain has proved itself to be a reliable ally and a trusted partner.

I also pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), who, as Secretary of State, dedicated his time and worked in order to deliver this plan. He set out to the House in clear terms why he could not support an earlier version of the plan; I will lay out what has changed, and why I can support it.

This plan now commits more investment in our armed forces: £298 billion over the next four years. That includes an additional £15 billion on top of last year's spending review settlement, of which most is extra day-to-day spending for training and improving the availability of ships and aircraft to increase our warfighting readiness. That is £1.5 billion more than when I took up this job just a couple of weeks ago, and it means that defence spending will now increase in real terms by 27% between 2023-24 and 2029-30. That is a bigger increase across a

Parliament than any present Member of this House has ever seen. It means that the £74 billion allocated to our armed forces next year is now £20 billion more than the allocation in the last year of the previous Government, and it means that by the end of the decade the proportion of GDP spent on defence will be greater than it has been at any time during the last 30 years.

We have made some difficult but necessary decisions to fund this, but our fiscal rules have been upheld and day-to-day spending on frontline services has been protected. All Departments were asked to contribute 1% of their capital budgets from this year, while those with larger resources—the Department for Transport with its roads budget, and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero—were asked to make further contributions. Full details are set out today in a written ministerial statement. To reinforce that additional investment, this Labour Government are announcing a new £50 billion defence export facility to support British defence firms in winning contracts across the globe.

More money matters—of course it does—but so do the choices that we make on how to spend it. I have therefore decided to reprioritise a further £1 billion in the plan, to ensure that it better reflects the way in which war is waged today. It will provide our service personnel with the capabilities that they need to deter and fight, now and in the years ahead. The war in Ukraine has seen battlefield technology advance faster than at any time in history, and few have done more to ensure that our armed forces have kept pace than my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns). I thank him for his service, and for the work that he did as a Minister. He will know that artificial intelligence, autonomy and uncrewed systems are no longer capabilities of the future, and through the DIP they will now receive the sustained investment that reflects their strategic importance.

Today, we commit the UK's largest ever investment in drone warfare: £5 billion for strike, protector and surveillance drones across the Royal Navy, the Army and the Royal Air Force; anti-submarine vessels, uncrewed ground vehicles and fighter jets; a new uncrewed systems taskforce to rapidly develop and field new autonomous capabilities; and funding for Europe's biggest drone testing site, the Uncrewed Systems Centre in Swindon, which I opened on my very first day in the job. That project is thanks to the efforts of my hon. Friend the Member for Swindon North (Will Stone). We will also invest nearly £2 billion to integrate our armed forces through a new digital targeting web, underpinned by the most advanced AI and software, cutting the time from decision to strike faster than ever before, along with £100 million for the defence AI taskforce and another £115 million to raise our defences against the threats from AI.

It would be reckless to ignore the lessons from Ukraine, but it is important to remember that we are not Ukraine. We are a member of NATO, and a nuclear power. In this year alone our armed forces have been deployed to the High North and the middle east, and they are now readying themselves for the prospect of regenerating Ukraine's forces and reopening the strait of Hormuz. All the while, they protect our island home and retain the ability to respond to crises in dangerous and distant lands.

Britain needs a flexible, hybrid, integrated, “high-low” force that can deter and fight across every domain. That is why we are committing £8.6 billion to the global combat air programme, proudly in partnership with our allies, Japan and Italy. This next-generation stealth fighter jet is in addition to the £1.1 billion Typhoon upgrade, and will ensure that our RAF retains control of the skies. We will invest £26 billion to fund the most extensive naval base upgrades for nearly half a century, including at Faslane, Portsmouth and Devonport; £790 million to protect the UK homeland and our overseas bases from air, drone and missile threats; and £11 billion in munitions and weapons to increase UK stockpiles, including long-range strike capabilities, low-cost cruise missiles and one-way effectors. By 2030, we will build at least six new energetics factories.

Today, we commit £64 billion to fund Dreadnought and AUKUS submarines, a new warhead and other crucial nuclear work. Our independent nuclear deterrent is the ultimate guarantor of our security, and in providing the funding to renew it, we extend that promise long into the future. We will also purchase F-35As and join NATO’s nuclear mission. Our security is now contested in every domain, so we will invest over £3 billion in space capabilities, £2.5 billion in cyber, and £400 million to protect our undersea cables and pipelines.

In the end, it is people who win wars and preserve peace. By delivering three above-inflation pay rises, extending childcare provision and putting fully into law the armed forces covenant, this Labour Government have demonstrated our commitment to what matters most. Building on the work already done to fix 1,200 of the worst homes, today we commit £9 billion over a decade to raise the condition of military family housing to a standard that matches the service and sacrifice of those living in it. Through a new Defence Housing Service, we will implement the defence housing strategy in full, fulfilling our moral obligation to personnel and their families.

The DIP represents significant progress in implementing the vision set out in our strategic defence review. We will invest more and target better, but there is much more work to be done. It was not for nothing that the UK made a promise to our allies, just as they did to us: 3.5 by ’35. In a more dangerous world, our commitment to NATO is absolute. I gave my word to the Secretary-General and all our allies that our promise will be met, and a credible plan will be produced to ensure that it is. We will reach 3% in the next Parliament, with funding set out at the next spending review, in which defence will be the No. 1 priority. Britain has always met our NATO spending commitments, and under this Government we always will. Britain has always stood with our allies, and under this Government we always will. This plan accelerates the development of deep precision strike weapons and close support artillery with Germany, and it creates an amphibious combined fleet with the Netherlands. We will also invite Joint Expeditionary Force nations to join our Northern Navies initiative and build a hybrid force together.

I now have a responsibility to make the plan work, not least given what Cabinet colleagues have forgone from their budgets in order to support mine. My commitment to them, and indeed to the British public, is that with the requirement to spend more on defence comes a duty to spend more wisely on defence. This

plan includes a pledge to make substantial savings by the end of this Parliament, as well as a commitment to drive down fraud and error across defence.

I am grateful to our partners in industry for their counsel and support during this process. I know that recent months have not been easy, but with the DIP now published, I am relying on the full spectrum of our industrial base to make it a success: primes and small and medium-sized enterprises; workers and trade unions; and innovators and investors. Together, we will ensure that the benefits of this plan will be felt right across the United Kingdom. We will develop sovereign and dual-use technologies, increase exports, generate growth and reindustrialise our economy.

Today, I am proud to confirm that with the publication of the DIP comes the promise of greater security for families and new opportunities for our young people. According to MOD analysis, this plan will support nearly 60,000 additional good, skilled jobs right across our Union. That will be achieved alongside a culture shift in procurement.

Ultimately, the success of this defence investment plan will be measured by whether it commands the support of the amazing men and women who serve in our armed forces. They remain our most important asset—respected by those who stand with us, and feared by those who stand against us. We know that they are equal to any task, and with this defence investment plan, we give them the means to match their courage. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Secretary of State, it is good form to let the Speaker’s Office know if one is going to speak for more than the allocated time. I will now have to give extra time to the other Front Benchers as well. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

2.45 pm

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

After months and months of delay, we finally have the defence investment plan, but it is quite simply a case of too little, too late. It is too little because there is virtually no more cash than there was in the plan that led the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), to resign because he believed that it would make the country “less safe”. It is too late not just because the plan is months overdue, but because much of the capability that it contains will not be in service until the 2030s, when the threat we face is right now.

If Labour Members do not agree that this plan is too little, they do not need to take my word for it. The Chief of the Defence Staff said he needed £28 billion to fund the armed forces over the next four years, but this plan fulfils barely half that requirement. The right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough, who was the Secretary of State for Defence until a few weeks ago, said that the proposed spending

“falls well short of what is required for defence and the country at this dangerous time”,

because

“it rises to just 2.68% of GDP in 2030”.

[James Cartlidge]

Will the Secretary of State confirm that, under his revised plan, the GDP figure for defence in 2030 remains unchanged, at 2.68%? That begs the obvious question: if reaching 2.68% by 2030 was a resigning matter for the previous Defence Secretary, why is it good enough for him?

This DIP is not just too little financially; it is too late. If Labour Members do not agree, they should remember that it was promised for last autumn and is now 10 months overdue. Most importantly, the drones that Labour promised in today's headlines mainly enter service in the 2030s, when the threat we face is today. Autonomous drones to fly with the Apache, uncrewed surface and underwater vessels, and the prototype for the RAF's autonomous fighter jet will all enter service in the 2030s—far too late in this fast-changing world of tech-driven warfare.

On that subject, it was ironic that the Prime Minister announced the DIP at Malloy Aeronautics in Maidenhead, where I launched the MOD's first ever defence drone strategy back in February 2024. Back then, we were world leaders in drone warfare, having supplied Ukraine with cutting-edge drone capabilities that were not on a press release. It was real kit used on a real frontline against Europe's peer military threat, the Russian armed forces. So what happened? Labour came to power and put all that progress on hold, which paralysed procurement while we waited for the strategic defence review and then for the DIP.

But the big question is, why all the dither and delay? In a word, money. Is the harsh truth not that the drones could come into service far sooner, but the Government are unwilling to commit the cash before the 2030s? Is this not the inevitable result of having a Prime Minister who is unwilling to cut welfare, and who is prioritising a bigger benefits bill over properly funding defence? That begs the next big question: where is the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) in all this? Can the Secretary of State tell us whether the putative Prime Minister has been consulted on the DIP? Most importantly, has he given it his blessing? If not, is the DIP even worth the paper it is written on?

It is rumoured that the current Prime Minister may have ambitions to be the next Secretary-General of NATO. If that is true, might it have been advisable to include in the DIP a funded plan to get to 3% on defence? Can the Secretary of State tell us in which financial year Labour will spend 3% on defence?

For all the focus on drones, our people—not just our regular personnel, our reserves and their families, but our cadets and our veterans—remain our most important capability. I was proud to make the decision to buy back the defence estate from Annington, a deal that the previous Labour Government left untouched. Given that I thought we all wanted to deliver homes for heroes, can the Secretary of State confirm—this is a critical question about the accommodation of those who serve our country—that the defence investment plan includes cutting hundreds of millions of pounds from the budget for forces housing, shifting it from this Parliament into the 2030s? Can he confirm that, and can he also confirm that he is cutting cadet funding at the same time and over the same period?

On veterans—I hope he has had a chance to think about this after my previous question—does the Secretary of State agree that a top priority for the new Prime Minister must be to back our former soldiers, and scrap the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill?

To conclude, after months of dither and delay, it has taken the sudden end of his premiership for the Prime Minister to finally publish the DIP in a desperate search for a legacy, but it is a legacy of failure, with an underfunded defence investment plan that is too little, too late. The men and women of our armed forces deserve much better.

Dan Jarvis: The shadow Defence Secretary talks about legacy, so let me remind him that the previous Government cut back our service personnel by almost 50,000, the morale of our troops was through the floor, 46 of the biggest 52 projects were delayed or over budget, and there was an equipment plan without the funding to back it up.

I have to say that I am also quite perplexed that the shadow Defence Secretary wants to raise concerns about the announcement we have made on drones. We have just announced the largest ever investment in drones in our country's history. When he gets the time, because I know he will want to look carefully at the detail, he will see that, over the past two weeks, we have reprioritised activity to bring forward spend so that we can deliver operational capability sooner than would otherwise be the case.

The shadow Defence Secretary mentioned housing, and I understand why he would want to raise that, because housing is hugely important for defence and for the armed forces community. I know what it is like to live in armed forces accommodation, and I said earlier that we absolutely have a moral responsibility to those who serve to ensure we provide them with the best possible living accommodation. That is why we have recommitted today to £9 billion of investment over the next 10 years, which will see investment in the housing estate growing in real terms in each of those years. That is an absolute commitment that we have made today.

The shadow Defence Secretary also mentioned, and again I understand why he chose to do so, the importance of cadet forces. All of us in our constituencies will no doubt engage with cadet forces, which are an absolute force for good in communities around the country. That is why we have made a clear commitment to continue to invest in and modernise our cadet forces and to continue to improve outstanding opportunities for young people.

The shadow Defence Secretary asked specifically about the percentage of GDP that we will be spending on defence. I gently point out to him that, when we came into government two years ago, we inherited a figure of 2.3%. That was the figure we inherited. It is currently at 2.5% and will be at 2.7% by the end of this Parliament, with a clear commitment to spend 3% in the next Parliament and an absolutely critical commitment to spend 3.5% by 2035. He will have heard the points I made about the importance of defence spending and the commitment this Government have made to ensuring that defence spending is the No. 1 priority at the next spending review.

John Healey (Rawmarsh and Conisbrough) (Lab): We all want this defence investment plan to be a success, and I personally thank the MOD officials who have

worked so hard for many months to get us to this point. I welcome the extra money the Treasury may have ceded in the last couple of weeks, which builds on the record increase in defence investment that we as a Labour Government have made since the election.

However, threats are still growing, demands on defence are still rising in this dangerous world and today's step means that, as a nation, we will be spending 2.7% of GDP on defence in 2030, the date when NATO warns we could face a Russian attack. With European security at stake, does my right hon. Friend agree that more needs to be done in the months ahead, beyond the DIP, to develop a clear, credible funding plan that will hit 3% and meet our NATO commitment to 3.5% by 2035?

Dan Jarvis: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for his service in government. He did an excellent job as Defence Secretary, and I absolutely aim to build on the work he did. I know he will share the pride that this Government have in the commitment we have already made of £298 billion over the next four years, with £15 billion of new money in this plan and an increase in defence spending in real terms of 27% up to 2029-30.

However, my right hon. Friend is right: we do need to do more. We will need to spend more on defence, and that is why there was a clear commitment that that will be a No. 1 priority at the next spending review. We have an absolute obligation to our armed forces and to our allies. When I talk to my NATO allies, they look to the United Kingdom for leadership. We have provided that leadership over a number of years, including under the previous Government, and this Government will continue to provide that leadership.

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

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement, albeit 14 months late and one Defence Secretary later.

The Liberal Democrats welcome investment in the technologies reshaping warfare in Ukraine and beyond. Our armed forces must be more agile and better equipped to deal with the threats we face. However, let us be clear: this defence investment plan is too little, too late. After years of Conservative neglect, Britain needed a Government willing to match the scale of the challenge. Instead, we have had months of delay, and we now have a plan that still appears to have a significant gap between the ambition and the resources required. In particular, it is hugely concerning to see how little is allocated to air defence. It is hundreds of millions short of what was recommended in the strategic defence review, and inadequate to protect our islands and, indeed, our allies.

The Prime Minister himself has warned that Russia could pose a direct threat to NATO by 2030, yet the architects of the strategic defence review, General Sir Richard Barrons and former Labour Defence Secretary and NATO Secretary-General Lord Robertson, have both made it clear that the current funding is not enough. Just weeks ago, the Defence Secretary resigned because he believed the funding settlement on offer was not sufficient to keep Britain safe. The new settlement does not bridge that gap, yet the new Defence Secretary claims it is enough. Were both the experts and the

former Defence Secretary wrong about this, or does the Defence Secretary truly believe this is enough funding to keep Britain safe?

The Liberal Democrats have welcomed plans to sort out the sorry state of forces housing, so it is concerning to hear reports that funding is being found by raiding existing defence budgets, including for military housing. If that is true, what message does the Secretary of State have for serving personnel and their families still living in mouldy homes? Is this genuinely new investment or simply moving money from one overstretched budget to another?

The last thing our armed forces and defence industry need is more uncertainty. Between delays to the DIP, a change of Defence Ministers and now a new Prime Minister incoming, they have already dealt with a lot. It is reported that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), who looks certain to become Prime Minister in the coming weeks, is sympathetic to the Liberal Democrat plan for defence bonds. Despite the Prime Minister appearing to rule it out in his speech today, can the Secretary of State confirm whether defence bonds are at least under consideration to provide the injection of funding our armed forces so desperately need?

Dan Jarvis: I gently say to the hon. Member that, when his party was in coalition government with the Conservative party, defence was cut by 22%. We are all judged by our record and the actions we take, and today's defence investment plan represents a real-terms increase in defence spending—

James MacCleary *indicated dissent.*

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Member can shake his head, but it is a statement of truth that this plan, which represents £298 billion of investment over the next four years, represents an increase in real terms of 27% by 2029-30.

The hon. Member spoke about housing. I hope he heard my words earlier about the absolute commitment to ensure our armed forces have a standard of accommodation fitting for the nature of the service they undertake. That is why we have made a commitment of £9 billion over 10 years. I remember living in armed forces accommodation that had not been properly maintained. We have a duty and a responsibility to do so, and that is why we are investing a very significant amount of money.

The hon. Gentleman spoke about defence bonds. Of course, we will look at all suggestions people have about how we can do things differently, but in the end all the money has to be accounted for and we have to be responsible and bring forward a properly costed defence investment plan. That is what we have done; we have brought forward very significant amounts of resource.

The hon. Gentleman said that I claimed it was enough. I think it is slightly unfair of him to characterise my earlier remarks in that regard. I am crystal clear about the fact that today represents a massive investment in our armed forces and in the technology they will be deploying and employing, but that is not to say that we do not need to do more. We do need to do more and

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that is precisely why I made the point that we need defence spending to be the No. 1 priority at the next spending review.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his collective team for all the work that has gone into the defence investment plan. I also welcome the increase in spending. There are a multitude of lessons from Ukraine that we have all heard much about. One is on scale and capacity in both Russia and Ukraine's industrial capability, where they are now building 1.1 million drones every two months. Will the Secretary of State outline to the House the percentage of the defence budget, particularly in the equipment plan, that is being spent on uncrewed systems and whether that is docked into the defence industrial strategy?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend for his work in this area. I know he has a particular percentage in mind, and I am keen to discuss it more with him. I hope that he will acknowledge today, though, that the DIP brings forward the largest ever investment in drone warfare: £150 million more for homeland counter-drone defences; £50 million more over the next 12 months for the Army's taskforce Rapstone; £150 million for a new uncrewed vehicle programme for the Army; and £150 million for the Royal Marine Commandos, with the same hybrid model of crewed and autonomous insertion craft and drones. I hope he will acknowledge that there has been a refocusing and a sharpening of the plan over the past couple of weeks to ensure that we learn the lessons from Ukraine. But I know, because he has been around the block a bit, that he will also understand that while we must learn the lessons from Ukraine, we are not Ukraine and we still have other responsibilities as a major power within NATO. That is why what I have to do is ensure we have a balanced set of capabilities. I am confident that that is the balance we have achieved today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): Many wonder whether aircraft carriers are going to go the way of the old battleships, uniquely vulnerable to drones that cost a tiny fraction of their cost. To protect aircraft carriers, we need destroyers and frigates. Moreover, in two world wars we relied completely on destroyers and frigates to protect our food supply, so will the Secretary of State say more about the replacement of our ageing frigate and destroyer fleet, particularly with regard to the Type 45 and Type 83 destroyers?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the Father of the House, not least because it gives me the opportunity to pay tribute to all those who serve at sea and do extraordinary work in the service of the Royal Navy. As an island nation, the capabilities they provide are mission critical for us. That is why, between now and the end of 2030, we expect the Royal Navy to take delivery of five new warships and the final Astute class attack submarine; and in the same period we will bring our first large autonomous surface and sub-surface autonomous platforms into service. Those who work in the Royal Navy do

exceptional work on behalf of our nation and we will make sure that they have the resources and capabilities they need to keep our country safe.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Chair of the Defence Committee.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the ministerial briefing beforehand and for allowing Defence Committee members advanced sight of the defence investment plan. I also welcome that we now have a fully funded plan, backed by the Treasury, that is scalable for key facets such as housing, training, workforce recovery, AI, integrated air and missile defence, and munition stockpiles.

However, there is no clear pathway to reach 3% of GDP spend. Despite assurances that the DIP would go further than previous defence equipment plans, it actually contains less detail: there is no full 10-year expenditure plan; there is no breakdown between procurement and support costs; and much of the investment appears to be backloaded beyond 2030. Will my right hon. Friend commit to fight for more funding for defence, so we reach the 3% of GDP spend by 2030? Will he commit to building more in Britain to stimulate sovereignty and economic growth? What operational risks have been accepted in the interim while there have been cuts to investment in certain areas? When will our Committee be furnished with the full details, so that effective parliamentary scrutiny can be undertaken?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for the scrutiny that I know he will apply to this important piece of work. He reeled off a number of different capabilities, and I am very happy to discuss those with him in more detail.

The essence of my hon. Friend's question was to seek an assurance that I will commit to fight for the funding that defence needs, and I will, of course, give him that commitment. It is my job now to ensure that we have the resources we need to field the kind of capabilities required to keep our country safe at a point of great challenge. That does involve working very closely with our NATO allies and providing them with the certainty of our long-term commitment towards defence funding, and it will require us to show a trajectory to our commitment to 3.5%.

He is also right to raise the point about backing Britain. The Prime Minister, the Chancellor and other ministerial colleagues have been absolutely clear that, while we require additional resource to provide the capabilities we need, we must do that in a way that ensures we are best able to grow our economy, and create and sustain good, well-paid defence jobs right around the United Kingdom. That is an absolute priority for me, and I give him an assurance that we will work closely with him on it.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): At last, we have agreement on a defence expenditure statistic. When the Secretary of State says that what the settlement means is that the proportion of GDP spent on defence by the end of this decade will now be higher than at any time in the past 30 years, he is quite right. The trouble is that if we go back 30 years to 1995, what we were spending then under the new accounting rules was 3% of GDP, and that was six years after the fall of the

Berlin wall. Given that we are now in a more dangerous situation today than at any time since at least the height of the cold war in the 1980s, should we not be looking at the sort of percentages we spent then? Under the new accounting rules, that was between 4.1% and 5.5%. Haven't we still got a long way to go?

Dan Jarvis: The right hon. Gentleman knows that I always listen very carefully to what he has to say, not least because he talks a lot of good sense on these matters. Over the many years of him being sat on the Government Benches and me sat on the Opposition Benches, I remember listening to the case he made for investment in defence, including investment in nuclear. I know, therefore, that he will welcome the £63 billion over the next four years to strengthen the UK's nuclear deterrent. He has spoken with great consistency on these matters over many, many years.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to say that there is still work to do to point the trajectory to 3.5%. I think today is a very significant step forward in terms of providing additional resource and additional capability. The £298 billion is a very significant commitment by this Government. When we came into office two years ago, the percentage of GDP was at 2.3%. We have increased that. We are on a trajectory to increase it over the next few years, and we must ensure that, through the next spending review process, we have the resource that I think most right hon. and hon. Members agree we now need to chart that course to 3.5%. That is an absolute commitment that we will honour, and we will work closely with our NATO allies in order to do so.

Wes Streeting (Ilford North) (Lab): Of course, this Government would not have such an uphill mountain to climb were it not for the decisions taken by our predecessors. I really think the Conservatives would have more credibility if they acknowledged that fact more readily and with more humility than they have shown today, and on every previous occasion the shadow Secretary of State has been at the Dispatch Box. None the less, as the Secretary of State himself has acknowledged, we need to go further and faster. What we have here is a good foundation to build on, but there is more to do. With that in mind, will the Secretary of State set out the Government's rationale for not joining the defence security and resilience bank, and will he reconsider?

Dan Jarvis: We will look carefully at the best possible mechanism to ensure that we have the resources to field the required capability. There are different views about how best to do that, and different allies advocate different ways of investing money in our defence industries. My right hon. Friend will understand that I have not had a huge amount of time, in the couple of weeks that I have been drawing the plan together, to map out the longer-term spending proposals on how we best generate that activity across defence and with our economy. I am not ruling anything out or in, but I will look closely at what our allies say and take advice. I am happy to discuss it further with my right hon. Friend.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): It would appear that this defence investment plan is unaffordable, but the Public Accounts Committee will be examining that. Deep in the plan is an old accountant's trick: a vast efficiency savings figure of £10.7 billion.

Does the plan rely on that figure? If not, what is the incentive to make efficiency savings over the course of the plan?

Dan Jarvis: The plan is affordable. That is one of the differences between this Government and the last. But I welcome the scrutiny that the hon. Member will no doubt apply to the plan. We have looked carefully, as hon. Members would expect, at how we are able to fund this. Nobody on the Government Benches wants to bring forward spending commitments if we cannot provide evidence of how are to pay for them, but I am happy to discuss that further with the hon. Member.

Michelle Scrogg (Barrow and Furness) (Lab): I welcome that this Government are prioritising the delivery of our nuclear deterrent, including investment in not only the current but the all-important future submarine programmes. The shadow Secretary of State said it was too little, too late. The price that the Liberal Democrats demanded for the coalition Government of 2010 was not renewing our nuclear deterrent, and the Conservatives were happy to pay that price so, yes, they are really bloody late! Part of the cost of that decision is being paid by our submariners, forced to remain at sea for over 200 days in an ageing fleet.

We have to be honest with the people of Great Britain: our food supply chains are being tested, our energy infrastructure is being mapped—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Is there a question?

Michelle Scrogg: Our MOD is under a cyber-attack every day. Does the Secretary of State agree that if we told the public the truth, they would be more willing to go along with those difficult decisions?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend does a fantastic job representing her constituents, whose important work on behalf of the nation I pay tribute to. I am keen to come and visit her constituency, and I look forward to continuing these conversations with her. My hon. Friend is right to make those points. The nuclear deterrent is a vital capability that underpins our national security, and we are hugely grateful to all those who make that happen on behalf of the nation, including her constituents.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Daring class and Sea Viper are due to be retired from the mid-2030s. As I understand it from the DIP, the plan is that the Common Combat Vessel, and its slave drone vessels, the Type 91 and Type 94, will come in to replace it as our principal means of hybrid maritime air defence. Given that this is simply little more than a concept at this stage, what confidence does the Secretary of State have that we will not still be reliant on the Daring class, and has he made contingency for extending her service, so that we are not left undefended?

Dan Jarvis: I would be happy to have a more detailed conversation with the right hon. Gentleman offline about his points. He will know that a massive programme of transformation has recently been set out by the First Sea Lord. We are working through the detail of that to ensure and satisfy ourselves that we have the right capabilities. As I have said, I pay tribute to all those who

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serve in our armed forces, particularly those who serve at sea in the way that the right hon. Gentleman described. It is an important capability, and we will ensure that we have the right capabilities, in the right place, at the right time.

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

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I have had the opportunity to look over defence equipment plans for the last 13 years, and have repeatedly seen—a profiling from over a decade—huge optimism about savings and efficiencies, which is how plans get across the line of affordability. Will the Secretary of State commit to ensuring that there is proper parliamentary scrutiny of the plan, through the Public Accounts Committee, the Defence Committee and, hopefully next week—if Ministers from both the Treasury and Ministry of Defence agree to attend—the Treasury Committee, at a meeting including Defence Committee colleagues?

Dan Jarvis: The Chair of the Treasury Committee makes important points. She will have heard my earlier comments about the requirement, when spending more on defence, to also spend more wisely. I am acutely conscious of the reputation of defence procurement spending, going back generations. We need to do much better, and we are in a process of transition to ensure that we do. I am keen to work closely with my hon. Friend and her Committee to ensure that it has the opportunity to provide the scrutiny on behalf of this House, which would be constructive to the process. The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry would be pleased to appear in front of the Committee next week.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The strategic defence review highlighted the importance of the active reserve, but the defence investment plan shows that there is no increase in reserve numbers this Parliament. Remarkably, the reserve is not mentioned in the land section. Even the commitment on cadets, made less than a year ago in August, has been shelved. Can the Secretary of State at least confirm to the reservists watching this debate that their reserve service days this year will be fully protected?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the right hon. Gentleman's question, not least because it provides the opportunity to pay tribute to those who serve in our reserves. I am in awe of their ability to balance their commitment to our nation with their professional occupations and their family life. It is a commitment that is hugely valued by this Government, as I know it was by the previous one. I am advised that there is a reference to reserves on page 62 of the people section. Essentially, we will maintain the vision set out in the SDR. We will do everything we can to ensure that those people who want to step forward and serve in the reserves have an opportunity to do so.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement, but I worry that scrapping the Type 83s that were due to replace our Type 45 destroyers, and were to be the backbone of our

fleet, in favour of a hybrid, uncrewed, autonomous Navy is a gamble. Unmanned service vessels of that size are untested, especially in the High North. I recognise the immense potential for the new hybrid Navy fleet to persistently monitor the Russian threat, but can the Secretary of State assure me that unmanned and disaggregated replacements for our Type 45 destroyers will be as effective in providing not just strike capabilities, but the deterring presence needed?

Dan Jarvis: We need to learn the lessons from Ukraine and elsewhere for the capability that we field. There was not a budget line attached to the specific capability that my hon. Friend references, so as part of the transition to a hybrid Navy, the First Sea Lord has set out an alternative vision of how we will field that kind of capability. Hopefully my hon. Friend will see, from the investment and commitment that we have made through the defence investment plan, that we are absolutely committed to ensuring, as an island nation, that we retain the Royal Navy capabilities that we need, now and in the future. They are vital to the defence of our nation, and we will always ensure that we have the right kit, in the right place, at the right time.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): The defence investment plan includes an additional £100 million transformation of the Royal Marines commando forces, with a special focus on our allies in Scandinavia and the High North. As the Royal Marines Commando Logistic Regiment is based at RM Chivenor in my constituency, will the Secretary of State tell us what form that transformation will take?

Dan Jarvis: I thank the hon. Member for his service, and I know that he has constituency interests in these matters. He referred to the £150 million that has been announced for the Royal Marine commandos for the hybrid model of crewed and autonomous insertion craft and drones—a bit of a mouthful. That is an important capability. I would like to reiterate what an extraordinary job the Royal Marines did in the English channel a couple of weekends ago in interdicting a Russian shadow fleet vessel. We owe them a huge debt of gratitude. They do extraordinary work, and this Government have a huge responsibility to ensure that they have the right capabilities. I or one of my Ministers would be happy to discuss the technical detail further, though.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): The investment plan lays out that this country will spend £63 billion on our nuclear deterrent over the next few years, but that is not just to keep the UK safe; we offer that as an umbrella protection across our European NATO allies. That is a massive point. It is extremely expensive; it is more than some entire Departments will get. It is huge, and we should celebrate it. I ask the Secretary of State to assure me that when he travels to Turkey with the Prime Minister for the NATO Assembly soon, and we come under pressure for not having laid out how we will hit 3% soon enough, the point will be made gently to our friends and allies that we are spending a huge amount of money keeping them safe.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. and gallant Friend, who makes an important point. It is right to emphasise that we are the third-largest spender of resource

on defence in NATO. He is right to point out the £63 billion that has been committed over the next four years. That is a very large figure, and a very significant commitment. As he will know very well, not least because his constituents benefit from that investment, it also means good, skilled jobs for people right around the country, including in his constituency.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Is it not the reality that the plan the Defence Secretary has put forward barely scrapes into 2.7%? It is not 3%. It leaves us £9.3 billion short, every single year of the process. If he is not going to achieve 3% by 2030, how in heaven's name will he ever achieve the NATO minimum by 2035? It is not going to happen in '35. He will not get 3.5% out of this Budget, will he? Will he give us the dates?

Dan Jarvis: I do not agree with the right hon. Gentleman. The defence investment plan represents a very significant commitment from this Government on defence spending—nearly £300 billion over the next four years. There is £15 billion of new money in this plan. He has heard the point I made about the real-terms spending increase of 27%. I have been very clear about the need to spend more on defence, and the fact that the next spending review will provide the resource required to chart the trajectory from 3% to 3.5%. I agree with him that that is precisely what our allies want to see, and I am confident that we will make good on that commitment in the context of the next spending review.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): Today is a step forward and a down payment on the future of places like my towns of Aldershot and Farnborough. However, much as we wrangle over percentages of GDP, on the ground, we still lack the industrial capacity to spend this money and build more. Defence companies in my patch and across the supply chain cannot access the finance that they need in order to hire more people and expand production. That is why I have campaigned for more than a year for the UK to join the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank. Does the Secretary of State recognise this challenge? What will we do to increase our industrial capacity?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for her question. It was an absolute pleasure to be in her constituency at the weekend for Armed Forces Day. Aldershot is the home of the British Army, and she has done a fantastic job representing her constituents and her constituency. She is right to raise the point on defence finance. I can tell her and the House that the defence finance and investment strategy will be published in the autumn.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): This defence investment plan is 300 days late and £13 billion short. It ensures that we fall further behind our allies and face greater exposure to those who would seek to do us harm, and it leaves us falling short of our NATO commitments. That £13 billion is just one year of costs for the Defence Nuclear Enterprise. As the Secretary of State seeks to fund his plans from the Scottish Government's budget, among many other departmental budgets, what savings has he sought to make from the Defence Nuclear Enterprise, which is the ultimate case of fur coat and nae knickers?

Dan Jarvis: First, let me acknowledge the very important contribution that Scotland makes to our national security. The hon. Gentleman should know that billions of pounds of UK investment is going into Faslane and other capabilities that will provide growth and jobs for his constituents and people right across Scotland. I would just gently say to him that I wonder what the defence investment plan would be for an independent Scotland, which is what he wants.

Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab): The Secretary of State is right to say that the benefits of this plan will be felt right across the UK; it will increase exports, generate growth and reindustrialise our economy. I am proud to represent KNDS in Stockport, which manufactures military bridges and Boxer armoured vehicles. I am grateful to the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry for visiting me in October for a factory tour. Will the Secretary of State ensure that the benefits of this investment are felt right across the UK, including in Stockport and Greater Manchester? In addition, Stockport is just a short drive from Barnsley; will he join me on a visit to KNDS?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Just a yes, Secretary of State.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the representations he has made on behalf of KNDS. I understand its important work well. He is right to emphasise the importance of ensuring that this significant investment of £15 billion, sitting in the continuum of investment that we have seen, needs to provide economic growth and jobs right across the country—and it will. It will provide nearly 60,000 new jobs. We should be hugely proud of that, not least because a significant proportion of those jobs will be spread right around the country. I would be very pleased to visit his Stockport constituency.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): More money for defence is a good thing, so I welcome the Secretary of State's defence investment plan. He has just said that he is confident that we will make good on the commitment to 3.5% in the next spending review. I do not know why he is so confident about that. The current Prime Minister will not be Prime Minister; the current Chancellor will not be Chancellor; and—dare I say it—he may not be Secretary of State. He would give us, industry, the markets and the whole country a great deal more confidence if he answered the question from the shadow Secretary of State and told us whether the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) had signed this off.

Dan Jarvis: Well, I can be confident about that, because I have confidence in the long-standing record and history of Labour Governments investing in defence. That gives me confidence.

Jonathan Davies (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): I welcome this record investment in defence, and I appreciate that it may lead to us making cuts elsewhere in public expenditure. One casualty may be the expansion of the A38 in Derby, which has been on and off under successive Governments for the past 40 years. Some local people would welcome the scheme's not going ahead, particularly on environmental grounds, but others would see a cancellation as a brake on economic growth, and we

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need economic growth to fund our defence. Will the Secretary of State work with me to convince the Treasury and the Department for Transport that we need more investment in Derby, so that our economy can thrive, and we can contribute to defence through public expenditure in the future?

Dan Jarvis: Tough choices have had to be made. As I mentioned earlier, Treasury colleagues will set out the detail of the spending choices today in a written ministerial statement. My hon. Friend will understand that, given the nature of the world in which we are operating, the Government have an absolute responsibility to make those tough choices and reprioritise resource and activity in order to best safeguard the security of our nation. That is what we have had to do in this defence investment plan; it has involved some tough choices, but that is the right way to proceed.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can I return to the efficiency savings that are forecast to be made? There are to be savings of £10.7 billion—£7 billion to come from resource spending and £3.7 to come from capital. Apart from some very vague headings, there is no indication in this document of where that money is going to be saved. Can the Secretary of State issue a written statement as soon as possible to set out exactly how those savings will be made? Otherwise, I have to rather agree with the Chair of the Treasury Committee, the hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier): we have all seen these accounting tricks before under previous Governments of both colours, and the savings are very rarely made. The Secretary of State will have to factor that into the negotiations with the Chancellor of the Exchequer—whoever that may be—in the forthcoming spending round, and I take what he has said about the next spending round to be a very significant point.

Dan Jarvis: I always welcome the contributions of the hon. Gentleman, not least because they are always thoughtful and constructive. I understand why he has raised the point in the way that he has. Resetting the programme to deliver this transformation has forced some challenging but necessary decisions involving the cutting of consultants and the cutting of the civil service headcount by 15%, as well as an increased use of technology to drive innovation. There have been some tough choices, and I thought it was right to be honest about those. I am very happy to discuss them with him further.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): Modern warfare has evolved from traditional mass troops to online cyber-attacks and drone-enabled conflict. We have seen that with the attacks on M&S and Jaguar Land Rover, and last September I saw it at first hand when I visited a drone factory in Ukraine. How is our Government using the defence investment plan to develop our own sovereign digital and technological capabilities, learning from Ukraine's war?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to raise those concerns about the threat we face every single day from cyber. In my previous role, I spent a lot of time ensuring that we were co-ordinated across Government—across

the Cabinet Office, the Home Office and other Government Departments. This defence investment plan provides the resource to make sure that we have the right capabilities to meet the emerging threat that we are dealing with on a daily basis. Cyber is a key part of that threat. What I have done is refocus and sharpen some of the capabilities in order to be able to deploy them sooner than would otherwise have been the case. There is always a balance between the shorter and the longer term, but I am confident that this plan gives us the right capabilities when we need them.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): This is a tale of two DIPs. The first DIP is covered by the period in the current spending review, up to about 2030, and the second DIP is the bit beyond that, from 2030 to 2035. The first has detailed spending commitments, and the latter has quite vague spending commitments. The former has small investments and the latter has big investments. I will give two examples: air has £28 billion versus £70 billion, and land has £19 billion versus £36 billion. On behalf of the Government, whoever might be in it by that point, can the Secretary of State confirm to the House that the Treasury has guaranteed that those figures will be in the next spending review—that is, that the Defence section of the next spending review has already been written?

Dan Jarvis: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, it is not for me to make guarantees on behalf of other Government Departments, including the Treasury. I am sure that he will understand that. I do not think that any Minister outside the Treasury would be in a position to make that guarantee.

I know that the hon. Gentleman thinks carefully about these matters, so the guarantee that I can give him is that in the time I have had available, I have looked very carefully at the mix of capabilities contained within the plan and made a number of changes in order to deliver capabilities that I thought were required sooner rather than later. Has that involved making some difficult choices? Yes, it has. Has it involved cutting some capabilities? Yes, it has. But what I have to do is do right by defence and be satisfied that we have the resource available and the right capabilities in place to allow us to operate alongside our allies in a very dangerous world.

That is not an easy process, as I hope the hon. Gentleman will acknowledge. I hope he will also acknowledge that today's investment plan represents an important step forward, but as I have said consistently, there is still a requirement to spend more on defence.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for the opportunity to read the DIP this morning in the reading room. There are some important questions that need to be answered. It is clear that the last Government left the armed forces in a poor state, and this Government have been doing all they can to try to repair that, but for me, the key question is this: given the threats we face today globally and in Europe and the state of the world economy, does this plan meet those threats and provide us with the security and defence capability that this country needs at this time?

My view is that it clearly does not, and I think we have to make a much greater contribution. We need to get to 3% by the end of this Parliament, and we need to

set out a plan to achieve that. Otherwise, it also leaves a great deal of uncertainty in the defence industrial base about the ability to ramp up and upskill to meet those requirements.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, not least for the work he does on the Intelligence and Security Committee and for his previous service in the Department. I therefore take seriously the points he made. He is right to highlight the nature of the threats we face as a country. That is why, in addition to the work we are doing in Defence, it is incredibly important that activity is joined up across Government to ensure that wider resilience and wider societal response. That work is under way with the Cabinet Office.

My hon. Friend made a point about uncertainty for industry. The truth of the matter is that the publication of this plan today will ensure greater certainty for our industry partners, who we now want to work with closely. We rely on them to be able to manufacture the capabilities we require to keep our country safe. This is a big shot in the arm for UK industries, and I look forward to working closely with the defence industries in the months—and hopefully years—to come to ensure that we are buying British and taking their capabilities and deploying them to meet the nature of the threat that we face.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): In what year will we reach 3%?

Dan Jarvis: In the next Parliament.

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): Reindustrialisation and backing British are the hallmarks of this defence investment plan. Does the Secretary of State agree with me and with the GMB and Unite unions that we need to build not only ships in Britain but new floating docks for Faslane? Does he agree that Programme Euston should be built by the skilled workforce at the Methil yard in my constituency?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his advocacy of that important programme, which I have been briefed on and have already discussed with the general secretary of the GMB. My hon. Friend will understand that I need to look carefully at the detail of it, so I am not in a position to make a commitment at the Dispatch Box. A decision will be forthcoming, but I am keen to discuss the programme further with him.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): With this new money, the defence budget is due to rise by about £17 billion a year over the next four years. In that same period, the welfare budget is going to rise by about £60 billion. That is almost the whole defence budget just in the increase in welfare spending.

General Barrons, who co-authored the Government's strategic defence review, said in response to today's announcement that

“we're not keeping up with our allies”

or “with our enemies”. Does the Secretary of State acknowledge that the Government have failed to fund the strategic defence review and left us dangerously exposed, particularly at sea? The Secretary of State talks about spending wisely. How much of the money

that the Government have announced they will be spending will go to SMEs and not to the big primes that have delivered us programmes like Ajax?

Dan Jarvis: I genuinely welcome the question from the hon. Member, not least because often no Members from his party are in attendance for defence debates. I think he has previously made the point that he represents more members of the armed forces in his constituency than anyone else. I therefore make the point to him gently that it would not be unreasonable for us to have a slightly more constructive dialogue about these things. I hope that he will consider that for the future.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Portsmouth, as the home of the Royal Navy, welcomes the defence investment plan, with investment in the hybrid Navy, at least six new warships and the biggest upgrade to our naval base for 45 years. It will strengthen national security in a new era of warfare and support skilled jobs, but ships and technology are not enough. Will the Secretary of State meet me to set out how the Government will ensure that the necessary skills and training are in place to build and sustain this high-tech force? Will he confirm that he will continue to work at pace to improve armed forces housing and keep our personnel at the heart of this plan?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of our people and making sure that they are properly supported. I know that she, as a local Member of Parliament for Portsmouth, takes these matters seriously. Of course, we would be delighted to meet her.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): In response to the DIP, the noble Lord Hutton, a former Labour Defence Secretary, said that

“the centres of resistance across Whitehall to extra defence spending have been allowed to prosper and they haven't been overcome.”

He went on to say that, as a consequence, our armed forces will not be war-ready by the end of this Parliament. Does the Defence Secretary disagree with the noble Lord? How do the £10.7 billion in cuts to the MOD budget enhance our armed forces' readiness?

Dan Jarvis: I pay tribute to Lord Hutton for the work he did when he was Defence Secretary. We listen very carefully to all those who take a view about the policies that we have brought forward. It is not unreasonable, however, to reiterate the commitment that we have made today: £298 billion, including £15 billion of new money, is contained in this defence investment plan, with an increase in real terms of 27% by 2029-30. That demonstrates a real commitment. Do we need to do more? Yes, I have been consistently clear that we do. We will listen to Lord Hutton and others in shaping that debate, but I am confident that the next spending review will provide the resources we need to meet the targets that we have committed ourselves to achieving.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for the statement. As he said, this is a welcome shot in the arm for our defence and security sector. He talked about the defence export funding that would be available. That is extremely important because so many nations around the world really rate our kit and our expertise in these sectors. I am slightly

[*Matt Western*]

concerned about what he said on home defence. Will he say a few more words about where he thinks we are on future funding and the importance of the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his important work in chairing the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. I agree with the thrust of his point about defence supporting growth. I know that he will be proud that we have a Labour Government generating good jobs and bringing forward a defence investment plan that is good for our economic security, as well as our national security. He will have heard my earlier remarks about taking a little bit of time to look at the various proposals from our allies and from others about how we might seek to fund further defence investment. I will take a bit of time to do that, but as ever, I am happy to discuss the matter further with him.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The Royal Navy is spending millions of pounds on private accommodation and hotels each year, while entire buildings and accommodation blocks behind the wire of its estate sit rotting and uninhabitable. However, I cannot say exactly how many millions, because I have submitted questions on that to the MOD and it refuses to answer. I do not know whether the Secretary of State can help me with that. On the £9 billion that will be spent on defence housing over 10 years, what is the spend profile and how much of that will be spent in the first two years? If it is back-ended to year 10, it does absolutely nothing to stem the flow of wasted cash and to provide our service personnel and their families with decent, habitable homes.

Dan Jarvis: I gently say to the hon. Lady that there was a massive lack of investment in defence housing under the previous Government. She will have heard my earlier remarks about the commitment to investing £9 billion over 10 years. That is a real-terms increase in each year.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Meur ras, Madam Deputy Speaker. I very much welcome today's announcement and the multibillion-pound investment in His Majesty's Naval Base Devonport. Given the scale of the opportunity, will the Secretary of State outline how the Government will work with communities across the Tamar in South East Cornwall to ensure that they play a full part in delivering the programme through the skills, apprenticeships and jobs it will create by connecting local businesses with defence supply chains, and through resilient transport connectivity? That will strengthen the regional economy and deliver for our national defence capabilities.

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the points my hon. Friend makes. It will require a team effort to make sure that Devonport gets the support that it needs and we want to provide. I know that I and ministerial colleagues will be happy to discuss that with her further.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): Since we have been in the Chamber, it has been reported online that senior military personnel are deeply unhappy with the

DIP and, indeed, that the Chief of the Defence Staff asked the Secretary of State to remove a line that suggested that he personally backed the plan. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he had to remove that line from his statement?

Dan Jarvis: That is not correct; all the chiefs support the DIP.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I welcome this investment in our defence. Will my right hon. Friend say just how difficult the hollowing out of our defence spending under the previous Government has made it to build the capacity to spend that money?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I never come here with the intention of politicising these matters. It is always my approach to engage on a cross-party basis and in the national interest, and that is precisely why, in my opening remarks, I did not once mention the record of the previous Government. I spoke only about the investment being made by this Government. I think that that is the right approach. I hope that, on these important matters relating to the security of our nation, we can try to have a constructive debate. That is absolutely the way that I wish to proceed, but where Opposition Members seek to critique the Government's record—and it is entirely their right to do so—it is not unreasonable to remind them of their record.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): RAF Wyton is in my constituency and I have a huge amount of service housing, both in the RAF Wyton and the former RAF Brampton patches, so service housing is extremely important to me. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he is cutting £300 million from the service family accommodation budget in this Parliament and moving it into the next Parliament?

Dan Jarvis: I know that the hon. and gallant Gentleman takes these matters really seriously, and I was grateful that he came into the Department for a briefing this morning. He will have heard what I said previously about investment in defence housing and he will understand the priority that we attach to that. He and I both know the value and importance of making sure that those people who serve have the accommodation that they need, not least when they are operationally deployed, and we have a moral responsibility to make sure that their families are looked after. We are investing £9 billion over 10 years with a real-terms increase in each year.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): I very much welcome this defence investment plan and the confidence it shows in the workers on the Ajax programme at General Dynamics in Merthyr Tydfil. I thank Ministers for their engagement with me, with General Dynamics and with the workforce. The DIP provides an opportunity for investment in further job opportunities in communities such as Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare that have often felt left behind since deindustrialisation. What will the DIP mean in new employment opportunities and support for export opportunities in these communities?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend because he makes an important point about ensuring that the money we are investing touches communities right around the country, including his own. I know that we are due

to spend £1.1 billion in the next four years on the Ajax project, which will have a real, meaningful impact on his constituency and his constituents. I am really proud that the investment that we have brought forward today will create 60,000 jobs right around the country. That is good for our national security, good for our economy and good for jobs up and down the nation.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Decisions taken in Whitehall mean that the Welsh Government's capital budget is already set to fall by 9% in real terms by 2029. Today, we learned that the UK Treasury will further cut that capital budget by many millions to fund the defence investment plan. Of course the plan is important, but surely it must not come at the expense of essential Welsh infrastructure, such as new NHS surgical hubs to help cut the waiting lists that are, of course, the legacy of Labour in Wales. Before the Secretary of State comes back to me with investments in Wales, let me tell him that the latest figures show that defence contract spending is £1,130 per head in south-west England, compared with £340 in Wales. Can he confirm exactly how much capital money Wales will lose, and does he agree that the Welsh Government need stronger borrowing powers to protect Wales from abrupt UK spending cuts?

Dan Jarvis: That is precisely why we have the defence growth deal in Wales, and I give the right hon. Lady a commitment that we will work with the new Government in Wales to deliver on it.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State's commitment to buy British and create British jobs. When he produces his further strategy on procurement in the autumn, will he try to get a joined-up approach to procurement across Government, as that is important to our industrial strategy? The MOD is investing £1 billion-plus in Sheffield Forgemasters to create the capacity to build nuclear reactors for our submarines, yet at the same time, Rolls-Royce is purchasing the same sorts of nuclear reactors in South Korea to go into civil nuclear plant. Do we not need to get that sorted out, right across Government, to make sure that we are doing British industry proud and buying British products to create British jobs?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend and to all those who work at Sheffield Forgemasters for the important work that they do; I hope to visit in the very near future. He makes an important point about the need to buy British, and that is what we will seek to do. On the other points that he has made, let me have a look at them for him.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): The Secretary of State will be well aware of the central role that Porton Down has played in our nation's security and history through the UK Health Security Agency and the Defence Science and Technology Laboratory. I welcome the announcement of an additional £580 million to build a new biological lab to protect against biological threats, but will he undertake to examine how that aligns with his Government's decision to move the UKHSA out of the vicinity of Porton and the announcement last year on biosecurity centres, to ensure that the money that has been invested will be spent wisely and aligned with other commitments?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his advocacy of Porton Down; I remember that the last time I visited, I bumped into him at Salisbury station and we discussed it then. He will know that the UK Government have a long-standing commitment to invest in DSTL, and hundreds of millions of pounds of commitment to infrastructure will benefit Porton Down. I will take away the specific points that he made and come back to him.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): Ground-to-air missile defence is listed as one of the major long-term investments, but not until 2030 to 2035. Given how important missile defences are in modern warfare and NATO's warning to be prepared by the end of this decade, is this not one example in which, to be war ready, funding should be brought forward, not least for military sites, sites of critical national infrastructure, and towns and cities?

Dan Jarvis: I can tell my hon. Friend that we are buying low-cost effectors. On his second point, he is right; I will come back to him with more detail, but my understanding is that we are doing that.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): What matters is not just how much we spend on defence, but what we spend it on and whether the Government's choices offer good value for money. I am therefore deeply concerned that more than half the capital budget is for the nuclear programme. More will be spent on a handful of submarines and unusable warheads than on every single other bit of kit and technology for all the armed forces. Does the Secretary of State not recognise the glaring inconsistency between his rhetoric about a flexible, agile, future-focused armed forces and the reality of pouring billions of good money after bad into the black hole of cold war technology, instead of investing in true security?

Dan Jarvis: Well, I agree with the hon. Lady on one thing, which is that what we spend the money on does matter. She is right about that. We part company at that point, not least because I am not entirely clear what her party's policy is with regard to NATO membership. Not so long ago, the party was advocating departing. The only people who would welcome that are Putin and his cronies in Russia.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I welcome the increased investment in defence, which should not only ensure our security but drive economic growth. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend reassure me, first, that the Ministry of Defence is capable of innovatively procuring innovation, with the support of our nation's start-ups and scale-ups, rather than focusing on the bureaucratic long-term processes with which my Committee is so familiar?

Secondly, the north-east sends the largest proportion of young people into the armed forces of any region in this country, yet it has the lowest proportion of defence spending. That is unacceptable. The defence investment plan has no place-based programmes apart from the defence growth zones, and the north-east is missing out on those. What will my right hon. Friend do to ensure that the north-east's commitment is rewarded with investment?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes important points. We are investing £400 million a year in UK Defence Innovation, and I hope and am sure that she will welcome that. She made an important point about how we direct spend towards the north-east, not least given its long track record of sending people to serve in our armed forces. That is an entirely reasonable challenge, and is one that the Department is considering. I look forward to discussing it with her further.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I will only be able to run the statement until 4.15 pm, so Members will have to ask much shorter questions.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Mid Buckinghamshire is proudly home to RAF High Wycombe and RAF Halton. Given everything in the defence investment plan on aircraft, drone innovation and the space field, coupled with the Secretary of State's absolutely correct commitment to our defence personnel, training is critical. RAF Halton has been on a rollercoaster of closure as a training base. Where does the defence investment plan sit with the long-term future of RAF Halton?

Dan Jarvis: Let me make a point of consensus. The hon. Member is right to say that training is critical because it underpins our readiness, and that is precisely why I reprofiled some of the spend to ensure that we can maximise our readiness, given the nature of the threats that we face. I will look carefully at the other points he raised, as I have done previously, and come back to him.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I welcome the defence investment plan and the additional investment announced today. Too many defence SMEs locally tell me how difficult it is to navigate the defence procurement system and to win contracts. Will the Secretary of State set out how they will be able to benefit from this investment and how we will then be able to benefit from their skills and expertise?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend makes an important point, and that is why we have launched the Defence Office for Small Business Growth. That provides part of the answer to his question, but I know that my hon. Friend the Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry has listened carefully to the points he has made and will want to engage with him further on them.

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): Some 80% of US and UK historical war borrowing has been repaid not through debt repayments but through economic growth. Draghi has urged the EU to borrow for defence R&D to increase economic growth and repay debt. Does the Prime Minister's statement this morning ruling out extra borrowing for defence risk not only our national defence but our economy, too?

Dan Jarvis: It is important to understand, as I know the hon. Member does, the symbiotic relationship between national security and economic growth. This Government have been incredibly keen to ensure that we can make progress on both those areas. There is an obvious clear

connection between the two, but our strong sense is that it would be deeply irresponsible to bring forward measures for which we could not evidence how we would pay for them. All the items that we have brought forward in the defence investment plan are underpinned by resource, and we can point to where that money will come from. We think that that is the responsible way to proceed. That is why there is clarity on the next spending review being the appropriate fiscal moment to make a contribution that will get us to the trajectory of 3% and then 3.5%. The easier option would be to make commitments for which we could not evidence how we will pay for them. That would provide perhaps some short-term sugar rush, but it would not be the right way to proceed. That is why I have come to the House to say that, yes, we will honour the commitments that we have made to NATO allies about the trajectory to 3.5%, but that the appropriate way to do so is in the context of the next spending review and not in this defence investment plan.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): As the UK trade envoy to Italy, I thank the Secretary of State for confirming the GCAP funding in his statement. As MP for Newcastle upon Tyne North, I add my voice to those who want to see this as an opportunity to genuinely spread investment and opportunity that will build strength and resilience in our people right across the UK—they are our greatest sovereign asset. The north-east currently receives £70 of MOD funding per person—less than a tenth of the figure for other parts of the UK. That is a wasted opportunity and one that we must grasp to ensure that we genuinely build resilience. I look forward to hearing from my right hon. Friend how we can work together to pull that investment up to our region as a test bed for it reaching the whole of the UK.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful for the work that my hon. Friend does with Italy, which is a key ally, and I am grateful for her welcome for the announcement of the commitment to GCAP, which was signed recently by the Prime Minister. Her second point is absolutely right—she should challenge us and hold us to account on that. She will have heard the response I gave to her relatively near neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), just a few moments ago. I look forward to working with them both on that particular matter.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the right hon. Member for what he is doing in what I am sure is a challenging and uncertain time. With regard to meeting NATO spending commitments, he has referred to future spending reviews on many occasions. Is this defence investment plan not a bit like the Government: cast adrift and waiting for someone else in the future to make the hard decisions?

Dan Jarvis: I do not think it is like that at all.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I am particularly concerned about missile and drone threats to the UK, so I welcome the £790 million in the DIP for additional air and missile defence capabilities. Could the Secretary of State give a little more detail about what additional capabilities will be added to our existing layered air defences?

Dan Jarvis: I know that my hon. Friend has consistently raised those points, and I am grateful to him for doing so. In the interests of time and not causing Madam Deputy Speaker further ire, let me say that given the points he has raised and his interest in the matter, we will bring him into the Department and give him a briefing on the work we are doing.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): I have asked before about the future of the amphibious fleet and the replacements for HMS Bulwark and Albion, and Ministers reassured me that the multi-role strike ships were forthcoming and that the Government would recapitalise the Royal Navy's amphibious fleet, with these new vessels ready to replace existing RFAs by 2033. The DIP implies that they are no longer being pursued. Is that the case? If so, does this change in plan mean delayed delivery and a capability gap for our amphibious forces?

Dan Jarvis: I gently say to the hon. Lady that under the previous Government, Albion and Bulwark were tied up, never to go to sea again. She will have heard the point I made earlier about the deal with the Netherlands, and I hope she will welcome that.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): The Prime Minister and many others have said that this country needs to be ready for an attack on NATO by Russia by 2030, so every step this country takes is critical, and I welcome today's plan. We must mobilise everything we can, including our industry, so will the Secretary of State or a Minister in the Defence team meet me to see how the defence industry in Stevenage—including MBDA, Airbus and our SMEs—can benefit from the new defence export facility?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, we would be very happy to do that.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Page 68 of the DIP makes clear that Proteus, being developed at Leonardo in Yeovil, will be key to future warfare, but lots of other SMEs doing cutting-edge defence work in Yeovil tell me that their hiring and investment decisions have been trapped in limbo by delays to this plan. What reassurance can the Secretary of State give Yeovil's other defence SMEs that the MOD actually has the money to back the research and development of advanced defence kit by Yeovil's defence sector?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman's constituency has very long-standing defence interests, and of course we will want to work closely with him in that regard. I think he will acknowledge that there was £1 billion of investment in new medium helicopters and other capabilities, but given his interest as the local MP, I would be very happy to discuss it with him further.

Tristan Osborne (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): My constituents will welcome this defence investment plan, which is more than £298 billion over the next four years. Of course, BAE Systems in my constituency is part of that programme of expansion and the new jobs and opportunities it will bring for young people. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the defence dividend will increase our sovereign capacity and provide jobs and opportunities for all our people in this country?

Dan Jarvis: I can confirm that. Let me also take the opportunity to say how much we value the working relationship with BAE. It is a great company employing thousands of workers around the country, and we will want to work very closely with it on the back of this plan.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey)—a man with honour, integrity and principle—for ensuring an extra £15 billion for the defence budget, and to the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who is a man of a supreme gallantry. I respect the fact that they resigned on a point of principle, but we are still £13 billion short, of course. What reassurance can the Defence Secretary give to my constituents at RAF Cosford who are looking to see their housing refurbished and replaced over the next few years that that programme is still safe, and to those working on the Boxer and Challenger 3 vehicle programmes? I understand moving to autonomous vehicles, but are those programmes safe at Telford?

Dan Jarvis: I always listen very carefully to the right hon. Gentleman. He has made a number of entirely reasonable points based on constituency interest. Rather than running through all of them now, I am very happy to get back to him with a more detailed response.

Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab): Dorset has a proud armed forces tradition and can play a critical role in delivering our defence ambitions. We have a strong ecosystem of cutting-edge drone technology companies at the Dorset Innovation Park and a pipeline of skills and talent coming out of Bournemouth University and Bournemouth and Poole College. Will the Secretary of State confirm that the DIP will back the businesses and institutions in my region to drive forward innovation and deliver the skills that our defence industries need?

Dan Jarvis: I understand that the Dorset Innovation Park is excellent. I can confirm that as a consequence of the investment that this Government are making through the defence investment plan, there will be a whole range of opportunities for the kind of businesses that my hon. Friend represents in her constituency and for businesses right around the country. As I say, I am hugely proud that we will be generating 60,000 jobs and creating economic growth in every corner of the country, including in Dorset.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is quite clear the Secretary of State knows that we need to be spending a lot more on defence than he has been able to announce in the defence investment plan. In writing the DIP, what assumption did he make about the status and future of the Chagos islands? Does he agree that the more than £30 billion that his Government intend to pay to the Government of Mauritius would be better spent on our defence?

Dan Jarvis: Diego Garcia is important for our national defence, but the assumptions I have had to make are to ensure that we have the right capabilities at the right time, given the nature of the world we operate in. I do not think anybody disputes that the world is a very difficult, complex and dangerous place. It is the job of defence and of the UK Government to ensure that we

[*Dan Jarvis*]

have the right resource and capabilities. That is why Iusb have been working hard to secure more resource and have sharpened our list of capabilities. That is also why I have been working with Treasury colleagues to ensure that defence will be the No. 1 priority at the next spending review.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): The £50 billion defence export fund to support British defence businesses is welcome and will create jobs in my constituency and across Lancashire. Will my right hon. Friend expand on that? Can the fund be used to place orders of Typhoons now, ahead of selling to our allies, so that the production line can continue with Tempest? Will he agree to meet with me and all Lancashire colleagues to discuss this matter further?

Dan Jarvis: My ministerial colleague will be very happy to meet with my hon. Friend.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): Following on from my constituency neighbour, I am obviously very disappointed to see that a Typhoon order for the RAF is not in this document. That would be worth around £8 billion, which is the single biggest way that the Government could invest in British jobs through this plan and through the aerospace industry. There is a line about £5.4 billion for Typhoons on page 44, but on page 45 it says that only £1.1 billion of that is new funding. What is the other £4.3 billion attached to the Typhoon platform in this document actually for?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Gentleman will see from the document that we are investing £300 million in the collaborative combat aircraft order. If he has further concerns and would like to discuss them with me or a ministerial colleague, we would be very happy to do that.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): The Secretary of State spoke about different political priorities and tough decisions being made, but today we have seen departmental budget cuts to fund an extra £15 billion for war preparedness. We talk a lot in this Chamber about defending our values, but what values are we actually defending when 14% of children in the UK are living in food insecurity? We are a nation with crumbling infrastructure, and we have more than 3 million people needing food banks to survive.

Dan Jarvis: Our defence spending will mean billions of pounds of investment in Scotland, which will create good jobs for people, including in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I am very proud of that. The Government have had to make tough decisions. We have been honest about them, because we must ensure that we have the resource to invest in the capabilities required to keep the country safe. Those are the choices that we have taken, and we have taken them in our country's best interests. I am afraid that not everyone will always agree with them—that is the nature of these things—but I have to do right by defence, our armed forces and the nation. I am content that this defence investment plan, a copy of which we will place in the Library of the House, does that.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): This £300 billion increase in defence expenditure will be paid for by every single Department. The Secretary of State is right to say that there is a world of insecurity and conflict out there, but where is the foreign policy strategy? Where is the policy to reduce tensions? Where is the policy to try to bring about ceasefires in the terrible wars that are going on? Where is the policy to deal with the real insecurities in the world—climate change, global inequality and poverty?

Dan Jarvis: I recognise that the right hon. Gentleman and I are unlikely to agree on the best approach when it comes to expenditure and defence, but I hope he will recognise that we have published the defence diplomacy strategy, and that we work closely across Government to align our resources and make sure we are contributing responsibly, along with our international allies. We take our obligations very seriously, not least as a leading member of NATO, but fundamentally this Government have an absolute requirement to make sure we safeguard our national security. That is a priority for this Government, as I hope it would be a priority for any Government, and we have to ensure we have appropriate levels of resource to do that. That requires prioritisation and difficult decisions, and that is what we have done.

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for his statement, and I particularly look forward to learning more about the uncrewed systems taskforce. When it comes to the Welsh defence industry, though, can he confirm that today's defence investment plan will work in tandem with commitments that are already in train—such as the Wales defence growth deal—to nurture and develop the Welsh defence industry?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, and I can give him that assurance.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Too little, too late—that will be the legacy of this Labour Government. Earlier today, the Prime Minister admitted that capital projects including roads and energy infrastructure will no longer go ahead as planned to pay for this package. In the interests of transparency, can the Secretary of State tell the House which projects in the west midlands will now be delayed or cancelled, and does he not agree that it would be far better to get a grip of Labour's ballooning, out-of-control welfare bill than to cut the infrastructure our regions need?

Dan Jarvis: I am trying to help the right hon. Lady out here. This defence investment plan brings forward £15 billion of new investment; it sits alongside a commitment to spend £298 billion, and represents a 27% real-terms increase. I gently invite the right hon. Lady to review the record of the Government of which she was a part. This Government are putting in place the resource we need to secure our national security, which I hope is a shared endeavour across this House, even if not everybody is necessarily signed up to the plan.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): As the UK trade envoy to Japan, I strongly welcome the £8.6 billion for the GCAP and Tempest project. Does the Secretary of State agree that this is a clear vote of confidence that will enable project partners in our country, Japan and Italy to make strong headway with that project at last?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his question, not least because it provides me with an opportunity to say how much we value the relationship and constructive partnership we have with our friends in Japan—I have engaged with my opposite number on a number of occasions over the past couple of weeks. GCAP is about building a sixth-generation fighter jet for the UK. This will take some time, and the programme is in its early stages, but it is already generating 4,500 jobs, with many more jobs coming online in due course. That is a good investment on behalf of the UK, and we very much welcome our partnership and relationship with both Japan and Italy.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): This money risks landing after the danger, because it backloads most of the spending until after 2030. What if Russia rearms before 2030, or what if Xi Jinping does as the Chinese Communist party says it will and invades Taiwan in the next two years? Will this plan give us what we need to protect us, given that we would have to step up and defend the whole of Europe as the US moves its focus to the Indo-Pacific?

Dan Jarvis: The hon. Lady is right to raise concerns about the nature of the threat—it absolutely needs to focus all our minds, as well as those of our European and NATO partners. That is why we have brought forward this defence investment plan, making sure the capabilities that are in place will deliver the effect we need as early as possible. I agree with her concerns about the nature of the threat we face from Russia and—she and I have debated this on numerous occasions—other states as well. What we have to do is marshal the resources and capabilities to ensure we are best prepared, working alongside our allies. That is what this defence investment plan will do, but I accept the basic point that we will want and need to do more.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call Douglas McAllister to ask a short, final question.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I am presuming that everything we do now, including spending on defence, will help clear the pathway to a re-industrialised nation. I understand that rewiring Britain involves ensuring parity between academic and technical career routes. Does the Secretary of State agree that if the defence investment plan is to succeed, we need to skill up our nation, and that includes having two defence technical excellence colleges in Scotland, including one at West College Scotland in West Dunbartonshire?

Dan Jarvis: I completely agree with the point that my hon. Friend has made. It is important to underline that we are looking for some financial support from the SNP for those colleges, but he is right to make the point in the way that he does. I am proud that the investment that we have brought forward today will affect communities right across the country and generate 6,000 jobs around the UK.

BILL PRESENTED

IMMIGRATION AND ASYLUM

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Secretary Shabana Mahmood, supported by the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Darren Jones, Secretary Hilary Benn and Secretary Douglas Alexander, presented a Bill to make provision about immigration, asylum and modern slavery; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 105) with explanatory notes (Bill 105-EN).

Points of Order

4.16 pm

Bell Ribeiro-Addy (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Since the proscription of Palestine Action last year, I have received hundreds of emails from constituents concerned about the decision, arrests for actions as minor as holding up a sign, and the wider chilling effect on protest rights. I am on record as opposing the proscription. I was a Teller for the Noes, so my position is well documented. With the Court of Appeal upholding the ban this month, much more correspondence has followed. I am genuinely unsure whether I can even explain the view that I held at the time without breaking the law.

An answer to a written question that I tabled gave little clarity, simply citing the Terrorism Act 2000, which makes it an offence to express support for a proscribed organisation. If I write to a constituent, and they post my letter online, did I break the law? Did they break the law? Did we both break the law? There is something deeply wrong here. I can stand in this Chamber and say, or write in a letter, words that could get a constituent arrested, if they put them on a placard. If an MP cannot say with confidence what is lawful, what hope does a member of the public have? Madam Deputy Speaker, can you advise on how MPs can get clear guidance on what we can and cannot say about Palestine Action, especially since the Secretary of State cannot seem to give that advice, particularly in my case, as I would simply be citing a matter of record?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. The House will know that everything that hon. Members say in the course of proceedings in this House is protected by the privilege of freedom of speech set out in article 9 of the Bill of Rights. However, when it

comes to what hon. Members say outside this place, that is a question of the operation of the law, and it is not a matter on which I can offer advice from the Chair.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wrote to the Justice Minister in the other place, Baroness Levitt, on 20 March this year on behalf of my constituent Lowrie Roberts, regarding the existing policy and legal framework relating to contact rights between extended family and children following parental separation. Despite repeatedly chasing a response by email and by written parliamentary question, I have yet to receive a response for my constituent. I would like your advice on how I might be able to secure a response from the Ministry of Justice.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I am grateful to the hon. Member for having given notice of her point of order. As she will know, the content and timeliness of ministerial answers, either to parliamentary questions or correspondence from Members, is not a matter for the Chair. However, it is important that Members receive replies. I would advise her to consult the Table Office on her options for pursuing this matter further. She may also wish to write to the Procedure Committee, but I know that the occupants of the Treasury Bench will have heard what she has said.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. In the previous statement, conversation was had about the future of the UK Health Security Agency. You will be aware that the Government last year made a decision that the new site of the UK Health Security Agency would be in my constituency of Harlow. It is therefore not subject to the defence investment plan. I just wanted to get that on the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order, which he will know was not a matter for the Chair, but he has put his point on the record.

Child Savings Accounts (Mental Capacity and Disability)

Motion for leave to bring in a Bill (Standing Order No. 23)

4.20 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to make provision about access to matured child savings accounts in the name of a young person who lacks capacity; to require the Secretary of State to review savings provision for children and young people with disabilities including those who lack capacity; and for connected purposes.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I want to tell you about a family. When Mikey Turner was born, his parents did what so many parents do. They saved for him—not much; a little here, a little there—because they loved their son and they wanted to give him the best chance in life. They put money into a child trust fund, the Government savings account that existed for children born between 2002 and 2011, topped up with £500 of public money as a foundation for every child's future. However, what they did not know at the time was that Mikey would grow up to have profound disabilities. He lacks the mental capacity to manage money independently. When his child trust fund matured on his 18th birthday, something absurd happened: the money that his family had saved for him, because of him and out of love for him, was, in effect, locked away. His parents, who have cared for Mikey every single day of his life, who are recognised by the Department for Work and Pensions as his appointees, who manage his benefits and who make decisions on his behalf, were told that they could not practically access their own child's savings account. Instead, they were pointed towards the Court of Protection.

The Court of Protection exists for good reasons, but we are talking about a process that can take over a year, cost hundreds of pounds in fees, require lengthy medical assessments, and demand a level of legal navigation and sophistication that would daunt even the most confident of us. This is a family seeking access to a few thousand pounds saved in their own child's account. For a family already stretched by the daily demands of caring for a severely disabled child, this is, frankly, an injustice.

Mikey's father, Andrew Turner, is my constituent. It is six years since Mikey's 18th birthday, and for all that time, Andrew has campaigned on this issue, both for himself and for all the other affected families. In that time, he has had to make his case 10 different times to 10 different Justice Ministers, seven Conservative and three Labour—with perhaps another coming soon, although I hope not. Such is the churn in ministerial positions. OneFamily and Contact have supported him throughout, and I want to thank Una Summerson and Maria Scholey at Contact for everything that they have contributed. Together, Andrew, the industry and campaigners have brought this Bill to the House, and the strength of support for it from across Parliament speaks for itself.

Andrew's is far from being the only such case. An estimated 80,000 disabled young people face, or will face, this same barrier, and that number can only grow, because junior individual savings accounts, the successor to child trust funds, will begin to mature before the end of the decade. Junior ISAs have the same fatal flaw, and

some children with junior ISAs will also, sadly, grow up to be unable to manage their affairs. If we take no action, we will see the injustice repeat itself, but on an even greater scale.

There is an extra twist. Many families have been told that while the money remains inaccessible to them, its existence can disqualify their child from any entitlement to benefits. Heads you lose, tails you lose. This is a scandal that must not be allowed to continue. These are not families trying to access large estates, or complex financial portfolios. They are parents who have saved a few hundred or a few thousand pounds because they believed in their child's future—and I stress that this is not a demand for Government compensation; it is families' own money.

What makes this so frustrating is that a solution already exists. A number of financial institutions—OneFamily, Nationwide, Santander and Foresters Financial—already operate their own processes, using evidence of Department for Work and Pensions appointeeship and appropriate safeguards, to release these funds to families. They have helped thousands of families to access millions of pounds. However, they need a proper legal framework; without one, not every financial institution is willing to act.

I acknowledge that Ministers and officials are engaging seriously with this issue. A meeting has been convened for 8 July. It will bring together the Government, the finance industry, charities and campaigners to work towards a solution, and that is very welcome. I want to particularly recognise the hon. and learned Member for Finchley and Golders Green (Sarah Sackman), who was a real champion for Andrew and families like his during her time on this brief. I am glad that the noble Minister who now holds the brief has continued that work and understands that this issue will not go away, but engagement is not legislation. Warm words, however sincerely meant, will not unlock a savings account.

This Bill asks for something straightforward: it asks the Government to establish a clear, proportionate and statutory route, so that a parent in Horsham gets the same answer from their bank as a parent in Harrogate. It asks that protection does not become prevention, and it asks for a review of wider savings provision for disabled children, because the principle at stake—that disabled young people should be able to save on equal terms as the rest of us—matters, and goes beyond this one scheme.

Andrew Turner has fought for six years for his son Mikey, and he is far from the only one. Claire Stockton waited more than a year and navigated a complex court process, all for the sake of a modest £1,000 in savings belonging to her disabled child. Another parent, Michele Creed, was able to access the savings, but has been obliged to take on the responsibility and bureaucracy of ongoing financial deputyship. This is crazy. The child trust fund is her daughter's only asset. Only the most skilful and determined families will ever find their way through this legal quagmire.

I respect the high amount of protection for trust funds. I understand that senior lawyers are reluctant to make an exception, even in a case like Mikey's, and that this reluctance has frustrated 10 successive Ministers so far, but I repeat that this is not the Government's money; it is the Turners' money. When Andrew first approached a lawyer for help, he was told that all he

[John Milne]

could do was wait for Mikey to die, and then he could access the fund. That is absolutely unacceptable. These families had already cared for a disabled child, at great personal sacrifice, for 18 years by the time they realised that they could not access the fund. The mere suggestion that parents might abuse their position and spend the money on themselves is appalling, yet that is the implied position of the law.

Thousands of families are waiting. The solutions are before us. The industry is ready. The cross-party support is here. What is needed now is for the Government to act—not to review further, or to consult again. If they need legislation, let this Bill be it. I know that the chances of a ten-minute rule Bill making it into law are vanishingly slim, but the Government can make it happen, if they wish. Families have waited long enough. I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That John Milne and Ed Davey present the Bill.

John Milne accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 106).

Estimates Day

[2ND ALLOTTED DAY]

Culture, Media And Sport

[Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee of Session 2024-26, Game On: Community and school sport, HC 593, and the Government response, HC 462, Session 2026-27.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £3,862,598,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £618,275,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £3,572,620,000, 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.—(Gen Kitchen.)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The debate will be opened by the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and there will be an immediate three-minute time limit on Back-Bench contributions. I call Dame Caroline Dineneage.

4.29 pm

Dame Caroline Dineneage (Gosport) (Con): I thank the Backbench Business Committee. I am conscious of time, so I will focus my remarks on the Select Committee's "Game On" report, which looked at community and school sport, and the Government response published last week.

The evidence was unequivocal: an active nation underpins everything else—our health, our prosperity, our social cohesion. It is not a peripheral issue, but a strategic priority, yet it has too often been treated by Governments as a discretionary choice. We are at a critical juncture as the UK continues to invest significantly less in sport and physical activity than many of our European neighbours, despite the proven economic and social returns. Our Committee therefore called for a decisive generational shift, with a cross-Government movement for health strategy that recognises that physical activity is not simply a sport, but a central pillar of policy across health, education, planning and economic growth.

The Government response acknowledged much of this analysis, but when we look more closely, we recognise a theme that has gripped this Government from day one: plenty of words, but no action to back them up, or as some might say, "all mouth and no trousers". Nowhere is that clearer than on funding. We recommended increasing the share of Government expenditure on sport and recreation over time, in recognition of the very clear evidence that investment in activity delivers long-term savings, reduces illness, supports people into work, prevents chronic conditions and strengthens local economies.

Following publication of the Committee's report, the Government announced over £1 billion for school sport. It looked like a statement of the kind of ambition we would like to see across the sector, and we nearly patted ourselves on the back for influencing this remarkable investment. However, given a closer look, this glossy announcement is no gift at all. It is a cynical cut

disguised as new funding. Yesterday, *Schools Week* published an article with the finding that 65% of schools in the north-east are expecting to make cuts to their coaching staff as a result. One reason for this cut is the reduction in the contribution from the Department of Health and Social Care and the replacement of the PE and sport premium with money that must now go to secondary schools as well as primary schools. I have a feeling that the Minister will attempt to say that schools are receiving more money for PE and sport when she responds to this debate, but that is simply not the case. It is smoke and mirrors.

We were pleased with the £400 million of grassroots funding, which we called for in our report, but we need a concerted effort to ensure that the funding achieves what it sets out to do. We also called for an audit of sport and physical activity facilities to make sure we are not losing them. This danger is real, especially as the Government have still not ruled out removing Sport England as a statutory consultee. Are the Government tracking the number of sports pitches and facilities, or do they have any plans to do so?

Another pillar of our recommendations was clarity—clarity of leadership, accountability and deliverability—because without a coherent national plan, even significant investment risks being fragmented and under-realised. That is why we called for a cross-Government strategy, backed by clear objectives, defined responsibilities and mechanisms to measure progress. The Government have told us that a national plan for physical activity is in development, but there is no firm deadline, no detailed governance model and no clear indication of how the Department will be held accountable—all words, no action. On issue after issue, the Government have agreed in principle to a number of our recommendations, but have declined to act decisively, as with the recommendation of a statutory duty on local authorities to provide sporting and leisure facilities and the recommendation on action to remove unnecessary “No ball games” signs. There are warm words, but zero grip.

In schools, where the case for action is perhaps clearest of all, we see the same pattern: the Government accept that provision is inconsistent and acknowledge the importance of high-quality PE and regular activity, but when presented with the opportunity to set out clear national expectations, they step back. There is no requirement for children to achieve 60 minutes of activity every day, only encouragement; there is no firm mandate guaranteeing two hours of PE each week, only an expectation that schools might protect time; and physical education itself will remain outside the core curriculum subjects, despite its central importance to children's development. A truly transformative approach would embed movement throughout the school, throughout the curriculum, throughout the environment and throughout our culture, ensuring that all children, regardless of their background, have the opportunity to live active lives, because active children become active adults.

Outside school, the Secretary of State has made her national youth strategy the poster child of her tenure. She came to Parliament to tell us she was giving young people

“somewhere to go, something to do and someone who cares.”—[*Official Report*, 18 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 971.]

The strategy is backed by £500 million, which again sounds like a hugely significant investment to me, but when we look at the detail, we see it is not the investment

we think. It is the amalgamation of the scrapped youth investment fund and the scrapped National Citizen Service. Less money is going into the system. Although the National Citizen Service no doubt had its flaws, it was the most successful youth programme of the past few decades—over 1 million young people took part.

Funding streams used to be clear, but now there is a convoluted pick and mix of over nine different programmes. It is more difficult for civil society to navigate a fragmented selection of funding pots. Meanwhile, the speed of the closure of the National Citizen Service meant that some of the incredibly skilled and dedicated youth workers, on whom we rely and on whom the Government will rely when they finally decide what they are going to do for young people, have left the workforce. How many have left the sector due to delays and uncertainty in the delivery of the national youth strategy? Does the Minister know? Perhaps she can tell me.

Volunteering is an essential foundation of community sport. The Government recognise its importance, but they once again stop short of setting out a comprehensive national policy to support, incentivise and sustain the workforce—there is nothing there. The valued volunteer workforce is needed more than ever before, but it is under incredible pressure. People are dropping out due to the time priorities of coping with cost of living demands.

There is one further example that speaks volumes about the Government's approach: the question of women's football broadcasting. The Select Committee recommended an intervention to explore whether the 3 pm Saturday blackout could be adapted to support the women's game. It would give a consistent time for showcasing the women's game and inspire girls to get active. The Government's response points to the technical complexities of UEFA article 48 and argues that any change would risk opening up the slot more widely, thereby undermining its current purpose—the response is, “It's all too difficult. We just can't be bothered.” Where is the ambition to work proactively with UEFA and the Football Association to pursue a targeted exemption for women's football? While the 3 pm blackout continues, women's football is shackled and with it the opportunity for more women and girls to see themselves participating in sport.

An active population is a healthier, more productive and more connected population. Increasing participation in sport and physical activity is one of the most powerful and cost-effective levers of Government. It delivers returns across multiple policy areas simultaneously, easing pressure on public services and improving quality of life. The question is not whether the Government recognise those investments—they plainly do. The question is whether they are prepared to act with any urgency or with the ambition that the evidence demands. Without ambition, we will continue to fall short of what is possible.

The Culture, Media and Sport Committee has set out a road map. It is quite easy for the Secretary of State, the Minister and the Department to follow it. What we need now is for the Government not simply to endorse this sense of direction, but to actually match their words with decisive action.

4.37 pm

Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham North) (Lab): Young people are our future. They are the future politicians, technicians, writers, sportspeople, physiotherapists or whatever they want to be. The laws, policies and funding that we put

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forward must help in building their future. We must invest in them, inspire them, and give them the tools and skills for their future, so that they have the confidence and resilience to deal with whatever life throws at them. Decent access to youth services and sporting activities is an integral part of that.

Almost 1 million of our young people are not in education or employment. Youth unemployment is also strongly linked to social and economic inequality. I have spoken many times about why I set up the Youth Violence Commission. Soon after I was first elected in 2015, five of my young constituents were murdered in quick succession. The commission gathered evidence from academics, youth workers, educators and, most importantly, young people themselves. It showed how many different factors influence a young person's life. Some were more immediately obvious, such as their schooling, health, housing situation and relationship with their family, but our work also really brought home the power of sport, youth services and the arts to inspire and motivate our young people, as well as offering them a safe place to go. I am not talking just about the activities themselves, but about the interventions that happen alongside them.

To give a brief example, there is a boxing club in my constituency called Double Jab. While young people might initially go there to learn how to train and box, they are also offered mentorship and guidance on how to navigate life's challenges. Strong mentors and trusted adults can deliver a change in attitude and get someone on the path towards a better future. Access to sport, youth activities and culture, improves a whole variety of outcomes. However, Government must go further with their ambitions. Culture, media and sport are not just a "nice to have" to be tagged on to other stuff. Instead, they must be at the heart of everything.

We need a public health approach, with all of Government working together on a cross-departmental strategy, led from DCMS and focused on the right outcomes for our young people. If we can get that right—if we can meet our ambition for every single young person—I am sure that colleagues from the Treasury will be delighted to know that it has the potential to result in significant savings down the line.

4.40 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I recently read Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning", which is a powerful account of life in a concentration camp. There is a poignant part of that book where victims and concentration camp prisoners, talking to each other at the end of the day when they could barely keep their eyes open, go and witness a sunset because its beauty brings out something in them that would keep them going for the next day. The reason I talk about that is that it demonstrates the importance of art, in any shape or form. It can help our young people and those who are looking to improve their ill health.

Creative art for young people is routinely treated as discretionary spending: nice if there is money left over, but expendable the moment that there is not. I pay homage to the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher), who has done a lot of work on this subject. He recently

held a roundtable where he showed that ill health currently costs the UK economy £212 billion a year, with 2.8 million people out of work due to long-term sickness. However, arts and health interventions are estimated to return up to £8.56 in social value for every £1 spent.

We also know that poor mental health costs the economy an estimated £300 billion annually. Conversely, cultural engagement among 18 to 30-year-olds shows an average wellbeing benefit of £854 per person. Evidence on social prescribing tells the same story in cash terms; reductions in GP and A&E attendance and hospital admissions could represent around a £4 saving on every £1 spent on a link worker's salary. The 2023 "Creative Health Review" found that the problem is not a lack of evidence, but fragmented funding.

I will quickly pay homage to some organisations in my city that are utilising arts to improve the mental health of young people and the recovery of those who are unwell. Since October last year, the Shine programme, launched by the Curve theatre in partnership with the Randal Foundation, has brought drama-based sessions into five Leicester city-centre schools, reaching 250 teenagers in some of our most disadvantaged communities. The early findings from Dr Lyndsey Bakewell at De Montfort University are striking: every student involved has reported doing something they have never done before, and teachers have reported an increase in student resilience across the board. One participating pupil described feeling comfortable speaking in front of others—something that they had always found difficult. That is what early intervention looks like.

There is also Talent 25, which is De Montfort University's extraordinary 25-year longitudinal study, led by Professor Bertha and funded by the Arts Council. It is following 440 children from across Leicester, from birth into adulthood, tracking the effects of regular access to arts and creativity on a child's development. The early findings are positive among the children now starting school, with researchers reporting no unauthorised absences and parents describing real, lasting changes in their own lives, reduced isolation—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Andy MacNae.

4.42 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): As we have this debate about budgets and the figures being spent on sport, one key question keeps leaping out. As has been said by colleagues, we know that sport and physical activity is one of the things that can best maintain good health and prevent ill health. However, when we look at the numbers—hundreds of millions spent on sport, and hundreds of billions on the costs of ill health and welfare—we realise that we are stuck in a cycle of spending billions on ill health and worklessness and hardly anything to prevent it.

The points set out in the "Game On" report and by the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenege), are well made, so I will leap past the questions on the quantum of spend and instead ask about the barriers that prevent us from doing what we know we should.

First, I have a question for the Treasury. We seem to be stuck in our approach and attitude towards prevention spending. It is time to ask some fundamental questions about how we address that, looking at the mechanisms

that the Office for Budget Responsibility uses to measure spend and how it scores those initiatives, and how we think about prevention within the fiscal rules.

Fragmentation has been mentioned. We spend £3.8 billion across Government on sport and physical activity, but that is across the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the Department of Health, the Department for Education, local government and so on. Surely we need to bring this together and co-ordinate it through one single, accountable body. The NHS is currently unable to pay for social prescribing and physical activity courses in the same way that it pays for pills. Surely we need to have parity between pharmaceutical and non-pharmaceutical interventions.

Hon. Members have also mentioned schools. Physical education plays a crucial role in schools—the White Paper is very clear about that. Yet within the Ofsted measures, do we actually properly judge schools on the quality and quantity of their physical education? We do not. It is a huge opportunity that we are missing out on. Sport and physical activity can clearly play a massive role in the prevention of ill health. We know that that can save a lot of money, not just from the health budget but from welfare as a whole. We know that that is an imperative, and yet we are not grasping the opportunity.

We need to recognise there are systematic, structural barriers that too often put prevention into the “too hard to do” pile, as has been said. We cannot continue to accept that. We must recognise the absolute imperative of reducing demand on health and welfare budgets through effective prevention. The only way we can do that is by committing to investment to deliver sport, physical activity and other prevention measures at true scale, while ensuring that we break down the very barriers that stop us delivering that across Government.

4.46 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): As the hon. Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) just said, sports participation underpins so much for young people, building character and resilience, acting in favour of good mental health and tackling obesity. Into old age, too, staying active has huge benefits, as I was discussing just this weekend with the brilliant, dementia-friendly Petersfield walking football group. In many ways, sports provision is probably better than ever, and national governing bodies have done a very good job. I was particularly grateful when the bowls national governing body introduced the Culture, Media and Sport Committee to the national open weekend for bowls, and I discovered what great fun it can be.

Of course, children are now introduced to a great variety of sports at primary school, and that is a good thing. That has been underpinned in many ways by the schools PE and sport premium, the requirement for which is to go over and above what is set out in the national curriculum. Crucially, it has been a budget controlled by the schools themselves.

This is an estimates day, which is about spending. I think we could query a lot of priorities at DCMS. I was particularly gobsmacked by the decision to cut the business events growth programme—a tiny sum of money in overall Government terms, but one that drives such success and billions of pounds' worth of contribution

to the economy—at the same time as looking at bringing in an overnight visitor levy, which will make this country less competitive compared to competitor nations.

In this part of the DCMS world, there is the axing of the National Citizen Service and the closure of the youth investment fund. At the same time, the Department for Education is closing the opening school facilities fund and the Treasury is making changes to business rates, with the effect that that has in this sector. Of course, there is the question at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government about Sport England as a statutory consultee. The Department of Health is also cutting by 66% its contribution to health-related activity in schools.

However, the biggest things are the cuts to the schools PE and sport premium, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) set out. It is both a total budget cut and money that now has to be stretched across far more schools, having already let the real value of the £320 million erode over the first two years. Control of that is going to be taken away from schools. That is a very aggressive move. I commend to the House the Committee's report, “Game On: Community and school sport”. There is a great deal in it, as my right hon. Friend set out, in terms of improving funding applications, local authority duties and doing things in initial teacher training. Most of all, though, as has been mentioned by colleagues across the House, what we need to see, and what this report calls for, is a cross-Government approach to movement for health.

4.49 pm

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): Many colleagues have spoken about the importance of sports, activity and physical health, and how it is not just a nice to have or an add-on, but something that is absolutely vital if we are to deliver our goals, particularly on creating a healthier ageing population and a healthier population in general.

However, I would like to touch on something that is quite often overlooked: the importance of disability sport. Particularly for children and young people, the ability to take part in local sporting events or to join a football or rugby team or a dance class is significantly impeded by a lack of accessible venues and coaches and support workers who know how to meet need. It adds another level of exclusion from public life and community to what people who are disabled often already face. In my constituency there are some fantastic groups that look to address that shortfall, such as JTD Arts and the excellent Ace network. Disability sport for young people is very important, and I believe that we should try to address the lack of accessibility on a national level.

I want to talk about what disability sport means for me, my family and my daughter's friends. Last weekend it was my birthday, and I spent it in the way that anyone would like to spend a birthday—on a rugby pitch in Coventry at TagFest, which is the biggest accessible rugby tournament in Europe. It is fantastic. It means that my daughter and people like her can be welcomed in an environment where everyone gets it. All the parents pitch in. If someone's kid decides that they are going to start legging it towards the massive ring road that goes around the side of the rugby field, we are all running after them. No one is left out, and parents do not need

[Jen Craft]

to arrange 5 billion different support workers just so that their kid can take part. There is a real sense of community and belonging at these events, but they are few and far between. The event last weekend was sponsored by the rugby charity the Wooden Spoon, which allowed my daughter and her teammates to take part, but the events do not happen often enough. They are a space where people can feel welcome.

I am not a big sports addict. My husband is a massive sports fan—he will watch anything where a ball is involved—but I am not. The idea of standing on a freezing cold rugby pitch on a Saturday afternoon is not my idea of fun, but my daughter's rugby club SouthSEND was offered the opportunity to be mascots for the club's first team. When they walked through the busy bar, with everyone getting ready for the afternoon, every single person in the bar was silent—you could have heard a pin drop—because they knew that our children needed that space to breathe. That is the power of sport and belonging. That is what we should support.

4.52 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): It is a joy to speak in this estimates day debate on sport and youth services, particularly after I spent my weekend joining the Furniture Makers' Company for its annual tug-of-war in West Park, Long Eaton. Erewash has a very long history of furniture making, and our enduring local businesses get together every year to celebrate their industry with their families over a very spectacular tug-of-war. They even let me have a go, and I am very proud to say that my side lost—and I did not do very well at staying on the rodeo rugby ball either.

I raise that because the event took place on West Park, which is our local hub for grassroots sport. West Park Leisure Centre, Long Eaton rugby club, Long Eaton cricket club, our skatepark, various football clubs, our splash pad and a very popular parkrun all call it home. As I walked around the park, I was struck by the investment that has been put into the park by our fantastic Erewash borough councillors. There is new lighting and a new events space, and a brand new flagship bridge and waterfront space are currently being built as part of the towns fund deal. That is a strong example of cross-party commitment to redevelopment. The project is going to help reboot the town as a local economic and leisure hub, linking the town centre to the park and making a stunning contribution to improving active transport in the area.

All that sits in front of further investment in grassroots sport across the country, such as nearly 1,000 community projects across the UK, which this Labour Government announced in January. Funding is focused on our most deprived communities, and women and girls' participation in sports is prioritised. I am very pleased that the Government are focusing so heavily on improving low-cost access to sport in our communities.

Erewash was lucky enough to benefit from one of those recent projects, with Long Eaton United football club receiving a Football Foundation grant of nearly £20,000. That contributed towards a £50,000 project to upgrade floodlights on Grange Park, increasing the community's access to sport on dark winter evenings. The grant forms a small part of the great expansion in

grassroots sports funding that the Government are building into their spending review; £400 million has been committed to delivering new pitches, changing pavilions, floodlighting and facilities to support physical education, health initiatives and community outreach.

As we know, for every £1 spent on community sport and physical activity, over £4 is generated for the economy and society. Investment in grassroots sport—it is real investment—supports our local economies and saves the public in NHS spending in the long run by promoting a healthy, active lifestyle. Lots is happening in grassroots sport at the moment, and it is great to see the Government providing the funding that the country needs to make it all happen. Long may that continue.

4.55 pm

Ian Byrne (Liverpool West Derby) (Lab): The need for greater sustained investment in youth services and sports and leisure facilities in communities like mine in Liverpool West Derby is something that I care deeply about. I welcome the debate, but I want to focus on one simple change that would cost not a penny and could happen almost overnight: removing the “no ball games” signs that still cover streets and housing estates across our country.

At a time when mobile phones and social media dominate young people's lives, we should be doing everything we can to encourage children to play outside, yet between 2012 and 2022 more than 400 playgrounds in England closed, according to the Raising the Nation Play Commission. It also found that outdoor play had fallen by almost 50% in a generation, because families have lost safe public spaces on their doorstep. Austerity has hollowed out our communities and councils like Liverpool have been forced to close parks, pitches and youth facilities due to lack of funding. In many places, children now need to spend more than £50 to hire a private football pitch because the free alternatives have disappeared.

The evidence is clear. The children, young people and the built environment inquiry recommended that the Government require housing providers to remove unnecessary “no ball games” signs. Earlier this year, the Culture, Media and Sport Committee reinforced that recommendation in its excellent “Game On” report, with support from the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee. That is welcome, but it is not enough. The Government continue to leave this to local authorities, yet councils are often understandably risk-averse and face pressure from housing providers. Without national leadership, progress will be patchy.

When I was a councillor in Everton, I refused to put the signs up. If there were issues with residents, I would speak to the kids, have a discussion and try not to have the signs up, and I was 100% successful. I remembered how I was as a kid, playing football every summer. The chalk came out, and one day the local park became Centre Court; the next day it was Lord's. Those memories were about sport, friendship, imagination and community, and one of my very best friends, Karen Burke, ended up playing for England women's football team. So much talent was nurtured on the streets.

There are many good examples. In 2015, Aberdeen city council removed these signs and has seen overwhelmingly positive results since. The benefits are obvious. Access to those benefits, though, should not

depend on where a child lives. We cannot accept a postcode lottery, where a child in Aberdeen can walk outside and play freely while a child in Liverpool stays indoors because they have nowhere left to go. We urge the Government to act, to accept the recommendations of the Raising the Nation Play Commission, the CMS Committee and organisations such as Playing Out, and to introduce a national directive to remove unnecessary “no ball games” signs. It is an easy win. Let us get our young people playing again.

4.57 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): If we are serious about tackling the growing challenges facing all our young people, we must recognise that youth services are not a luxury but an essential part of the solution. For too long, youth provision has been viewed as an optional extra, but youth clubs, sports teams, arts programmes and enrichment activities give young people confidence, skills and—perhaps most importantly—somewhere they feel they belong.

Many of us in the Chamber look back fondly on our childhoods and remember the school discos, riding our bikes from sun-up until the streetlights came on, youth clubs on a Friday night, community centres full of activity, and summers packed with sports and activities. Those memories are special not because of the buildings but because they were the places where we made our friendships, where confidence grew and trusted adults gave up their time to invest in us. Every child deserves that opportunity today, regardless of where they live and what their or their family's circumstances are.

That is why this debate is personal to me. My own son Archie played football, but there were times when he struggled to find where he belonged—like so many young people, he was searching for something that was his—then he discovered wrestling with Rishi and Raj, better known as “the Prince of Mumbai” and “Tiger Raj” at the fantastic Quality Wrestling Academy. They gave him far more than sport; they gave him confidence, discipline, laughter and friendship. Most importantly, they gave him a place where he felt he belonged. Today, he is thriving. He walks a lot taller, he believes a lot more in himself, and who knows, perhaps one day he will make a career out of being “the chosen one”.

That experience reminded me that one caring coach, one youth worker or one volunteer can change the direction of a young person's life. I thank every one of those people who quietly turn up week after week, in all weathers. They are rarely given recognition, but they change lives every single day. That is why I welcome the Government's national youth strategy, backed by £500 million of investment and the commitment to rebuilding and refurbishing 250 youth facilities. It recognises a simple truth: investing in young people not only gives them the opportunities and experiences that shape their childhood, but it prevents far greater future challenges. I welcome the introduction of 50 Young Futures hubs, but I am deeply disappointed and frustrated that Portsmouth is not due to receive one. I would therefore welcome the opportunity to meet the Minister to discuss how young people can access those vital services in my city.

I take this opportunity to thank positive role models and to say something about their importance. As the co-chair of the Labour Group for Men and Boys, I am

increasingly concerned about how many boys are growing up without a consistent, positive male influence in their lives. For many, that role is not played by a famous person; it is the football coach who gives up their Saturday morning, the youth worker who notices when something is not quite right, or the music tutor who encourages a child to keep going—those ordinary people who do extraordinary things. They teach respect, resilience and responsibility; they show boys what positive masculinity looks like, not through words but examples; and they give boys, lads and, indeed, men a place to belong. If we want to reduce the number of young people who are not in education and improve their wellbeing, we must do more of that because every young person deserves someone who believes in them—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

5.1 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): I congratulate the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinanage), on securing this important debate on sport and youth services. The debate is timely because it coincides with the world cup and Wimbledon—and yes, like other hon. and right hon. Members, I will be hiding behind a sofa somewhere on the estate from 5 pm tomorrow for the England match. It is also timely because it coincides with the recent publication of the Milburn report and this week's findings from the Children's Commissioner that show a 10% rise in children and young people's referrals to mental health services over the past year.

For too long, sport and youth services have been an afterthought for Government. As many hon. Members have already said, young people need space and the opportunity to express themselves, and they need trusted role models and structure in their lives. Both sports and youth services give them the chance to discover their talents and build their confidence, as well as helping them improve their mental and physical health. Yet the Milburn report showed that failing to invest in prevention carries through into poorer education and employment outcomes. If we want happy, healthy, hopeful and productive adults, we must first invest in happy, healthy and hopeful children and young people.

I strongly support the Select Committee's recommendations to hardwire two hours of physical education into the school week. PE is funded largely by the Department for Education, with some support from the Department of Health and Social Care—although we know that there has recently been a tussle between the two over funding. The resulting announcement saw annual funding for PE slashed by a staggering 22% under the Government's new PE and School Sport Partnerships Network, with primary schools hit the hardest. The cuts are being rushed through mid-year, leaving teachers, parents and sports co-ordinators scrambling.

That comes at the worst possible moment. In England, 2.1 million young people do less than 30 minutes' physical activity a day and only 57% of teachers say their schools deliver the recommended two hours of PE each week. Sky's “Game Changing” report estimates a participation gap between girls and boys in secondary school of a staggering 280,000,000 hours of sport per

[Munira Wilson]

year. If we want to see many more years of Lionesses and Red Roses lifting trophies, we need to invest in the next generation now, through sport both in school and in our communities. Cutting budgets at a time when children need them most—when they are spending more time in front of their screens, as we have just heard—is incomprehensible.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): Teachers and parents in South Devon are worried about the future of PE following funding cuts. Many areas already have successful school sports partnerships, with schools pooling their premium and working with organisations such as Active Partnerships. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Government need to clarify whether schools can build on existing relationships, with those partnerships continuing to operate under the new system, or will they all be forced to start from scratch?

Munira Wilson: Partnerships are valuable, of course, and I do not oppose the Government's approach, but the overall funding envelope is declining and being spread across both primary and secondary schools. This is resulting in a real-terms cut in the sports that are, as we are hearing from both sides of the House, so important to our children's wellbeing and health.

Moving on to grassroots sports more broadly, with Sport England losing its function as a statutory planning consultee, it is hard to see how the Government's aim of promoting healthy communities can be met when facility provision is declining due to closures, ageing infrastructure and uneven availability. Local authorities are trying their best, but they need help. The Udney Park playing fields in Teddington in my constituency have been lying dormant for over a decade, land banked by developers and out of reach for the local community, who are crying out for additional pitch space. This is not just limited to my constituency. London Sport told the Select Committee that it had had to look at running sports activities in car parks, empty shops and libraries because of the massive disinvestment in parks, leisure and community centres and youth services.

As this debate also covers youth services, I want to briefly touch on that, if I may. Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for a fair, long-term funding settlement to support youth work, resources and infrastructure, so we very much welcome the Government's national youth strategy, and particularly their promise to introduce multi-year funding settlements. However, we need them to deliver on that promise. Earlier this year, the YMCA reported that spending on youth services by local authorities in England and Wales fell by 10% in a single year, the largest annual reduction since 2016-17.

We know that, as well as improving educational outcomes, youth services provide the relational infrastructure that prevents disengagement from becoming entrenched, protects our vulnerable young people and creates a sense of belonging. I have seen for myself what that investment can achieve at the WEST Youth Zone in London, where there are over 30 activities every evening serving a very disadvantaged community. I was told that if those young people did not have that space, they would be in their bedrooms on their phones all the time.

In conclusion, as investment in youth services has fallen, spending on youth justice has risen. We need to focus on prevention, whether through youth services or sport, and we hope that the Government's rhetoric will be matched by investment and a commitment to delivery.

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

5.7 pm

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): I thank the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), for her work, for her impressive speech and for securing the debate today. I pay tribute to her and all the members of the Select Committee from all parties for conducting the review on community and school sport that forms the basis of today's debate. I also thank everybody for their contributions today.

This important report has highlighted the concerning reality that England's community and school sport system is not currently delivering either the opportunities that people want or the benefits that we know sport can provide. All too often, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the sectors it oversees are dismissed as "nice to haves" or a bit fluffy, when in fact they are pivotal—indeed, essential—to our economy and society. DCMS sectors—sport, culture, tourism, film, TV, music, heritage, civil society and much more—enrich our lives and make them more fulfilling, while supporting over 5 million jobs in the UK and generating well over £220 billion in economic value. The purpose of DCMS is to champion and support vital sectors that can and should turbocharge our economy. They are, after all, things that we are globally recognised as being exceptionally good at, which begs the question: why are this Government cutting support?

DCMS's total expenditure fell 3.3% from 2023-24. The Government have chosen to abolish the National Citizen Service, to undermine horseracing and legitimate gambling, and to cut spending on tourism promotion, on business events, on listed places of worship and even on school sport, while implementing policies that are loading up costs on DCMS sectors, especially through tax rises. The business rates and national insurance rises are decimating DCMS sectors, depriving tens of thousands of young people of their first job opportunity and causing unemployment. Of the nearly 200,000 job losses since Labour came to power, over half were in tourism and hospitality and many of them involved young people. I respect the Minister, and have a lot of time for her, and many of those things were not her Department's decisions, and that must be intensely frustrating.

We all understand the benefits of an active population. When children are active from an early age, they develop confidence, resilience and social skills, and are more likely to enjoy better mental health, improved wellbeing and healthier lifestyles. If we fail to give every child the opportunity to be active, we risk storing up significant challenges for the future, from rising obesity and poorer mental health to greater pressure on our NHS. Allowing even more development on sports fields and playgrounds is clearly not going to help.

The evidence is clear that there is strong public demand for sport provision, but as the report highlights, fragmented policy, inadequate investment and poor cross-Government co-ordination are preventing sport from delivering its

full potential—whether improving health outcomes, supporting children’s development, strengthening communities or contributing to economic growth. There is also a gender dimension to this issue, as the Chair of the Select Committee outlined and as a recent report by Sky demonstrated. Investment in sport delivers some of the clearest returns of any area of public spending: Sport England estimates that every £1 invested in community sport and physical activity generates more than £4 in social and economic value.

The Government announced in January that they were investing £85 million to build and upgrade grassroots sport facilities across the country as part of a £400 million boost for grassroots sport facilities by 2030. However, the £400 million figure is the same amount that we announced when we were in government, so thanks to inflation, it is a real-terms cut. There is also little detail on who will receive the money and when. Many sports governing bodies, including those for cricket, swimming and tennis, say that they have plenty of projects that are ready to go, but without clarity on funding, they cannot pull the trigger on key projects across the country.

I have particular concerns about school sport, where there has clearly been a bunfight between the Department for Health and Social Care, the Department for Education and DCMS about funding. The Government announced £1 billion for school sport over the next three years, but the devil is in the detail. The Department for Education announced that the £320 million annual PE and sport premium for primary schools will be scrapped in favour of a new partnership network. Let us be clear: that is a cut. In fact, it leaves schools around 22% less well off in terms of annual funding than the current scheme. As the report outlined, we need structural reform, sustained investment, clear accountability and a joined-up national strategy.

The Government have committed to publishing a national plan for physical activity later this year, and we look forward to scrutinising it. Sport and physical activity cannot solve every challenge facing young people, but they can be one of the most powerful tools for improving health, building confidence, developing skills and strengthening communities. Investment matters—of course it does—but we also need a long-term plan and structural reform. The Committee has provided Ministers with a road map; the challenge is whether the Government have the ambition to follow it.

5.12 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): I congratulate the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and members of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee on securing this estimates debate. I thank them for their efforts in scrutinising the work of this Government and shining a light on the issues that matter.

DCMS is the Department that brings joy to people’s lives while focusing on driving growth, fostering civic pride and supporting our world-class sectors. From sport to arts, media and heritage, culture binds our social infrastructure. Our work reaches every part of the country. Regardless of a person’s postcode or background, the Department should reach them in some way. The shadow Minister rightly pointed out the figures for jobs and economic contribution.

This debate centres on sport and youth, and I will focus my remarks in that area. Some Members raised other issues, and I will endeavour to write to them. Some Members requested a meeting; I am always happy to meet colleagues. I will talk specifically about school sport and the report in a moment.

Across the country, people have been supporting our national teams at the world cup. Of course, I wish England good luck tomorrow night, and give my commiserations to Scotland—the results did not go their way. The women’s cricket team play on Thursday in the T20 world cup, and we wish them every success. The global spotlight is on Wimbledon, and will be on the British grand prix at Silverstone this weekend.

Major sporting events foster an undeniable sense of national pride and social cohesion, while driving economic growth. We have seen their impact up and down the country, whether it be the women’s rugby world cup last year, the women’s T20, which we are currently hosting, or the Commonwealth games, which we will host in Glasgow next month. Over the next few years, we are investing over £500 million in hosting Euro 2028, the Tour de France, and Tour de France Femmes. The investment in those events alone is predicted to deliver £3.2 billion in socioeconomic benefits—a near sixfold direct return on investment for the British public. I would also like to mention the important work that the Government have done to secure the Crucible theatre in Sheffield as the home of the snooker world championship through a £35 million investment in it.

We will continue to work closely with UK Sport to keep the UK at the very top of the global event hosting pipeline, because these events are so important in inspiring the next generation to get active. Inactivity is the story of inequality, and that is why this Government are investing at least £400 million in community sports facilities across the country over the next four years.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I commend the investment that the Minister has already announced. In Dewsbury, our leisure centre and swimming pool were closed in September 2023, and have stood there, with no repairs or survey. Will she meet me to discuss what the Government can do to help reopen them? Maybe they could have some of the £400 million. The youth in my community are asking, “What can we do during the summer holidays?”

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I would be delighted to meet him. I was on a visit near his constituency recently. Leisure is a real challenge; I really want to do more on it. Of course, it is a responsibility of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but we are absolutely aware how important this issue is for physical activity. That is why we are investing £400 million in sports facilities. That is alongside the £250 million of Exchequer and lottery funding for grassroots sports annually.

This financial year, we are delivering £85 million via the multi-sports grassroots facilities programme. It will build and upgrade vital pitches, changing rooms and clubhouses. Fifty per cent of the investment will be prioritised for the 30% most deprived areas in the UK, and at least 40% of projects will offer multi-sport access, benefiting rugby, cricket and basketball, alongside football.

[Stephanie Peacock]

We have innovative projects, as the hon. Member for Droitwich and Evesham said, which I am happy to write to him about.

The projects will prioritise women and girls' provision, doubling access, and I am committed to promoting women's sport and tackling some of the challenges that it faces. That is why I established the women's sports taskforce, and we had our most recent meeting in Southampton to coincide with the T20 world cup. We are working with local leaders, in a place-based approach, to deliver funding beyond this year, so that areas can have a greater say on the facilities that they need. I have seen this the length and breadth of the country.

This Government believe in the power of sport, not as a luxury, but as an essential driver of national health, wellbeing and economic productivity. It helps tackle so many issues, such as mental and physical health and loneliness. I think about Jed in Wombwell Main in my constituency, who took up walking football after his wife sadly passed away. That is the power of sport in this country.

I turn to school sport. Over £1 billion will be invested in school sport over the next three years. We are launching the new physical education and school sport partnership network. It intentionally replaces the old PE and sport premium, putting an end to the one-size-fits-all model that failed too many children for too long, while meeting the clear asks of leading voices in sports education.

Dame Caroline Dineneage: The hon. Member is an excellent Minister, but can she please just answer this question? When we add it all up, does this equate to an increase or a cut in the total amount of school spending?

Stephanie Peacock: One billion pounds is going in over the next three years. Of course, that is capital and revenue, and it covers all schools. I do appreciate that there are some concerns. I will come on to address them, and I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady and, indeed, other Members.

I understand those concerns regarding the decision to replace the existing premium. However, despite sustained investment through the PE and sport premium for over a decade, fewer than half of children are getting the chief medical officer's recommended 60 active minutes a day. Persistent inequalities remain for girls and people from disadvantaged backgrounds. It simply is not good enough, and we are determined to close the gaps in participation that this causes. That is why over £1 billion in funding for PE and school sport has been committed to over the next three years. This includes £580 million for a new PE and school sport partnership network, to replace the PE and sport premium, alongside investment for improvements to school sport facilities and transitional support for primary schools.

Damian Hinds: I am going to have another go, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dineneage) did. A billion pounds over three years sounds like a lot of money. The simple mathematical question is, is that £1 billion over three years more or less than the amount for a comparable three-year period, starting just before the middle of 2024?

Stephanie Peacock: A billion pounds over the next three years is more than was invested in the previous three years, but I am acknowledging the changes to the system. I am acknowledging that we are including all schools, and that it includes capital and revenue.

The new PE and school sport partnership network will respond to calls from the sector to bring together schools, local clubs and national governing bodies to work together. That will ensure that the funding makes a real difference, tackles inactivity and provides equal access to sport, underpinned by support to improve the quality of PE and school sport for all children.

Munira Wilson: Could the Minister clarify one point for me? The previous PE and sport premium was just for primary schools. Am I right in saying that the new funding she has announced is for primary and secondary schools, and it is therefore being spread across far more schools, so there will be less money per school? How will that help her meet the chief medical officer's targets?

Stephanie Peacock: A billion pounds is going in over the next three years. I have acknowledged that it is for secondary and primary. The current system simply is not working—kids are not getting as active. I know as a former teacher how important it is for kids to be active. We are reinventing the model, and we make no apologies for doing so. In the interests of time, I am very happy to meet Members to discuss that further.

I am being encouraged by the Chair to hurry up, so I will perhaps put some of my responses in writing. Of course, we have responded formally to the "Game On" report, but I will make a couple of points on that. I have talked about school sport. On the point about "no ball games" signs, we are fully supportive of the principle of removing them. I am due to meet my counterpart at MHCLG. This is in the gift of local authorities, but we want to do everything we can to address this issue.

I understand the arguments about the 3 pm slot. On the point that the Chair of the Select Committee made, the Government's response did refer to the technical issues with such a change—that is true—and Karen Carney's review did not recommend it for those reasons. Our football taskforce has led to direct improvements, such as insurance products for female athletes.

In the 30 seconds I have to wind up, I would like to briefly mention youth. We have the most connected but the most isolated generation of young people, and that is why we have announced our national youth strategy, with £500 million of funding. It is incredibly important that this issue be tackled across Government. I will conclude there, but I will ensure that I write to Members to follow up on the points I was not able to cover.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

Dame Caroline Dineneage: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I think the Minister may have inadvertently misled the House a moment ago when she said that the quantum of school sports funding exceeded what it previously was. There have been cuts to school sports funding, and I would like to give her the opportunity to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The hon. Lady will know that that is not a point of order for the Chair. I am sure that if the Minister wishes to correct the record, she will.

Stephanie Peacock: Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It certainly would never be my intention to mislead the House. I was really clear in the debate that this Government are investing £1 billion over the next three years. I have acknowledged the fact that we are changing the system; the amount includes capital and revenue, and primary and secondary schools. I appreciate that it is a different model, and we make no apologies for that.

Madam Deputy Speaker: We are not going to continue the debate via points of order.

Department of Health and Social Care

[Relevant documents: Correspondence between the Health and Social Care Committee and the Department of Health and Social Care, on the Supplementary Estimate 2025-26, reported to the House on 1 May and 25 March, Session 2024-26; Correspondence from the Health and Social Care Committee to the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health Innovation and Safety, on the UK-US Arrangement on Pharmaceuticals Pricing and Tariffs, reported to the House on 28 April, Session 2024-26.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Department of Health and Social Care:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £108,291,452,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £7,899,179,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £115,924,112,000, 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.—(*Lilian Greenwood.*)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): The debate will be opened by the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee. Before I call her, I wish to alert Members that the same time limit of three minutes will be imposed in this debate, and I am sure the Chair of the Select Committee will be cognisant of that during her opening remarks. I call Layla Moran.

5.24 pm

Layla Moran (Oxford West and Abingdon) (LD): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate on the NHS estimates and, in particular, the impact of the UK-US pharmaceutical deal.

Let me start by briefly talking about the estimates themselves. I am sure that every Member has a copy of them; I have one every year. Given that we spend £211 billion on the NHS, it is rather extraordinary that £201 billion of that is simply two lines in this document. Last year, I made a request of the Department of Health and Social Care, in the light of the deal, that we get not just a better breakdown of the costs of the deal, but, more importantly, the ability to scrutinise the estimates.

The Treasury's own guidance says that the information in the estimates should be "informative" to readers. We can all read it, but—goodness me!—it tells us absolutely nothing. My request of the Department again, and much more publicly, is to sort this issue out. Other Departments do this much better, so there is no reason why we cannot. The information exists; it is a question of putting it correctly in a spreadsheet.

Today, I hope that we will discuss the pharmaceutical deal. I have to admit that I had seen stuff about the deal, but it was not until a whistleblower came to my surgery that I really began to understand the implications of it. They said:

"I am a doctor, a public health specialist, and a NICE employee. I am deeply concerned by the plan to change the NICE cost-effectiveness threshold. I continue to believe that the NHS would be better off if ministers decide to scrap their original plan to spend more on new, less good value medicines, and used the money instead to provide basic things that we already know are good value, but don't manage to provide adequately."

[Layla Moran]

Let us start by explaining what this deal does. It is worth mentioning that it is not a free trade agreement. That is quite important, because we will not get the normal mechanisms of scrutiny. This is one of the only ways that we can scrutinise it. We certainly do not get a proper vote on it. Different Committees of this House have raised that as a key point, so I am delighted that we are able to discuss it.

The deal agrees with the USA that there will be no tariffs on UK pharma exports until January 2029, and we have agreed a series of measures in return. The most important of those, which was raised by my whistleblower, is the changes to the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence thresholds. We must remember that NICE was set up as an independent body of Government to make health economics assessments for treatment and medicines, to maximise value for money. I do not need to remind the Minister that providing value for money for the taxpayer is in the NHS constitution.

The Government gave themselves powers to direct NICE on cost-effectiveness thresholds, raising them from £20,000 to £30,000 up to £25,000 to £35,000 for each quality-adjusted life year. In plain speech, that is basically the amount of money that we would spend on a medicine to increase people's good life expectancy by one year.

Historically, the NHS has had a very good deal on medicines. That is in part because of where the QALY is set; in fact, research has been done that suggests that we could have put the figure even lower. It is not a budget, and does not have to increase with inflation. Some have made that case, and I will come back to that point in a moment.

The second part of my speech relates to changes to the rebate mechanism. There is a voluntary agreement between the British pharmaceutical industry companies, and the NHS caps the amount that it spends on branded medicines. If the NHS spends more, it claws back some of the money from those companies. Under the deal, the UK Government are limiting that to 15%, which is down from 22.9%. Let us put those two things together: we have the NHS paying more for medicines, and receiving less back through rebates.

There is an agreement in the deal that the UK will increase support for life sciences and spending on new medicines from 0.3% of GDP to 0.6% of GDP by 2036. That is an increase of spending on medicines, particularly, from 10% to 12% of the NHS budget.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): The hon. Member is making an excellent speech, and is trying to draw out the details of this deal; I am glad that one of her constituents drew her attention to it. I was lobbied by Karl Claxton at the University of York, who described this deal as an existential threat to the NHS because of the potential costs. Interestingly, the Department has not yet published its impact assessment on the deal. Does she agree that it is high time that the Department published the impact assessment and let us know the true cost of the deal?

Layla Moran: I believe that by the end of my speech, the hon. Gentleman and I will be in violent agreement, if we are not already. There is one more

aspect of this, incidentally: the supply chains deal, which I understand is being crafted. We do not have time to go into that.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady on the speech she is making. It is really important that we talk about the disadvantages of this deal, and there is a clear disadvantage to Northern Ireland. Access to everyday medicines in rural communities in Strangford and across Northern Ireland will be inhibited, so does the hon. Lady agree that the Northern Ireland Assembly in particular should receive the resources necessary to deliver vital frontline service improvements? At this moment, it is not receiving those resources.

Layla Moran: That is a really good point. I will come back to generics, which make up nine in 10 of the medicines that the NHS uses. There is also an issue of devolution here, which I am sure other Members will cover. At the moment it is very complex, and it is not at all clear how the deal will apply in Scotland and Northern Ireland in particular.

We cannot divorce this deal from the geopolitics. It is only happening because Trump decided that he wanted to slap tariffs on every country in the world and on a number of different sectors. The reason why the US came after the NHS is that historically, we get an incredibly good deal, but we have to admit—this is why this debate is so important—that we are using the NHS and NICE in geopolitical negotiations to appease the current President of the United States. Although Trump probably wants to be President for much longer than he will be, his term will come to an end, but the effects of this deal will last much longer than the period of time he might be in office, and the amounts of money involved are eye-watering. I wish we had more information in the estimates, but everyone knows the pressure the NHS is under.

Sir Ashley Fox (Bridgwater) (Con): Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government's failure to publish the impact assessment means that NHS authorities across the country do not know how much this deal will cost them? My constituents in Somerset cannot get a GP appointment or see an NHS dentist. That is far more important to them than this obscure deal.

Layla Moran: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and that lack of transparency is the nub of my speech today.

There are some potential positives in the deal. At the 10 February sitting of the Business and Trade Committee, a representative of the Association of the British Pharmaceutical Industry said that zero tariffs and commitments to the pharmaceutical market in the UK were "welcome" and had been "sought for some time". The Government's press release points out that patients will get access to innovative new medicines—who does not want that? Of course we all want that, especially those who have incurable cancers and so on, but there is a trade-off. We all want to bolster innovation in the UK. I have an interest—I am the MP for Oxford West and Abingdon. We are the other side of the Oxford-Cambridge growth arc. Biomedical sciences are going to drive my local economy, so I absolutely want that to happen, but there are also some important criticisms of this deal.

First, Medicines UK, which represents a large number of pharmaceutical companies based here in the UK, has real concerns. The life sciences sector plan has stalled, and Medicines UK points out that even though the companies it represents supply nine out of 10 medicines to the NHS, those companies are basically not recipients of what is good in this deal. Mark Samuels, its chief executive officer, has also pointed out that while there may be new investment in this country, particularly in R&D, if we want to create jobs and strengthen the economy, we must also address the inadequate support for the production of goods in the UK. That is where long-term value is created, and it is where the UK misses out compared with other countries. I point colleagues to Denmark, for example, which has had extraordinary success in its economy because it not only invests in R&D, but ensures that a proportion of the manufacturing happens in Denmark. That is what drives economic growth.

I now turn to the key point, which is the money. We do not know how much this deal is going to cost. There are two suggested amounts: the Institute for Fiscal Studies puts the cost at £9 billion, but the House of Commons Library briefing points out that the 0.6% of GDP in the Office for Budget Responsibility forecast actually amounts to £14 billion. As has been mentioned, that is an eye-watering amount of money, in the same period that we need to be spending money on dentists, GPs, capital investment, attendance at A&E, prevention, the shift to community and the 10-year plan.

When we should be seeing money delivered to the frontline, instead we are seeing money diverted to a small number of very large American-based pharmaceutical companies with no transparency, little debate and absolutely no vote in this House. It is the lack of scrutiny that I take issue with, and there are economists who point out that we could have an extra 330,000 excess deaths by 2036. The Minister is looking quizzically at me, but she has information that I do not. It could be that those economists are being alarmist, but maybe they are not. We simply do not know, because the Government refuse to publish the impact assessment owing to commercial sensitivities. Normally at this stage, I have a series of questions, but today—and this not just in the interests of time—I have only one: where is the impact assessment, and if the Government will not release it, what are they hiding?

5.35 pm

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): I thank the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for her comments.

Life sciences are one of the country's great strengths. We have world-leading universities, brilliant researchers, innovative companies, NHS experts and public investment. The life sciences support high-skilled jobs, drive growth and, most importantly, transform patients' lives. The UK invented the covid vaccine, pioneered in vitro fertilisation and sequenced DNA, but we are slower than many other nations at diffusing innovation. The NHS spends £27 billion a year buying stuff that should be helping to give British patients access to innovative treatments, guaranteeing high-tech start-ups and scale-ups their first contract, and enabling clinical trials and exciting new drugs. However, in evidence to the Science,

Innovation and Technology Committee, we have heard that bureaucratic processes and a culture of inertia mean that adoption is far quicker in the US, for example.

My Committee was told that the NHS has more pilots than British Airways, but innovation still is not getting through. Sometimes it can seem easier to be locked into tech giants such as Palantir. My Committee has warned against that, but we do want the UK to be a great place to grow life sciences businesses. Last year, following a series of cancelled investments, we held an emergency inquiry into this area. Witnesses were clear that the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access and growth, or VPAG, was a big issue, but there were also deeper questions on whether the UK is spending enough on medicines, whether patients are getting timely access to innovation and whether companies have confidence to invest for the long term.

I very much welcome that the UK has secured zero tariffs on pharmaceuticals and an exemption from the US's most-favoured-nation pricing policy, but the arrangement is not treaty-based and is therefore not subject to scrutiny. The final cost is not clear. It depends on which medicines the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence approves and what the actual NHS uptake is.

We all agree that the NHS must get value for money. Every pound spent on one part of healthcare is precious and cannot be spent elsewhere, but innovative treatments can reduce healthcare demand, and companies need to know that they have a market if they are to invest in research and development, clinical trials and manufacturing in the UK. The Minister needs to explain how these figures, such as the 0.6% of GDP, were arrived at. What international analysis has the Minister commissioned to justify them? In particular, where does the UK sit internationally? We heard from President Trump that the UK does not pay enough, but the US system is one of the most bloated and overpriced in the world, with health accounting for 18% of GDP, with worse outcomes than the NHS, which accounts for 10% of UK GDP.

5.38 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): An estimated 229,000 excess deaths by 2036—that is the eye-watering figure that *BMJ* analysis identifies as the upshot of diverting NHS funding to pay more for pharmaceuticals in response to Trump's threats.

Estimates day debates exist to scrutinise how public money will be spent before that spending has happened, not least when the decisions could have such damaging consequences for the health of our nation. This estimates day debate does not include the full budgetary consequences of the UK-US pharmaceutical deal agreed on 1 December. When we look at the cost, the Government's figures simply do not stack up. Instead, we see a structural weakening of NHS safeguards on drug pricing, higher thresholds, weaker rebate mechanisms and a commitment to dramatically increase spending, which will prove devastating for patient health.

Ministers claim that the arrangement will cost about £1 billion over the current spending review period, but independent analysis tells a different story. Using the projections of the Office for Budget Responsibility, the House of Commons Library suggests that increasing spending on medicines in line with the Government's

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

commitments would require about £1.7 billion extra by 2028, and potentially as much as £14 billion a year by 2036.

The Government have been clear on one point, and one point only: they say that those increased costs will come from existing NHS budgets. No new funding has been guaranteed. Every extra billion spent on higher-priced medicines is a billion not spent elsewhere in a system that is already under immense strain. This is money not spent on tackling waiting lists, not spent on primary care, and not spent on saving lives. As we have heard, the Nuffield Trust has made that point starkly, estimating that the NHS will be able to save 340,000 fewer years of quality-adjusted life in 2035 if the promised spending goes ahead.

Despite the magnitude of these changes, the Government have refused to publish the full impact assessment of the deal that they hold. Why? This worrying development can be seen in the way in which the UK-US pharma deal was forced through, with no vote and scant parliamentary oversight. Let me summarise what I wrote on PoliticsHome back in March. This deal will increase the cost-effectiveness threshold set by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, curtail the overall cost cap on patented medicines, double the amount spent on such medicines, and increase the share of the NHS budget allocated to medicines. That should worry every Member of this House, because once those safeguards have been eroded, they are very difficult to restore.

5.41 pm

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): I must declare an interest as a registered pharmacist for nearly two decades and an expert on pharmacy procurement.

Let me begin by saying that I welcome the UK-US pharmaceutical trade agreement, and also by saying something quite controversial: President Donald Trump is right. We do underpay for drugs—not just our expensive, lifesaving rare cancer drugs, but the everyday drugs that we purchase.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the hon. Gentleman to comment on the fact that the NHS pays 10 times the manufacturing costs for over 80% of the licensed medicines that we buy? How is that underpaying?

Sadik Al-Hassan: I am not sure where the hon. Gentleman's figures come from. When we look at the drug tariff reimbursement, which is the system that we use to pay, and compare it with the arrangements in other countries, it is clear that we underpay significantly. Perhaps he is referring to something of which I am unaware; I should be happy to chat to him outside.

We in this country are addicted to low-cost drugs for our health service, and what does that addiction mean? It means that we have the lowest costs and we always go for the cheapest drugs, and that favours foreign manufacturers. It destroys UK supply chains, as we have seen over the last 25 years, and it endangers our resilience as a country. We are already seeing the side effects of that, with drugs being out of stock. We have a system for payment called the drug tariff, which establishes how much pharmacies will buy drugs for and how much they will be reimbursed for. There are currently 254 price concessions. Price concessions happen when a drug is

out of stock, and we must make an emergency increase to the price in the drug tariff to try to bring it back into the country. Given that there are 3,500 drugs in that section of the drug tariff, 254 does not sound a lot, but it is the highest level that I remember seeing in my entire professional career. Last month's highest level of 230 has just been exceeded.

Cheap drugs often mean that we overvalue the benefit of medicines in our system and use a “drug first” approach in the NHS, and that has continued for decades. When we increase the price that we pay for drugs, it allows us to start considering the benefits of other types of treatment, such as social prescribing. Social prescribing becomes a great deal cheaper by comparison in a system in which drugs are valued at the correct level. The all-party parliamentary group on pharmacy, which I chair, published a report in June 2025 that laid out some of the problems with drug pricing and availability. I absolutely support the idea of paying more for drugs, because at the moment we are building a system that is creaking and breaking. By trying to pursue every penny of savings, we have destroyed UK manufacturing and offshored our problems. The only way to bring that back is to rebuild the drug tariff, with the idea of paying to procure more in the UK.

Layla Moran: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his speech, because he is showing how important this debate is. A lot of this has not been flushed out. Medicines UK, which is responsible for a lot of the generics that he talks about, disagrees with him, but that is a conversation for another time. My question is specific: does he agree that the lack of transparency behind this deal, and the lack of an impact assessment, is a material issue and that we should ask the Government to release such information?

Sadik Al-Hassan: First of all, Medicines UK does not disagree with me; its members disagree that the value from the UK-US trade deal will go to people other than them. Medicines UK actually thinks that companies are not paid enough for drugs in this country. Unfortunately, you might need to go and have a chat with the association about that, because you might have misunderstood.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. You mean “the hon. Member”, not “you”—I do not need to go anywhere. I ask the hon. Member please to wrap up as soon as he can, because we have many speeches to get in.

Sadik Al-Hassan: In conclusion, I welcome the deal. I hope we find a way to pay for drugs correctly in this country, so that we value them properly and can value the rest of the system.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I will give Front Benchers a heads-up: we are not going to have a huge amount of time, so please edit your speeches accordingly.

5.46 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): The debate we have had so far highlights the issue at hand. This is an immense change to the way in which we will determine the delivery of drugs to the NHS, and one of

my fears is that it will begin to weaken the existing controls. I think it politicises the process, because what will happen now is that Ministers will be able to determine the thresholds. In addition, I am concerned that decision making in the negotiations with the pharmaceutical companies has been transferred from NHS England to the Department itself. There will be real concerns that when we look for objective advice from NICE, the system that we have will now be politicised. I say to my hon. Friend on the Front Bench that it behoves the Government to ensure that we have a proper debate on this issue.

I welcome the comments that have just been made by my hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan), because I find them interesting, just as I have found the contributions from Members across the House. The costs have been set out today, and there is a vast range of figures. This could be resolved if the Government just published the impact study that we have all been asking for.

Members have emphasised that when No. 10 said very clearly that any additional costs would have to come from the NHS, we wanted to have a debate so that we could ask, “Where from? What areas of service will be reduced?”

Peter Dowd (Bootle) (Lab): The NHS will carry out screening and evaluation of newborn babies for spinal muscular atrophy, or SMA, which causes spinal cord deterioration. It is a devastating genetic condition. The evaluation will start in October in England, but not in Northern Ireland or anywhere else. Does my hon. Friend agree that the will must be found to ensure comprehensive cover for all nations? We can have no more delays. We need action now to save the lives of children and prevent trauma for families.

John McDonnell: That is an incredibly relevant point in this debate. Many of us have examples of that, which is why we need to have a wider debate about the supply of drugs, their effectiveness and how they are evaluated. I thought we had a relatively objective system, but the deal throws that objectivity into question.

Figures on the scale of deaths have been bandied about. I want to hear the Government’s view and their proper analysis of that, because we have to engage with the reports from Karl Claxton, Andrew Hill and so forth, as others have mentioned.

The justification for the Trump deal was that it would increase UK exports to the US and increase overall investment in drugs in this country. I have yet to see any published evidence of that; in fact, the Government have not brought forward any evidence.

I also say to my hon. Friend the Minister, and this is political, that I remember the commitment given by the Prime Minister and the former Health Secretary that the NHS would not be on the table in any Trump deals. This deal does put it on the table, because it has consequences not just for the supply of drugs, but for investment in the NHS and decision making about what our constituents can access. It relates not only to what level of drugs they can access, but—if there are reductions in other expenditure—to whether they will get access to a GP or A&E, or get the care services for which we have been advocating for quite a while.

I thank the people who have been providing us with briefings on this issue, such as Global Justice Now and Just Treatment, which I have worked with over the years. They want to engage in the debate with the Government and to bring their expertise to the table, so I would welcome a commitment from the Minister to bring in those organisations before we move forward with implementation. This is my worry and that of those I have worked with: Kamran Abbasi, the editor of *The British Medical Journal*, has said that the deal

“will end up harming vulnerable people to boost the profits of already obscenely profitable drug companies.”

I do not want to support a deal that does that.

5.50 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This debate should have taken place long before a deal was signed, and the fact that we are having it months afterwards shows that there is still no transparency.

Last December, the pharma and health tech deal was signed, and it was made clear that money would have to be taken out of the Department of Health while the Government were trying to solve a Treasury problem. As we have heard, that problem was the trade deal with the US and the wider relationship. The big question that has not been answered is this: if we are going to take money out to fund this deal—we have heard that from 0.3% to 0.6% of GDP will be spent on pharma—where are the cuts going to fall? Research shows that excess deaths will result.

We also know that at the same time as paying more, we will get a lower rebate—down from 25% to 14.5%—so VPAG will be more expensive. As a result, we will be paying more for our drugs and getting less back. In developing countries, which benefit from the way the health system works, the toll will be even more significant. As NICE changes its relationship and its function, and of course does not have the independence it was set up to have, there will ultimately be more flexibility for Ministers to make determinations about drugs.

Not only will there be a cumulative cost of £2.6 billion by the end of 2028, but that is estimated to go up to £44.7 billion. That is why we need to see the impact assessment—so that the Government can prove to us that that is not the case. Of course, for every £1 billion cut from budgets, £118 million is cut from social care. That leads on to the excess deaths, which will depend on where those cuts fall. We obviously want the Government to be transparent with us, because this is about the lives of our constituents. The data shows that there will be 229,000 excess deaths by 2033. That is almost double the number of deaths during covid. However, putting everything together, the figure could be as high as 291,000 excess deaths. Exactly which of our constituents are going to pay the price for this deal?

NICE itself predicts that the benefit will bring only between two and five additional drug approvals annually, so for very little gain we could be paying an exceedingly high price. One of my biggest fears is that the ratchet of the focus of the US on the NHS, which it has always had, will draw the drug companies in even closer, and if another party gets control of our NHS, it could well fall into the hands of the US. We need that impact assessment, we need transparency and we need to protect lives.

5.53 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I, too, thank the Chair of the Select Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) for securing this debate, and I, too, wish we had more time. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Somerset (Sadik Al-Hassan), who made some difficult, but really important points.

This is a timely debate, because pharmaceuticals are core both to supporting a healthier population and to delivering economic growth. The main estimates memorandum outlines an expectation of just under £2 billion of R&D expenditure over the coming year from the DHSC, which is roughly equal to the figure in the previous estimates, and I welcome that.

Of course, private investment also plays a significant role in drug development. That is why I am so pleased to see increasing confidence from the private sector in the UK as an environment in which to do impactful research. Last month, we saw AstraZeneca commit £300 million in investment across the UK, after this Government's work to agree a pharmaceutical deal with the US enabled that investment. However, there is much more to do to create a regulatory environment that encourages investment into clinical research in the UK. I encourage the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology to consider simplifying and consolidating our regulatory landscape.

I am not here to criticise our regulators, who I believe do a very good job in their respective roles. I have regular engagement with research scientists, universities and professional bodies through my work as chair of the all-party parliamentary group known as the Parliamentary and Scientific Committee. This is the oldest APPG, which was established in 1939 to better connect scientists and parliamentarians in the interests of better policy. The overwhelming message is that, actually, regulators get it and want to enable research and growth, not hinder it, but that the overall landscape is just so complex that approvals are taking far longer than they need to.

In a contribution to the King's Speech debate last month, I listed a range of regulators: the MHRA, NICE, the Health and Safety Executive, the Human Tissue Authority, the Health Research Authority, the Human Fertilisation and Embryology Authority, the Animals in Science Regulation Unit, and so on. That is just too many regulators and that is not even all of them. I very much hope the Government will use the upcoming regulating for growth Bill to look at how to reduce overlap and streamline the environment. Having to get so many decisions slows down research and innovation enormously, particularly when researchers have to apply for clearance from them sequentially in most cases, rather than in tandem, stretching the overall timeline.

I propose another solution. Why do we not create a single front door for study approvals: a unified application process that collects all the information that different regulators might need, so that researchers can fill in one form, and a team of recruited staff whose job it is to liaise with all the regulators, establish who needs to approve the individual study in question and pass along the information necessary, ideally in tandem rather than each approval being sequential and relying on the last?

I hope the Minister will take some of those ideas on board. There are many reasons to be optimistic. The UK has been, and in many areas still is, a world leader in drug development. Let us keep building on that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, who I thank for agreeing to make a very short speech.

5.56 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Today we are being asked to approve a motion on the main estimates for the Department of Health and Social Care for 2026-27, in which pharmaceutical spending is not separately identified, in either the estimate or its accompanying memorandum. We are being asked to approve spending without clear visibility of exactly how much is budgeted for medicines. That is against the principle of estimates day, which is to scrutinise spending before it is authorised.

This is yet another example of the lack of transparency around the murky UK-US pharmaceutical deal. It was drawn up in secret and the Government are refusing to publish the impact assessment. The Government must be clear on how much is budgeted for medicines, how much they expect the deal to cost and the risks to the frontline associated with diverting money from elsewhere in the NHS.

The UK-US pharmaceutical deal should never have been allowed to go ahead. The deal will see the NHS paying out at least £1.5 billion more in higher medicine costs by 2028, rising to over £9 billion by 2036. The Government have made it clear that there will be no additional money to fund that over the next spending period. That means frontline NHS services will be plundered at the behest of a foreign Government, while patients suffer in cramped hospital corridors and cannot get a GP appointment.

We must support the British life sciences sector. We can find ways to achieve that, but it must be a domestic matter for the UK Government to solve holistically through negotiations with the sector. It should not be dictated from Washington. The Government refused to publish an assessment of the impact of the deal. What are they trying to hide? The bottom line is that medicine procurement should be based on sovereign health needs. This is not a matter of being pro or anti the pharmaceutical industry. We need to find a solution that works for patients, the NHS and the life sciences sector.

Rather than defund vital NHS services in a knee-jerk deal, the Liberal Democrats would take real action to strengthen our life sciences sector by: developing a long-term plan with the sector to ensure certainty on issues such as VPAG—the Voluntary Scheme for Branded Medicines Pricing and Access—and rapid licensing by ensuring that the needs of our society are reflected in the approach of NICE and other regulatory bodies; promoting investment into upscaling UK life sciences manufacturing; encouraging investment in vaccine, medicine and antibiotic medicine manufacturing plants; reviewing the relationship between research and development tax credits and manufacturing; and establishing a fellowship programme for scientists working on health conditions, such as cancer, so they can continue the research Trump has defunded in the US. We would also cut the cost of visas for researchers, as well as boost R&D funding to

3.5% through a decade-long programme of public investment. Rather than spending billions to pay off a bully in the White House, the Liberal Democrats would oppose the deal, develop a plan for our life sciences that reflects our national interest and invest money in vital frontline services that are in dire need of funding. The Institute for Fiscal Studies has indicated that the deal could cost as much as £9 billion by 2036. That money would be transformative for so much of the NHS: it would end corridor care, hire thousands more staff, buy countless radiotherapy machines, or deliver high-quality care and help for elderly and disabled people.

Any choices over money spent in our NHS must be made by the British people, not Trump. It is unacceptable that Trump thinks he can meddle in our NHS, and, worse still, that the Prime Minister lets him. That is why the Liberal Democrats wrote to the Prime Minister in December, demanding that the deal was put before Parliament for a vote. If the Prime Minister cares as much about the NHS as he claims, I encourage him to set the record straight, show his true feelings on the deal and, at the very least, bring it before the House for approval.

This House, and the voters who elected us, decide matters of national importance, not the White House. That is why the Liberal Democrats tabled new clause 76 to the Health Bill, which would bring the deal before the House for a vote. Any deal that diverts billions of pounds away from NHS frontline services must be subject to democratic process and parliamentary scrutiny.

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

6 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I will dispense with the formalities to jump straight in. The hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran) asked whether the Government have a clear, funded and transparent plan. Simply put, the Government appear to have made commitments they cannot properly explain, cannot fully cost, and cannot tell Parliament how they intend to pay for.

We are of course talking about the UK-US pharmaceutical arrangement, which will see 0.3% of GDP in 2026, rising to at least 0.6% by 2036—or an overall medicine spend of 10% to 12% of the UK NHS budget by 2036. That may bring benefits and investment, it may avoid tariffs, and it may help some patients get treatment faster, but those benefits do not remove the three key basic questions: what will this cost, how will it be funded, and what will the NHS have to forgo as a consequence? Those questions remain unanswered, which is a running theme from this Government.

Since Labour took office in July 2024, the pharmaceutical sector has issued a serious set of stark warnings. In January 2025, AstraZeneca cancelled its £450 million expansion near Liverpool, citing as a factor in the decision

“the timing and reduction of the final offer compared to the previous Government’s proposal”.

However, that was not isolated. In March 2025, the leaders of some of the UK’s biggest pharmaceutical companies warned that the country risked becoming “uninvestable”. That warning turned into decisions, with MSD cancelling its plans for a £1 billion research centre in London, Eli Lilly pausing its work on the Gateway Labs hub,

and Sanofi saying that it would not make substantial UK R&D investment until it saw appropriate recognition of the value of innovation.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Given that there are so many unanswered questions and such little information, rather than estimates day, wouldn’t the better name for this debate be “a complete stab in the dark” day?

Dr Evans: Or guesstimates day, for want of a better pun. That is part of the problem. If the Government are so confident, why do they not produce the impact report so that they can justify this? At the end of the day, we have seen that those decisions are not isolated; they are different companies, making different decisions, but all with the same concern. It is a pattern: tax rises, more regulation, more red tape—a more toxic concoction.

The Government will say that the deal is part of the answer, but Ministers cannot point to potential benefits while avoiding certain costs. The House of Commons Library is clear that the Department’s main estimate for 2026-27 does not include budget cover to meet the expected increase in pharmaceutical spending associated with the UK-US arrangement. That is the central problem. The Government say that the total cost in the current spending review period is expected to be around £1 billion, but the former Minister, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), also said,

“Total costs over the Spending Review period are expected to be approximately £1 billion. The final costs will depend on which medicines NICE recommends and the actual uptake of these.”

That is an important admission, because the final cost depends on future NICE decisions and uptake, and other estimates are higher.

The Library briefing cites analysis suggesting that spending could be around £1.7 billion by the end of 2028, and around £14 billion by 2036, depending on the assumptions. Is the £1 billion the central estimate, and if so, what are the lower and higher ends of the estimate range? Why will the Government not publish the modelling so that we can see? My next question is even sharper: where is the money coming from? We know from leaked WhatsApp messages that Labour MPs have been asking who they can tax to pay for benefits, so where is the money coming from? Both the House and the public are right to ask.

The Government have said that additional costs will be funded from existing NHS budgets, with future funding settled at the next spending review. However, if the money is coming from existing NHS budgets, it is coming from somewhere within the NHS. It might be the workforce, services, capital or future growth, but it will not be cost free. As Jonathan Benger, the chief executive of NICE, put it,

“If they choose to spend money on defence, they’ve got to pay for that somehow, either by raising taxes or removing money from somewhere else. If they choose to spend money more on medicines, similarly, that has to be paid for.”

That is the reality.

The former Secretary of State told the House that the Government would not cut NHS budgets to fund the pharma deal, but the former Health Minister, the hon. Member for Glasgow South West, later turned around and said:

“The deal will be funded by allocations made at the Spending Review, where record funding for the NHS was secured. Future funding will be settled at the next Spending Review.”

[Dr Luke Evans]

Those statements need reconciling. If it is funded from NHS allocations, that is NHS money. Can the Minister rule out any cuts from the frontline?

Finally, I will turn to transparency. I want to point out that the UK-US pharmaceutical arrangement is not a treaty-based free trade agreement. It has not been through the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process. We have not seen what is going on. The Government need to publish their impact assessment, and yet they cite commercial sensitivity. Of course, there is a way round that: the Minister could redact it and give that to the Committee so that we and this House can see what is going on.

I will cut my speech short there. I will simply pose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Very quickly, shadow Minister. Ten seconds.

Dr Evans: What is the policy's true cost? How will it be paid for? What will be displaced in the NHS to make it happen?

6.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): I will try to answer all the questions that have been put to me in the short time I have. First, I am grateful for the contributions made by hon. Members, and I thank the Chair of the Health and Social Care Committee, the hon. Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for securing this debate.

The UK-US pharmaceuticals arrangement is an important step forward for patient access to innovation and the future of our life sciences sector. This arrangement is fundamentally about patients by ensuring that they can benefit from life-changing medicines as they are developed, rather than see the UK being left behind. We have already seen the benefit from those changes, with NICE approving life-changing treatments such as vorasidenib, a brain cancer drug for patients as young as 12.

The UK's life sciences sector is one of our greatest national strengths. It saves lives, supports jobs and underpins innovation across our economy. I am proud that thanks to this arrangement, the United Kingdom will be the only country in the world to have secured a commitment to tariff-free access for pharmaceutical exports into the United States.

The Chair of the Committee raised NICE and VPAG changes and rebates. My right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) also raised a number of issues, as did my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell). I will address them now.

The joint Government and industry taskforce has been discussing the options for continuing to evolve our system to ensure that we maximise benefits to patients and the economy. It will make recommendations on pilot programmes as per the UK-US arrangement commitment, and I look forward to providing an update to the Committee on that in due course.

I know there has been concern that these changes undermine NICE's independence, but that is not the case—let me just be clear about that. NICE will continue

to make its recommendations based on evidence, clinical effectiveness and value for money, free from political interference. The change will allow Ministers to set the overall threshold within which NICE operates, not to determine individual decisions. This will preserve NICE's core role as an independent evaluator, while ensuring that the framework that it uses reflects how we value innovation and patient benefit.

Concerns were also raised about the fact that the UK commitments are larger than the US commitments, but I do not agree. The UK has made policy changes to improve access for patients, while the US has committed to tariff protection for UK exports, which is significant given the scale of that market. The commitments deliver improved patient access in the UK and protection for UK exports.

Dr Luke Evans: Will the Minister give way?

Preet Kaur Gill: I am trying to get through all these questions as quickly as I can. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman shortly.

On the VPAG changes and rebates, alongside changes to NICE recommendations, the arrangement affects how pricing and repayment mechanisms operate through the voluntary scheme for branded medicines pricing, access and growth. To ensure predictability for the industry going forwards, given the unexpectedly high payment percentage for newer medicines for 2025, the Government have committed to ensuring that future VPAG rates do not exceed 15%. This will support life sciences investment and patient access to medicines while ensuring that the scheme can continue to work for both industry and the NHS, keeping the medicines budget sustainable. I look forward to engaging with the sector on the future of the voluntary scheme, with negotiations due to begin next year informed by the outcomes or interim findings from pilot programmes that were launched as early as this September.

Dr Evans: The Minister would save a lot of time simply by publishing the impact assessment, which would answer every one of the questions that she is trying to find the answers to in her folder, so will she—yes or no?

Preet Kaur Gill: With respect, I am going to answer the questions that have been put to me by many hon. Members, and I am coming to the impact assessment.

We have been clear that the estimated short-term impact is around £1 billion in England over the spending review period. Costs will increase over time as NICE approves more medicines, but precise long-term costs cannot be modelled as a single figure; they depend on future medicines, NICE approvals, uptake and wider commercial developments.

Members mentioned a number of figures. I do not recognise the £9 billion and £14 billion figures for costs. Spending on innovative medicines increases year on year as new treatments become available, so underlining growth would be expected to continue regardless of this arrangement, and often the figures cited publicly do not take that into account. We are committed to increasing spending on medicines as a proportion of NHS spend, ending the recent decline in the proportion of health spend dedicated to medicines and increasing spending on innovative medicines to 0.6% of GDP.

The Chair of the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah), and my hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) raised a really important point. Life sciences is one of our most productive sectors. It underpins research and development, clinical trials and high-value manufacturing, and it supports jobs across the country. Over £1 billion in industry investment has already been secured since the announcement of this arrangement in December last year. That includes AstraZeneca's recent announcement of a £300 million investment into R&D sites at Cambridge and Macclesfield. That demonstrates the confidence that this key sector has in the UK. Maintaining a strong commercial environment helps ensure continued investment and the development of new treatments. This is not separate from patient benefit. It enables the pipeline of the new medicines that NHS patients ultimately rely on.

Layla Moran: I am frustrated, because everything the Minister is saying is in the press release. Can she please answer the question? Will the Government release the impact assessment? If they will not, will they at least allow a Select Committee to see it confidentially?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We are running out of time. Minister, please respond as briefly as you can.

Preet Kaur Gill: I recognise the Committee's request for the impact assessment, but the analysis is scenario-based, contains commercially sensitive assumptions and remains linked to live policy development. Officials should be able to produce confidential advice for Ministers to inform trade and other negotiations, and we will not apologise for maintaining such confidentially where doing so is in the national interest.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Layla Moran to wind up the debate briefly, in under a minute.

Layla Moran: I am happy not to.

Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

Department for Work and Pensions

[Relevant documents: First Report of the Work and Pensions Committee, Employment support for disabled people: Connect to Work, HC 77; Oral evidence taken before the Work and Pensions Committee on 17 June, on the Work of the Department for Work and Pensions, HC 317; Correspondence from the Department for Work and Pensions Permanent Secretary to the Work and Pensions Committee, on Department for Work and Pensions Supplementary Estimate 2025/26, reported to the House on 15 April, Session 2024-26.]

Motion made, and Question proposed,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £107,094,729,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £649,416,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £107,012,572,000, 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 (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee to open the debate. As we are very short of time, I would be incredibly grateful if your speech was short.

6.13 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing this debate. The Department for Work and Pensions supports nearly 23 million people and spends around £300 billion each year—around £1 in every £5 of Government spending. Some £164 billion is spent on pensions and pension-age benefits—a third more than the more-frequently-criticised spending on working-age benefits and on children—which has come under growing pressure from an ageing population.

Debate about that spending has at times been framed in stark terms, but understanding people's lives makes clear just how essential this support is. My Committee has consistently argued that, alongside efficiency, the system must treat claimants with dignity and respect, yet too many report experiencing the opposite. Improvements will only come if the Department is open, honest and willing to learn.

The estimate seeks nearly £14 billion of additional resource, with much of that reflecting demand-led need. The central question is not just about cost, but whether the system is fair, timely and trusted. Reducing support at individual level is not cost-free: cuts to disabled people's support in 2017 increased poverty and poor mental health without improving employment outcomes, and of course there are wider costs to the NHS and public services. Investment matters. Evidence suggests that reducing inactivity among young and disabled people by 5% could yield £20 billion, and that there are strong returns from employment support programmes, such as Connect to Work. Preventive investment is key.

What should the House test? The Secretary of State has spoken of shifting from administering benefits to transforming lives, and we welcome that ambition, but delivery depends on cross-Government action and effective local implementation. This is not just about the DWP.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): As my hon. Friend is talking about local implementation, I will pay tribute to what is being done in Harlow, and particularly at Harlow college, through programmes to support people who are not in education, employment or training. That is really paying dividends.

Debbie Abrahams: I am grateful for that intervention; long may that work continue.

About one in eight young people are not in work, education or training. That is more than a million young people. It is the first time since 2013 that we have seen figures on that level. Ill health, and especially mental ill health, is a major driver of that. While programmes such as Connect to Work are welcome, with funding of around £820 million, they appear to be modest, relative to the scale of the challenge. The Government's plans may support up to 90,000 young people into work, but that is still only a fraction of what is needed. The key test is outcomes—how many people move into sustained work.

The accounts of the Department for Work and Pensions remain qualified, due to fraud and error amounting to nearly £10 billion in overpayments. Service quality issues persist; there are communication failures, discrimination findings and serious backlogs. The carer's allowance overpayment scandal caused profound distress, and Access to Work delays are unacceptable. These are not marginal issues; they affect whether support reaches people fairly and on time. For the DWP, value for money must include timeliness, accuracy and trust.

The most egregious failings relate to safeguarding. Last year alone, the Department undertook 90 internal reviews, including following claimant deaths and serious harm to claimants. Since 2010, there have been 10 prevention of future death reports from coroners warning that the systems must change. Our Committee has described the safeguarding approach as deficient. While some progress has been made, it remains too slow. Incremental change is just not good enough.

Machinery of government changes and local delivery models risk blurring accountability, so while local flexibility is important and place-based approaches are essential, outcomes must be consistent. Parliament must be able to see clearly who is responsible for delivery.

The overarching issue is the lack of a clear link between spending plans and outcomes. While improvements have been made, scrutiny is weakened when Parliament cannot see how success will be measured. A clearer, strategic plan linking spending to measurable outcomes is essential.

The debate is not about whether social security spending is necessary—it clearly is—but whether a Department spending £300 billion is using resources effectively, fairly and transparently. I would be grateful if the Minister answered three questions in her response. What outcomes will this spending deliver? How will progress be measured? Who is accountable if delivery fails? The challenge is to show that the estimate is aligned with the scale of the problem, operationally credible and capable of delivering services with dignity and respect. Finally, I thank my Clerk and all his team for their excellent support for the Committee.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It gives me huge pleasure to invite the new MP for Aberdeen South to make his maiden speech.

6.18 pm

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a pleasure to make my maiden speech today. I thank all hon. Members from across the Chamber for their best wishes. I give my best wishes to the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Lara Bird) for her upcoming maiden speech.

The people of Aberdeen South have once again chosen a Conservative and Unionist to represent them here in Westminster. It is an honour to be here, and a responsibility that I take very seriously. I am grateful for and humbled by the trust that the people of Aberdeen have placed in me. The by-election victory was the result of the hard work of hundreds of volunteers, without whom I would not be standing here. Unlike another recent by-election, the campaign in Aberdeen South was not focused on one man's job, but on the thousands of jobs in our oil and gas sector.

With almost 50% of the votes cast in my favour, the people of Aberdeen have made their voices heard loud and clear—clear enough to echo around the Palace of Westminster and Holyrood alike. The people of Aberdeen have had enough of the wilful destruction of the oil and gas industry, of their jobs and of the local economy. This win is a clear mandate from the people of Aberdeen to the Labour Government in Westminster and the SNP Government in Holyrood to act now to save our North sea oil and gas industry.

It would be remiss of me not to pay tribute to my predecessors in Aberdeen South. As an Aberdeen loon, for many years I was represented by the trailblazing Dame Ann Begg. In her maiden speech, she remarked on the transience of the Members for Aberdeen South, a seat held almost equally by Labour and Scottish Conservative Members throughout the 20th century. That transience is captured by another of my predecessors, Priscilla Buchan—Lady Tweedsmuir—who, like me, came to the House through a by-election. She was elected in 1946. A pioneer of women in political office, she was the youngest MP in the House of Commons at the time. She was a formidable force, having initially lost in Aberdeen North, and then winning in South the following year. In her maiden speech, made in a debate on the economic situation, she warned of

“the growing feeling of nationalism, due to the Government's policy of centralised control.”—[*Official Report*, 11 March 1947; Vol. 434, c. 1194.]

It says much that, almost a century later, the people of Aberdeen South are grappling with the very same issues. The divisive force of nationalism still seeks to set us apart, but we on the Conservative Benches know the enduring value of our United Kingdom.

Most recently, I succeeded the right honourable Stephen Flynn, who I am delighted has chosen to take up a seat in Holyrood. Without his decision, and his dedication to his career, I would not be standing here today. We were councillors together on Aberdeen city council, and we have both now sat in Westminster and Holyrood. I sincerely wish him well. Stephen understands the value of oil and gas to Aberdeen, and I am sure that, now in government, he will press the First Minister to get off the fence and finally defend our oil and gas industry. I have known Stephen for a number of years. He now has the tough job of Scottish Transport Secretary.

I look forward to firing off the letters asking for updates on transport projects that affect my constituents in Aberdeen South.

It was while I was at Aberdeen city council that I learned the cut and thrust of politics. I remember my time fondly as the co-leader alongside Jenny Laing, the daughter of the former Member for Oldham East, Jim Lamond. I am grateful to her and to all those I worked with on the council. It serves as a reminder of the importance of building bridges and consensus to deliver for our constituents.

Aberdeen has a rich history of reinvention, from fishing to textiles to oil and gas. The silver city with the golden sands has been a cornerstone of Scotland's success for centuries, and it has changed and evolved more than most. Today, energy plays the critical role in the city's prosperity, with thousands of my constituents being among the most highly skilled workers in the industry. I am immensely proud to represent them. So too is it a privilege to represent so many distinctive parts of the city, from the great south harbour at Torry to Hazlehead Park, where the Piper Alpha memorial stands. That memorial is a testament to the dangerous, demanding work that our oil and gas workers carry out, week in, week out, for the benefit of the whole of the United Kingdom—because energy security is national security. It is too easy to forget the sacrifices, large and small, made by the sector so that the rest of us can enjoy the benefits of modern life.

I am sure that my time here will be judged not just on the basis of how I can help constituents with their issues, or the quality of the legislation that we pass. My time here will be judged by how loudly and firmly I can make the case for our oil and gas workers. It is the privilege of my life to represent my city—a city that thousands of oil and gas workers call home—and I will spend every day repaying the trust of the people of Aberdeen who have placed me here.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): It now gives me huge pleasure to invite the new MP for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry to make her maiden speech. I call Lara Bird.

6.25 pm

Lara Bird (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and congratulations to the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) on his maiden speech.

I may be new to this Chamber, but I stand here as a young woman whose adult life has been shaped by the politics of this place. I marched against Brexit. I protested in Dundee against the Conservatives' cruel policies and, in 2014, as an outspoken 16-year-old, my whole world focused around advocating for Scottish independence. I have never been the type to keep my opinions to myself, so I became a voice for the youngest generation who were able to vote in that referendum. It was that campaigning in Dundee that taught me to have confidence in myself and conviction in my beliefs, and to stand up for the future that I wanted to see. Twelve years on, the Yes city is still very much alive and kicking—a city where the old, the young, the loud and the quiet all continue to champion our cause of independence.

In fact, it was in Dundee, in Douglas, where I recently met a young SNP activist who reminds me a lot of my former self. Erin Nicholson is 16, and when I met her, she was so excited to vote for the first time in the Scottish parliamentary elections. Motivated by independence, angry about Brexit and deeply invested in our nation's politics, Erin is exactly who I am standing here for today: for the young people who have grown up in the shadow of Tory austerity and Labour's broken promises, and who have a vision of hope for Scotland; for the young women who deserve to take up space in our nation's conversation; and for the new generation in Scotland who now deserve to have their say. Erin and her peers, despite voting in the last Scottish parliamentary elections, were only four at the time of the independence referendum. If the Secretary of State for Scotland is listening, that sounds like a generation to me.

My constituency might be called Arbroath and Broughty Ferry, but our community is so much more than that. It is Douglas, Whitfield, Fintry, Monikie, Letham, Friockheim, Carnoustie, Monifieth and everywhere in between. And it is not just Dundee that made me who I am today. I am proud to have grown up in Angus with a Scottish father and an English mother, and I think it is a little more than ironic how much consternation that fact seems to have generated from some so-called Unionists this week. Growing up in Angus, none of my friends ever cared about my accent. We were only concerned about what flavour ice cream we would get from the famous Visocchi's in the Ferry, and about whether we chose to go swimming in East Haven or Lunan Bay. As we got older, the decisions centred around whether we preferred the Ship or the Fisherman's Tavern, which is a hard choice, as the Ferry has unarguably the best pubs in Scotland.

I loved growing up in Angus, not least because Angus is famous for its centrality to Scotland's proud history. It was here that the immortal words of the declaration of Arbroath were written:

"As long as a hundred of us remain alive, never will we on any conditions be subjected to the lordship of the English. It is in truth not for glory, nor riches, nor honours that we are fighting, but for freedom alone, which no honest man gives up but with life itself".

The declaration is one of the subjects that I remember being most excited to study in primary school, so perhaps I was inclined to a politics of independence and freedom from a young age.

I could not speak about Angus without mentioning our world-renowned farmers and fishers, who are famed not just for Arbroath smokies but for creating the berry capital of these islands. And with apologies to my Aberdeenshire colleagues, Angus beef is the best quality in Scotland, which obviously means the best in the whole of the UK. To me, Angus is defined by the generosity and hard work of the people who live here—traits that you see as soon as you step foot in Arbroath. A community that has faced economic adversity but remains optimistic, Arbroath is a place where businesses like the Bell Rock and Lord Rubin's are daring to do something different and willing to bet on Arbroath, where the community is resilient and the people are open.

Before I finish, I must pay tribute to my predecessor, Stephen Gethins. Anyone who had the privilege of working with Stephen will know that while there were many causes that he championed, there was one matter

[Lara Bird]

that he spoke about more than most: a quick search of *Hansard* tells me that Stephen Gethins said the word “Brexit” more times in this Chamber than almost anyone else. As I once overheard someone describe him in the Ferry, “He’s that lovely, smiley lad who really cares about Ukraine.” Stephen was a phenomenal representative for our community. Committed to public service, he came to each debate with grace, grit and a fierce determination to see Scotland back in the European Union. As a proud believer in Scotland’s place in the EU and as a member of the international community in its own right, I intend to carry on that part of his legacy.

I am here to show young people in my community that they should not be afraid of the backlash or resistance that they might be met with. If you believe in a better future for Scotland, for our home, whatever that belief might be, there is a place for you. Regardless of what you look like, how you sound, and no matter your background or accent, your voice is valid and important. It can be daunting, but you should never be afraid to be who you are—your hair, tattoos, clothes or boots do not define you. There will always be those who look for an easy opportunity to tear you down, so you must have courage in yourself and stand your ground. Find others who lift you up, and be proud of your differences. Be proud to speak your mind, and do not be afraid to do things your own way.

To all the folk in Arbroath and Broughty Ferry, to the young women in particular, and to Erin, you have my word that I will always stand up for you. I will lift you up. You are an inspiration to me, and I hope to do you all proud.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Back Benchers now have a time limit of two and a half minutes.

6.31 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): I pay huge tribute to our two new Members of Parliament, the hon. Members for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) and for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Lara Bird), for their maiden speeches.

I will talk about something that makes up a relatively small part of the DWP’s operations and its spending, but that has an enormous impact on children’s lives. One of the four core aims for the Department set out by the Secretary of State, and clearly stated in the main estimates, is to

“Tackle child poverty and hardship, ensuring financial security for all”.

The Child Maintenance Service exists to ensure that separated parents have enough money for their children, but all too often it does not manage to do that. Being a child of divorced parents myself, I know how upsetting and difficult the issue of maintenance can be and how it can be scarring for children, making the separation of parents even harder. That is why I back the Government’s plans to improve the service, so that it does a better job of bringing children out of poverty.

The Government have promised to move everyone from direct pay to collect and pay, as well as to cut the fees on collect and pay, allowing more families to transition to a system in which a third party ensures that the parent who looks after the child actually gets the money.

Stronger enforcement on non-payment and better systems to accurately assess income, including when the paying parent is self-employed, would save the Government money.

The changes that the Government want to make require minimal funding, but would lift 20,000 children out of poverty. That would help us to make meaningful progress on two of the Government’s core commitments: tackling violence against women and girls and ending child poverty.

6.33 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Right now, it is hard to get through a day without someone, somewhere, saying that welfare spending is ballooning out of control. For example, the Conservatives’ alternative King’s Speech tells us:

“For the first time ever, the total welfare bill is now higher than total receipts from income tax.”

Western civilisation is at an end, it seems—until we realise that it is not the first time at all. It has been that way for 13 years, most of them under the Conservatives. Then we discover that the ratio is about to go into reverse: for the next few years, welfare is forecast to be lower than income tax receipts—panic over, then. Remarkably, as a percentage of GDP, the amount we spend on welfare today is roughly the same as it was under Maggie Thatcher 40 years ago. Today’s welfare bill is simply not the cause of our economic problems, and neither can it be the sole solution.

Although moral panic is an overreaction, we should not relax. Cost control is always crucial, so long as we understand that today’s budget pressure is less to do with welfare and more to do with NHS demand and a general weakness in the economy. “New benefit claimants are suffering from mild anxiety,” we are told, “The need isn’t real. Why don’t they just man up?” The neat thing about this angle is that we can be mean to people in need but still feel good about ourselves. But this is a misreading of the data. Most claimants have more than one condition. If a claimant who cannot walk also has mild anxiety, they are counted only in the mild anxiety column. It is a false characterisation of a scrounger culture, and that itself is part of the reason we never fix things. Most attempts to cut the benefits bill fail. They hardly ever save as much money as they were supposed to and they can even end up costing more than they save.

I fully recognise the need to control costs and that a healthy economy is the root of a healthy benefit system, but basing national policy around the minority of claimants who do not want to help themselves is the surest way never to fix our benefit system.

6.35 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): Our social security system acts as the bedrock of our welfare state, but for years, the safety net it was meant to provide has developed more and more holes through which some of our most vulnerable citizens have fallen. For our older generation, the state pension is absolutely the foundation on which a decent retirement can be built. The interim report of the new Pensions Commission explains that 50% of working age adults are under-saving, that pensioner poverty is persistent and that the state pension represents three quarters of income in retirement for the lowest income groups, and that is set to grow. The fact is that if

someone is low paid when they are at work, they will have an inadequate pension in retirement. That is why we need to acknowledge the importance of the triple lock, which has been key to raising the incomes of some of our poorest pensioners, and why we need to see it continue. I cannot talk about pensions without calling again for those women born in the 1950s who were unaware of the changes to their state pension age to receive some form of compensation.

Much has been said about the need to get young people into work, but the "Pathways to Work" Green Paper proposed removing eligibility for work-related disability benefits, known as the universal credit health element, from disabled people who are under 22. We know that 94% of households with a young person claiming UC health would be in poverty if that support were cut. Abandoning the cut would make it clear that this Government are here to help people get on, not punish them for the barriers they may face.

The protection offered by our social security system should be there to ensure that no one in need falls through the gaps. That is the mark of a compassionate society and something we should be proud to advance.

6.37 pm

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I congratulate both hon. Members who gave their maiden speeches a few moments ago.

We know that the outgoing Prime Minister wanted to cut welfare spending—or at least he did a year ago when he brought forward some pretty rough and ready proposals to cut it by £5 billion—but, of course, his plans withered in the chill winds of the Labour Back Benches and the Minister literally tore up the proposals at the Dispatch Box during that debate. The messiah from Makerfield may be here in just a few weeks' time, but he faces the same Back Benchers in this place, and that same environment within the Labour party exists even if the new Prime Minister actually wants to do something about the welfare bill.

The situation we find ourselves in today is that youth unemployment—among those aged 16 to 24—is over 16%, which is 729,000 people. Those not in employment, education or training stand at nearly 1 million. That is not good for them, it is not good for the economy and, crucially, it leads to the welfare bill that we have today.

The Government's response to their failure to get their legislation through their own Back Benchers a year ago was to put the questions to the Timms review. But of course, the Timms review is there to consider, in the words of the Prime Minister and the Government, "fair and fit for the future"

funding for personal independence payment. It does not have a remit to look at future savings and reductions in the spending on PIP, so the aspiration has gone. The Milburn review into youth unemployment makes it clear: we are not talking about getting young people back into work—six out of 10 are not in work and have never had a job.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The hon. Member is talking with great clarity about the number of young people who are no longer accessing the world of work, which we know can define people for the duration of their working career. Does he

lament, as I do, the catastrophic changes that the Chancellor has made to the hospitality sector, taxing them out of business and taxing young people out of a job? Does he agree that that will have a very long tail for an awful lot of people in the world of work?

Joe Robertson: I do agree with the hon. Member. Indeed, it is in the tourism sector that a lot of young people in my constituency and, I am sure, in his—and in constituencies up and down the country—find their first job. It is the flexibility in the tourism sector and the fact that there is work to do when young people have the time and want to do it that make it such an enabler. The changes to the rate of national insurance and the fact that it now applies to part-time working are major disincentives to work, as are the cliff-edge incentives for young people and, frankly, people of any age to remain on welfare.

Of course, the Government came into office without a plan to deal with those cliff edges, which inevitably develop over time. Any Government will bring in welfare reform—they should plan for it in opposition—but over time, loopholes and cliff edges emerge that were unintended. When a new Government come in, we expect to see them implement their plans for welfare reform. Of course, this Government had none. They tried to develop plans on the hoof, but failed to do it.

It is not just young people; more than 2 million people over the age of 50 but of working age are now not working either. Most of those people would like to work—they are looking for the opportunities and the Government support to help get them back into work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): That is the end of the Back-Bench contributions, so we now come to the Front Benchers. I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

6.41 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): There are 96,000 civil servants working for the DWP; it is very much a leviathan. Most of those that I have come across are incredibly committed individuals who are professional and want to do the best for their community. What a sad thing it is that it feels like they are lions led by donkeys.

When the Work and Pensions Committee has engaged with senior civil servants and the Secretary of State, it feels as if they are trying to wrestle a greased pig; there is a lack of grip and engagement with some of the challenges, and there are many moving parts in the DWP. When they come to wrestle the pig, it is disturbing that they then discover that the Chancellor has set them up to fail with the national insurance hike, which has sabotaged the opportunities for many young people who then end up NEET. It is also disturbing that there has been a failure to properly reform business rates and manage utility bills, which continue to be an issue, particularly for our hospitality sector.

There is much that I had hoped to cover in this speech, but I will cover just a couple of areas. Access to Work is a scheme that can result in real opportunities for people with disabilities or long-term illnesses. The Public Accounts Committee published a report on 12 June which highlighted that the target date for dealing with new Access to Work claims is five weeks, but it now takes up to 37 weeks. That puts people with disabilities

[Steve Darling]

and their employers in an invidious situation. Again, we need better tech to process claims, simpler systems and, as the Public Accounts Committee said, a firmer grip on the situation.

At the other end of the spectrum are the WASPI women—women who the Labour party campaigned with before the general election, made promises to and then promptly dropped like a hot potato. Labour Members said all the right things when the report came out—they even apologised—but they failed to deliver the compensation. WASPI women have again resorted to judicial review, but there need to be safeguards around the cost challenge that they face. The Government are failing to give those assurances. While it does not interfere with the judicial review, will the Minister give some assurances about the cost limitation for those campaigners? WASPI women deserve their day in court.

I would welcome the Minister commenting on what appear to be 130 job cuts at Cotswold House in Torquay, which were announced last week by the Department for Work and Pensions. There are alternative locations elsewhere in the country for those people, but there are none in Torquay. That is disturbing. The DWP took on new, young people at entry-level jobs only in March, yet a few short weeks later they are effectively on notice. They either have to move to Exeter or Plymouth to work or be out of a job. I look forward to the Minister's comments.

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

6.45 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I thank the Chair of the Work and Pensions Committee, the hon. Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for securing this debate. I offer my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) on a great Conservative gain and to the hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Lara Bird) on an SNP hold, and I congratulate them both on their maiden speeches. I welcome the opportunity to challenge the Minister on her Department's spending policies and performance.

We cannot pretend that welfare reform is not difficult to achieve. As the shadow Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately), said recently:

"When I speak to former Welfare Secretaries, I hear the same thing again and again. Welfare reform is hard. You will be hated." That is why we offered our support to the previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Leicester West (Liz Kendall), when she attempted to bring down the benefits bill, because it was the right thing to do.

Everyone is paying more in tax to pay benefits to others. That is not fair, and it needs to change. When it comes to our welfare system, we need to be clear what we want from it. The system should be there to help people when they fall into difficulty; at the same time, it should help the most vulnerable people in our society. There are many people who simply cannot work, and they must be protected. However, we have got to a state in which too many people are reliant on the benefits system.

Let us take a look at where we have got to today. When we left office, inflation was at 2%. Unemployment was at 4.1%, and youth unemployment was at 14%. Some 6.8 million people were claiming universal credit, and 3.5 million people were claiming personal independence payments. Twenty months later, after Labour came to power, inflation has risen to 2.8%. Unemployment has risen to 4.9%, and youth unemployment has risen to 16.2%. Some 7.9 million people are claiming universal credit, which is 1.1 million more people, and 3.9 million people are claiming PIP—that is 400,000 more people. That is unsustainable.

How have we got to this position? Part of it is down to the Government's policies around employment. The increase in employer national insurance contributions to 15% has added more costs to businesses. That means that many businesses have had to make redundancies and are hiring fewer people than before. That is especially affecting young people, hence why we now have higher youth unemployment than the European average. That is not a good thing after 20 months in power. At the same time, the Government introduced the Employment Rights Act 2025, adding even more costs and complexities to businesses. These costs to businesses are estimated at £5 billion.

When the Minister closes the debate, I am sure she will talk about the increased funding in apprenticeships, which is of course welcome. It is all well and good increasing funding for apprenticeships and employment, but it is ultimately pointless if there are no jobs available. That is what this Government seem to fail to understand. This is a crisis of their own making, and they are putting their head in the sand and pretending it is all fine. As the Leader of the Opposition has said, if it is all fine, why is the Prime Minister resigning?

When it comes to welfare specifically, we are at a point where more than half of all households are net beneficiaries of benefits. Again, that is unsustainable. The Government had the chance to reduce the benefits bill, and the Leader of the Opposition pledged our party's support in doing that. However, the Government could not face down their own Back Benchers, so we are left waiting for the Timms review of PIP to report in the autumn, which may not even suggest making the necessary savings we should all make on PIP.

In this year alone, PIP will cost the Department an extra £3.5 billion, and universal credit will cost nearly £9 billion extra. If we stay on this trajectory, the health and disability-related benefits bill could reach nearly £100 billion by the end of this Parliament. We should be acting now; instead, we are left with dither and delay.

Finally, we need to talk about fraud, which is becoming ever more pervasive—the National Audit Office found that it cost the public sector between £55 billion and £81 billion in 2023-24. That figure continues to increase year on year, so there is a real need to tackle fraud and ensure that public money is allocated correctly.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mark Garnier: I am not going to give way, because I have very limited time—my apologies.

When it comes to fraud and error in the DWP specifically, the Department's own statistics estimate that around £9.9 billion is overpaid in benefits each year. Two thirds

of those overpayments are for universal credit claims, so I hope the Minister will explain why fraud and error are particularly high for universal credit claims and what steps are being taken. In 2017, there were 7,840 convictions for benefit fraud; last year, there were 461. That is a 94% decline in convictions, and fewer than 600 individuals have been convicted in total since the general election. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) that we should be making an example of benefit cheats in the courts to disincentivise others.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be delighted to hear that I am coming to the end of my speech. Under this Government, hard-working taxpayers are being asked to pay more. Many people would hope that that money would be going towards—for example—increasing the defence budget, but as this estimates day debate has highlighted, it is going to the DWP budget instead. The Government know that this is not right; indeed, the previous Secretary of State for Work and Pensions was right when she said that the Government

“must not...duck the big challenges facing this country”.—[*Official Report*, 1 July 2025; Vol. 770, c. 164.]

However, when it came to making the tough decisions, they bottled it every time. Maybe the next Government, led by the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), will do better. In his speech yesterday, he said that he would control the welfare bill, and told us to “imagine”. We on the Conservative Benches hope that his promises do not turn out to be imaginary.

6.51 pm

The Minister for Employment (Dame Diana Johnson):

I congratulate the Chair of the Select Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), on securing today's debate and on all the work that she and her Committee members do.

It has been a pleasure to hear not one but two maiden speeches this afternoon. I congratulate the hon. Member for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) on his excellent maiden speech. As a spokesperson for his party across several briefs during his time at Holyrood and as a former co-leader of Aberdeen city council, he brings extensive local knowledge to this place, and I wish him well in his career at Westminster. The hon. Member for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Lara Bird)—who has already made a splash at Westminster—made a powerful speech today, including telling us about her choices of ice cream and pubs in her constituency and of course referencing the famous Arbroath smokies and Angus beef. Despite the limited time I have available, I will try to address as many as possible of the points Members have made, but I apologise in advance if I do not get to them all. Of course, I will respond in writing if need be.

This debate has underlined that the DWP is a really important Department, supporting millions of people, and is the bedrock of our welfare state, which is the cornerstone of a civilised society. However, the welfare system must constantly change and adapt to the challenges and circumstances we find in this day and age. That is why we are recasting the welfare system to put work, skills and opportunity at its heart.

I will start by addressing some of the recent changes to the Department. First, as hon. Members know, the DWP has taken on responsibility for adult skills from the Department for Education. This change strongly links skills and employment support to create genuine pathways into rewarding careers, supporting economic growth. We have already seen the benefits of that; the youth guarantee and the growth and skills levy demonstrate the DWP's priority of tackling youth unemployment and investing in young people's futures.

Secondly, the DWP now hosts the child poverty unit, which was moved from the Cabinet Office in March, reflecting the Department's role as the centre of expertise for poverty policy and analysis. I reassure the House that we have ensured continuity of the cross-Government ministerial oversight of this important policy via the interministerial group on child poverty, which I am proud to co-chair and which will oversee delivery of the child poverty strategy. That strategy is all about maximising opportunity for young people and giving them the best start in life. That is why, as the centrepiece of our child poverty strategy, we have already removed the two-child limit in universal credit, which will lift more than half a million children out of poverty.

Thirdly, we have seen the introduction of our new crisis and resilience fund, which is about getting people help before a crisis hits, not just afterwards. We retain the policy responsibility in the Department and have worked hard with all our key partners, including councils, the Local Government Association and community and voluntary sector organisations. As has already been said, the funding has been transferred to the local government finance settlement in the Ministry for Housing, Communities and Local Government. We think that is the right approach to make the funding process simpler and easier for local authorities, which are ultimately entrusted with deciding how best to provide this financial support to their communities.

Supporting young people is the Department's top priority. More than a million young people are not in work, education or training, and the Milburn review estimates that for every £1 that the DWP spent on employment support for young people in 2024-25, around £25 was spent on benefits for young people. That is a bad deal for young people and for the taxpayer. By 2031, that number is already expected to reduce from £25 to £10. That is what more investment in opportunity looks like. We are creating a total of half a million opportunities for young people, backed by £2.5 billion of additional investment, including our youth guarantee to ensure that every young person gets the chance to earn or learn.

I will say a few words about employment support more generally. We are investing £3.5 billion in employment support for disabled people and those with long-term health conditions through our pathways to work offer. That includes Work Well and Connect to Work. I was pleased that the Select Committee recently produced a report on Connect to Work, and I was pleased to be in the Chamber for the Chair of the Select Committee's statement on it last week.

We are partnering with employers through the “Keep Britain Working” review to build healthier and more inclusive workplaces. We are building a new jobs and careers service, and I know that the Chair of the Select Committee in particular is following that development

[Dame Diana Johnson]

closely. I noted her comments on safeguarding and vulnerable customers. Alongside all that, we are rewiring the welfare system by changing the law so that claimants on sickness and disability benefits have the right to try work without the fear of automatically triggering a benefit reassessment. We also have the Timms review.

I want to put things into context on welfare spending. Since this time last year, we have 400,000 more people in employment and welfare spending as a percentage of GDP continues to be broadly stable, as it has been for many years. We have slowed the increase in the number of people coming into health and disability benefits, but that is where spending is increasing most. As the Secretary of State has said, we are not circling the wagons around the status quo; we are reforming the system. We are putting work, skills and opportunity at the heart of the system. We are building not just a welfare state, but a working state that is active, efficient and fit for the times in which we live; that rejects wasting talent and potential and writing people off; and that always asks how we can help people to move into good jobs and fulfil their potential.

6.58 pm

Debbie Abrahams: With the leave of the House, I congratulate the hon. Members for Arbroath and Broughty Ferry (Lara Bird) and for Aberdeen South (Douglas Lumsden) on their maiden speeches. I thank all the Back Benchers who have contributed to today's debate.

I wholeheartedly support what my right hon. Friend the Minister has said about how we can transform people's lives, and that is not necessarily by cutting individual support for vulnerable people. We must make sure that employment support provides an impetus for people, including young people and disabled people—there is still a 30% disability gap—and gives them opportunities. We can reduce social security spending by £20 billion by the end of this Parliament if we have some innovation and can do things at pace. *[Interruption.]* This has been a wonderful debate. I thank those who have contributed. The changes that were introduced in 2017 actually caused harm, and we do not want to introduce harm that will make things worse for people; we want to make things better, and much more supportive. Do I need to keep going, Madam Deputy Speaker?

Chris Vince: I wonder whether my hon. Friend would like to touch on a point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes). She was right to say that the Child Maintenance Service—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order.

7 pm

Debate interrupted, and Question deferred (Standing Order No. 54).

ESTIMATES 2026-27

CABINET OFFICE

Resolved,

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.

NORTHERN IRELAND OFFICE

Resolved,

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.

HOME OFFICE AND MINISTRY OF JUSTICE

Resolved,

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.

DEPARTMENT FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Department for Culture, Media and Sport:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £3,862,598,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £618,275,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £3,572,620,000, 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.

DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Department of Health and Social Care:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £108,291,452,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £7,899,179,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £115,924,112,000, 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.

DEPARTMENT FOR WORK AND PENSIONS

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027, for expenditure by the Department for Work and Pensions:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £107,094,729,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1855 of Session 2024-26,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £649,416,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £107,012,572,000, 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.

The Deputy Speaker then put the Questions on the outstanding Estimates (Standing Order No. 55).

MAIN ESTIMATES 2026-27

Resolved,

That, for the year ending with 31 March 2027:

(1) further resources, not exceeding £275,347,789,000, be authorised for use for current purposes as set out in HC 1752, HC 1793, HC 1812, HC 1815, HC 1855, and HC 1858 of Session 2024-26 and HC 204 of Session 2026-27,

(2) further resources, not exceeding £94,463,608,000, be authorised for use for capital purposes as so set out, and

(3) a further sum, not exceeding £251,898,299,000, 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.*)

Ordered, That a Bill be brought in upon the foregoing Resolutions;

That the Chairman of Ways and Means, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Lucy Rigby, Rachel Blake, Dan Tomlinson and Torsten Bell bring in the Bill.

SUPPLY AND APPROPRIATION (MAIN ESTIMATES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading

Dan Tomlinson accordingly presented a Bill to authorise the use of resources for the year ending with 31 March 2027; to authorise both the issue of sums out of the Consolidated Fund and the application of income for that year; and to appropriate the supply authorised for that year by this Act and by the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2026.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 107).

Business Without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LOCAL GOVERNMENT

That the draft Local Government (Structural and Boundary Changes) (Control of Disposals etc.) (Amendment) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 14 May, be approved.

EDUCATION

That the draft Lifelong Learning (Fee Limits) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 18 May, be approved.

ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION

That the draft Pollution Prevention and Control (Fees) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 14 May, be approved—(*Mark Ferguson.*)

Question agreed to.

CHURCH OF ENGLAND (GENERAL SYNOD) (MEASURES)

[Relevant documents: 248th Report of the Ecclesiastical Committee, Clergy Conduct Measure, HC 220.]

King's consent signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

That the Clergy Conduct Measure (HC 221), passed by the General Synod of the Church of England, which was laid before this House on 3 June, be presented to His Majesty for his Royal Assent in the form in which it was laid before Parliament.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

Question agreed to.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice. Over the course of the day, following the announcement of the defence investment plan, it has become clear that the Government intend to cancel two major road schemes to fund their commitments. One of them, the Newark bypass, is in my constituency. This is a scheme on which tens of millions of pounds have already been spent. The development consent order has already been granted, and the Chancellor of the Exchequer's permission was given for that. No stakeholders, including me, were informed in Newark, and the Mayor of the East Midlands did not know the faintest thing about this before the story was given to the trade press, which strikes me as a total slap in the face for local people in Nottinghamshire.

The scheme would have a profoundly welcome effect on business, jobs and quality of life for my constituents, and for everyone in Nottinghamshire and Lincolnshire. It seems that the scheme has now been cast aside, but it is clear what the money should have been spent on. We should cut waste in Government to fund important schemes like this. How can we get the Transport Secretary to come to the House of Commons to account for this terrible decision for my constituents and for all the people of the east midlands?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order, which, as he knows, is not a matter for the Chair. He may wish to consult the Table Office on means of pursuing his concerns further.

Domestic Abuse and Public Life

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

7.5 pm

Apsana Begum (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): To make politics truly responsive to the needs of survivors of domestic abuse, and to address the failures that have let them down time and again, the voices of survivors need to be heard and understood in the place where our country's laws are made. The Minister, as a survivor of domestic abuse and violence, is testament to the fact that the voices of those with lived experience are desperately needed in this place, yet the barriers can feel enormous. The cost of entering and staying in politics can mean that survivors are locked out, or pushed out, of political participation.

Given the stigma, the structural and systemic bias against us, the endless complaints and investigative processes, and the use of the courts and the law to threaten and silence us, what a survivor has to endure feels insurmountable. The Westminster Foundation for Democracy has said that democratic institutions that tolerate the exclusion of women cannot credibly claim to represent them. Indeed, I know that survivors who are already in public life have chosen not to come forward and report the abuse that they have faced, because of their perpetrator's position of power. That is important, because politics is about power. Politics and abuse can often be closely correlated, as we have seen through the revelations of Jeffrey Epstein's horrific crimes and his connections to British political figures and institutions.

The abuse does not end when a survivor leaves; often, it intensifies, as I know too well. The threats, intimidation, monitoring and manipulation can continue in social settings, such as sports clubs; online and offline; and, yes, in workplaces, political party settings and all across public life. In my experience, and in the experience of survivors I have spoken to, post-separation harassment is shockingly pervasive. I want to illustrate that through the story of a councillor who informed me that she endured a truly staggering level of post-separation harassment from an ex-partner, his family and his associates during the local elections. Hundreds of abusive messages were shared on public forums during the campaign, including personal and private information, putting her at risk. Although I will not be able to relate the full extent of the police failings in her case, it is shocking that no protections have yet been put in place to allow her to conduct her public duties safely, despite the introduction of Operation Ford. How is she supposed to attend full council meetings, when her ex-partner may turn up there? What about her prospects of being able to safely participate in future elections? Tragically, she says,

"I'm just at the point now where I don't think I want to stand again".

This situation is all too familiar to me, but why should we be the ones to leave?

As I have explained to the House previously, when I first put myself forward to be Labour's parliamentary candidate for Poplar and Limehouse, the harassment I faced intensified. My ex-husband told people he was angry that I had not asked his permission to stand, and he threatened to "expose" me to the community, knowing

that he had intimate details about my medical history, and pictures of me without my hijab on. Threats were made to campaign team members, who were told to tell the press stories about me. They were told that people should "make me stand down or else". At the time, my ex-husband was a Labour councillor. Then and, I understand, even now, he was well connected in local political groupings and with a small clique within my local Labour party.

Two years after my election in 2019, I was made to endure a vexatious eight-day trial on criminal charges as a result of a complaint made by my ex-husband's brother-in-law. I was completely cleared, but I feel that that continues to haunt me, and perhaps will for the rest of my life. Why? Because even after my ex-husband was expelled from the Labour party for his treatment of me, he stood against me in the general election in 2024, with the stated aim of wishing to "set the record straight". Indeed, I found out through a press outlet less than 20 minutes before the deadline for legal nominations that he was standing. I had just 20 minutes to decide whether I should embark on my re-election campaign, with the prospect of continuing to be in public life while knowing that the harassment had now rolled on from party and court processes to an electoral one.

I want to highlight to the House just what that meant in practice. I was unable to attend some hustings, and had to seek advice as to whether refusing to stand next to my ex-husband at the election count would violate his legal rights as a candidate. I had to leave polling stations immediately when he was tipped off about where I was. I had to stop campaigning early on election day, because the threat just could not be managed. There appears to be little or no framework on how to manage the situation overall, because he was already confirmed as a parliamentary candidate, or even about how to protect my democratic rights and provide me with safety as a candidate. I feel a tremendous duty to survivors, and am compelled to keep speaking out about these experiences and to do something about this, because what happened to me must never happen to anyone again.

I have long been campaigning for better protections in the workplace for survivors of domestic abuse, and I have also been campaigning, cross-party, for new duties to be placed on all political parties to better support candidates and representatives who are survivors of domestic abuse, so that they are not exposed to further harassment in their roles. Abuse is not always direct; survivors can experience threats made against third parties, who can be intimidated or manipulated into engaging in behaviours desired by the perpetrator. These are forms of indirect abuse, as I have come to understand through the ongoing support of my independent domestic violence advocate. I know from my experiences of my ex-husband's associates, including the small clique still active in the local party, that the abuse can persist even when the perpetrator is not present. With reports that my party is about to commence a new re-selection process, I have still not been told if or how the party will prevent those people from overseeing another process.

In the years since the tragic and senseless murder of Jo Cox, which took place 10 years ago this month, numerous initiatives have been launched to tackle abuse and violence against representatives, campaigners and candidates. We know that women, and black and minority ethnic women most of all, face staggering levels of abuse,

online and offline, ranging from threats of sexual violence to physical assaults. It is still a terrifying time to run for election as a woman, and 69% of women polled cite abuse or harassment as a key reason for not pursuing a career in politics. For a survivor, it is of course even more difficult to consider doing so.

The return of the Representation of the People Bill to the House gives us the opportunity to tackle the barriers that lock survivors out of our political system. I am glad that clause 32 is increasing the timescale for anonymous voter registration; that is crucial to ensuring that survivors can participate in elections as voters, but what about participating as candidates? It is for that reason that I have tabled two amendments to the Bill to address the gaps in protections under electoral law regarding domestic abuse: the schedule 9 offences for which disqualification orders must include behaviours amounting to domestic abuse; and, when charging and conviction rates for domestic abuse related offences remain so low compared to the full scale of domestic abuse, it is also necessary for courts to issue disqualification orders when granting protection orders. The amendments are supported by Elect Her and the Jo Cox Foundation. I hope the Government will consider them fully to encourage more survivors to participate in our politics and in our elections.

There is no question about the need to make sure that survivors can feel secure and confident in standing for election. There are urgent measures that political parties, the Government and the police must take to make that possible. I am sure that, to the fullest possible extent, the Minister will be looking to deliver on the promises of the Government's violence against women and girls strategy. The measure of the strategy's success will be whether it tackles the horrifying statistic that only one in five victims and survivors reports their abuse. How we enable victims and survivors to come forward is by tackling the systems that can be used to manipulate and silence them and prevent their voices from being heard. Political parties, including our own, must truly assess how well they themselves do that internally.

We have a duty to make inclusive, democratic and safe environments that make it possible for everyone to participate. It saddens me deeply to be in a position where I am prevented from being able to participate fully in public life. I still have to risk assess every event and meeting, and I cannot participate if the risks cannot be mitigated. I have spoken from my own experience today, but I know that my experience is actually far from unique. I have been contacted by women and survivors from all across the country for whom I am determined to work for a society where survivors feel confident that they will be believed, listened to and treated supportively. This country must become one where survivors are not thwarted by ongoing harassment and abuse, including if they choose to enter public life, as surely should be their right.

7.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Natalie Fleet): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Apsana Begum) for raising this vital issue, and for her continued advocacy for victims and survivors of domestic abuse everywhere.

There are parts of this job that I find really difficult, and I know that my hon. Friend shares that. And then there are parts of being here, in this Chamber and on

these Benches, that are the most incredible privilege. As I sit here, as a Minister, to be able to hear your testimony as a survivor—sorry, I mean my hon. Friend.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I know the Minister is new to the Dispatch Box, but no “you” and “yours” because it is not my story. To help, she must look into the microphone and speak through the Chair.

Natalie Fleet: Thank you for your patience, Madam Deputy Speaker.

It is the most incredible privilege to be here in this Chamber to hear how my hon. Friend triumphed against the most horrendous abuse and to see her surrounded by her colleagues in the most supportive way possible. That feels like a real privilege, and I am very grateful to have been here for that moment.

My hon. Friend championed the importance of a whole system approach to domestic abuse and violence against women and girls more broadly. I also know how hard it is to come forward and share experiences of abuse. I am proud to use my platform to shine a light on the challenges many victims and survivors face, and I know that so many will have been listening to my hon. Friend's account this evening and will take strength from it.

I want to reassure my hon. Friend that tackling VAWG is a top priority for this Government. We have made it a mission to halve these crimes in a decade. Domestic abuse and violence against women and girls are the source of untold harm. The abuse can remain hidden, regardless of a person's lifestyle, their social circles and their profession, including people in public life. It is something that affects every single part of society, and too often it is still hidden and accepted as part of everyday life. That is why this debate is so important, and I am so grateful for my hon. Friend's testimony and campaigning on this issue. Her bravery and honesty, and that of other survivors, is crucial. Only by listening to those who have first-hand experience can we continue to champion and advocate for victims of these crimes.

The Government have been clear that things must change. Our violence against women and girls strategy is driving that change by strengthening early intervention, pursuing perpetrators at every turn, and giving victims the best possible support. It is about not just responding to harms after they happen but focusing on stopping them in the first place. We are taking clear steps to challenge attitudes, norms and behaviours that allow abuse to continue.

Through the updated relationship and sexual health education curriculum, we are giving our children the tools to spot and challenge unhealthy relationship dynamics. We are delivering “Enough”, our behaviour change campaign, to help young men and boys reflect on and question harmful behaviours that have absolutely become normalised. By raising awareness across our society, spotting those early signs, and teaching everyone to challenge those behaviours, I hope that we continue to reduce the shame and stigma that stop people seeking help early.

We are taking a victim-centred approach to tackling violence against women and girls by investing £550 million to pay for counselling, court guidance and children's services to support victims. In the Home Office, I am proud that this month we launched a £24 million

[Natalie Fleet]

competition for helpline and advocacy services. Those specialist helplines are for minority groups and will help victims of domestic abuse, sexual violence, honour-based abuse, intimate image abuse, and stalking. We have worked hard to secure multi-year funding that will give our services more certainty and reassurance.

If we are going to make real change in tackling VAWG, however, we need to transform how we work across the public sector and services. We need a whole-of-Government and a whole-of-society approach, so victims can access housing, health, justice and the support they need. We have established the National Centre for Violence Against Women and Girls and Public Protection, so that victims receive a consistent VAWG response across our forces. Our strategy focuses on pursuing perpetrators, holding them accountable for their crimes, and managing them, wherever they are, to prevent further harm.

An example of that is our domestic abuse protection orders, which bring together the strongest elements of protection orders into a single flexible order. That means that they can impose behaviour change programmes on perpetrators. The pilot has seen more victims protected and perpetrators held to account, with prison sentences able to be handed down where breaches occur. We are rolling out DAPOs across England and Wales as soon as we can, so that more victims can benefit from the impact it is having in pilot areas. Though we are taking active steps to combat all forms of violence against women and girls and domestic abuse, there is so much more to do.

My hon. Friend raised post-separation abuse. I found out today about the interventions that have been made in this area—it blew my mind that they were not always a thing. But they were not. Too often, abuse continues after a relationship has ended. That is why, in our changes to the Domestic Abuse Act 2021, we extended the offence of controlling and coercive behaviour to former intimate partners. We have also removed the requirement for the victim and perpetrator to live together, to reflect that this can happen once the ex-partner has left the property.

As technology advances, it amplifies the scale, severity and reach of abuse. That is why the VAWG strategy includes ambitious commitments to tackle online and technology-facilitated harm. We are already taking decisive action to protect all of us online. The Crime and Policing Act 2026 introduced measures to ban nudification apps, and requires platforms to remove non-consensual intimate image abuse within 48 hours. On 8 June, the Prime Minister announced that Britain will be the first country to prevent children from taking, sharing and viewing nude images on their devices.

My hon. Friend mentioned how difficult it is for people like her to hold public office because of the challenges she has faced. Our democracy is richer with Members like her in this House. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Democracies across the world need women and survivors within them. In fact, public office should be open to everyone, regardless of background. All our democracies are better for it. Again, I thank her for her campaigning in this area. My hon. Friend mentioned our sister Jo Cox and her legacy more than once. The work taking place in this space to ensure that we support each other to be here is absolutely vital.

The Government absolutely recognise that MPs face abuse and intimidation, and that they have a disproportionate impact on minority groups in politics, including women and those from minority ethnic backgrounds. Through the defending democracy taskforce, we are working with policing and electoral partners to ensure that candidates and elected officials are safe while campaigning and when in office. The taskforce is driving a whole-of-Government approach to tackle abuse targeted at elected officials and has taken steps to make it safer to stand for and be elected to public office. We continue to review and develop our approach, working with partners across law enforcement, Parliament and the third sector to identify and address any gaps in our response.

On vexatious civil court proceedings, the Government are absolutely committed to preventing courts from being used as tools of abuse by perpetrators. We recognise the damage that vexatious litigation has on individuals. In England and Wales, the courts have several mechanisms to protect individuals from being subjected to repeated meritless or abusive litigation. Most commonly, a party can seek a civil restraint order, which restricts a person from making further applications or issuing claims without the court’s permission where those applications have been found totally without merit. CROs can range from limited orders, which apply only to current proceedings, to extended or general orders to prevent wider use of the court system without prior approval. In more extreme cases of persistent abuse, the High Court may declare an individual a vexatious litigant under section 42 of the Senior Courts Act 1981. If this happens, the individual must obtain permission before bringing forward any new proceedings.

Along with those measures, courts must also strike out baseless claims and impose cost sanctions. In certain circumstances, where litigation forms part of a pattern of harassment, injunctive relief may be available. Together, these remedies help to ensure that individuals are protected from repeated unfounded claims while preserving the integrity of the justice system.

Once again, I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I have refrained from commenting on any individual case, but I will say that listening to the personal accounts in this debate has been an incredibly moving experience. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for not just the powerful and thought-provoking contribution we heard tonight, but the contributions she continues to make across the House. I have heard her.

As I hope has been clear from my response, the Government’s commitment to tackle domestic abuse and violence against women and girls is total. We have taken important steps forward, especially with our VAWG strategy to improve criminal justice outcomes, restore trust in policing and ensure that tackling domestic abuse and violence against women and girls is everyone’s problem. However, we all know that there is more to do. Across Government, Parliament, policing and beyond, we all must now step up our efforts to prevent abuse and protect the vulnerable as we work towards halving VAWG in a decade.

I have been able to set out the measures that the Government are taking and where there is more that we can do, but I cannot overstate how powerful it is for survivors everywhere to see a survivor raising this issue

here, surrounded by a group of her peers who support her without question. I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution tonight.

Question put and agreed to.

7.29 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 30 June 2026

[VALERIE VAZ in the Chair]

High Street Regeneration and Unlawful Storefronts

9.30 am

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for regenerating local high streets and removing unlawful storefronts.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz, and a delight to see so many Members present to talk about this important topic. High streets matter: they are one of the most significant topics in UK society and politics today, because our town centres are a barometer of the vitality of all the areas that we represent, both economically and socially, for good or for ill.

Town centres are changing. There has been a perfect storm: retail habits have changed since e-commerce set in the best part of two decades ago, and social habits have changed as a result. In many areas, we have seen a hollowing out of high streets and a different type of retail moving in, often with different problems. Low-grade retail and the decline in investment in the public realm are significant factors in the vitality of the areas that we represent. The British public have clear opinions: 79% of Brits are concerned about the decline of high streets and town centres, 65% believe that there are not enough shopping options and 68% believe that there are too many vape shops, barber shops, charity shops and mini-marts in their communities.

We have to think about why footfall in retail has declined. There is the effect of internet shopping, which is very much a normal part of life nowadays. We must also acknowledge the increasing costs that businesses face, including business rates, utility bills and rising labour costs. It is a perfect storm: I do not think that anyone across the House would deny that high streets are under probably the most acute pressure in living memory.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his success in securing this debate, which I suppose is indicative of the crisis that he is talking about. I have secured a similar debate this afternoon on a directly related issue. This demands not only our attention, but immediate Government action, because in 10 years' time we will not know the high street as we have known it in the past 10 years.

Bradley Thomas: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing a debate later today. He is absolutely right: the pressure and stress that high streets are under mean that, on the current path, they will be unrecognisable in a decade.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this important debate. He mentioned vape shops, barber shops and mini-marts. He will be aware of the evidence that some of those enterprises are masking quite serious

organised crime on our high streets. This has been a decades-long failure in regulation. The cracks between which the issues fall, between different agencies, is immense. Does he agree that greater action is needed on the joint taskforce that this Government have now set up, and that we should also look at some of the commercial private landlords? We should ensure more regulation on them to check who is renting the properties that they let out.

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Member is correct: without doubt, a strong regulatory failure over the past decade has contributed to the problem. I will address some of her points later in my remarks.

There is also a rural/suburban distinction. In rural areas, the British public have a stronger opinion: about 55% of people in predominantly rural or semi-rural areas believe that their high street is undergoing a decline, whereas the figure for those living in urban areas is only 19%.

Let us look at some of the stats that back up the evidence about the narrowing range of high street retail across the country. There are now believed to be at least 3,500 nail bars, 20,000 to 25,000 barber shops and 3,500 vape shops. As we are all aware, those numbers could well be significantly under-reported, so they do not necessarily give an accurate picture of the extent of the challenge. On Oxford Street alone, a mile or so from here, there are 18 American candy stores.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate. The issues that he highlights exist across the country. A common struggle for hon. Members across the House is that we cannot find out who owns these buildings on our high streets. I have approached my council, but it either does not have the information or is not willing to share it so that we can regenerate our high streets. Does the hon. Member agree that we need mechanisms to ensure greater transparency and due diligence so that these landlords can take some ownership?

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Member is correct. At the centre of a Venn diagram of regulatory and reporting blackspots, there is a sweet spot where it is difficult to identify those who are responsible behind the building ownership or the so-called businesses appearing on our high streets as a consequence of the pressure that I am outlining.

Another consequence that is being discussed across the House is the decline of vital services in our areas. Some 7,000 banks have closed across the country since 2015, which is two thirds of the entire banking network. We have all heard stories from constituents who are increasingly dependent on retail banking presence. There has been a push towards banking hubs, and the Post Office performs a role to some extent.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): Does the hon. Member agree that in rural areas we need a lot more banking hubs, because the banks are going, and that we should scrap business rates for start-ups and independent businesses? Rural communities are losing shops big time.

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Member is correct that the issue is acutely felt in rural areas. I am delighted that the Conservative party has put forward a plan to abolish business rates for thousands of small businesses, including shops, pubs and hospitality businesses on the high street. I will come on to some solutions to the challenges we face.

There are 1,400 postcodes across the country that do not have a bank within a 5-mile radius, which demonstrates the scale of the challenge. One in seven high street shops across the country are currently empty. An estimated 38 businesses close every day. When businesses close, there are job losses, with an estimated 93,000 retail jobs lost in 2025 alone. In the hospitality sector, it is reported that up to 5,000 jobs are being lost per month. I make a plea to the Government to change course on the additional costs that they have placed on small businesses across the country. They are unquestionably killing employment and putting greater pressure on the long-term viability of those businesses.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to the hon. Member for securing this important debate. York is fortunate that two thirds of its high street businesses are independent, but they are really struggling at the moment, not least because of the costs pressing on their finances—particularly business rates, which have gone up incredibly steeply. Does the hon. Member agree not only that businesses are laying off staff, but that they are not recruiting staff, which is vital for the regeneration of high streets? We need the Government to take an overview and make a plan for regeneration, as my right hon. Friend the new Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) made the case for just yesterday.

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Member is an ardent champion of her constituency. It is reassuring to hear that her area has a strong and thriving independent sector, but she is right that the first rung of employment for so many has been pulled away from that ladder, in large part because of choices that this Government have made. Small retail businesses have reduced recruitment, and in many cases they have had to let people go because of the pressure on them.

Another reason why the debate about town centres matters, as hon. Members have touched on, is that far too often our high streets are becoming a very visible front for illicit or illegal activity. That is a problem in plain sight that none of us can deny.

Sarah Green (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the closure order powers that we have in this country are not fit for purpose? Until local authorities have the power to act swiftly and decisively, organised criminals will continue to exploit our high streets with impunity.

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Lady is correct: the tools at the disposal of the state are not used often enough, there are not enough deterrents and there is not enough strong and visible action to clamp down on this behaviour and prevent such instances from recurring.

Melanie Onn: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Bradley Thomas: I will make a tad of progress, if I can.

The Office for National Statistics has reported that in 2025 there were 530,000 shoplifting offences, an increase of 20% on the previous year. That is the highest figure on record, and it does not take into account crimes that are not reported because there is a general malaise or a suspicion that they will not be investigated. I read a similar stat from public authorities that only 50% of shopkeepers report crime, while a staggering 55% of reported cases are closed without a suspect ever having been identified. That is despite retailers having spent £300 million on measures such as security, CCTV and facial recognition to mitigate the effects of shoplifting.

It is believed that up to one half of vape shops and a large proportion of American candy stores have ties to organised crime. The scale of the problem is unquestionable; we all recognise it. Over the past 12 months, 3,600 shops have had illegal goods seized, and it is estimated by the National Crime Agency that £1 billion of criminal cash is laundered through high street retail. The scale of the problem is undeniable, which brings me to the question of what we can do about it.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con) *rose*—

Bradley Thomas: I am genuinely interested in hearing what fellow Members have to say, so before I continue I will give way to my right hon. Friend.

Sir John Hayes: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for bringing this debate to Westminster Hall and for his interest in what I am about to say. The Government took powers under the Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026 to license these kinds of premises, but there is real uncertainty—I have had correspondence with the previous Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Pontefract, Castleford and Knottingley (Yvette Cooper)—about the Government's application of the new powers. I am sure that my hon. Friend will join me in calling for the Government to get their act together and clamp down on these shops.

Bradley Thomas: My right hon. Friend is absolutely correct. Much greater focus on tackling these issues is needed from all arms of the state, national and local, including arm's length bodies, law enforcement and investigation. For far too long, a fragmented approach has allowed the problem to grow: it has swelled, not declined, in recent years.

The reason this matters is that society has to get the basics right. I am a big believer in the idea that the fundamentals in society slip when we do not collectively enforce the basics. That often starts with pride. As we have seen our high streets hollowed out, we have seen a decline in civic pride across the country. In all our areas, the councils do some things very well, but it is unquestionable that investment in the public realm has declined over the past decade. There are lots of reasons for that, and hon. Members may speak about some of them, but we have to get back to enforcing the basics. I am passionate about the importance of good design, including design codes and good-quality signage and a good-quality aesthetic in the public realm. A lot flows from the degradation that we have seen in recent years.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman's vision. In my town centre of Longton, we are making massive improvements to the public realm. We have heritage colours and an awful lot of civil pride. It can be done, and Longton is demonstrating that.

Bradley Thomas: That is fantastic, and I am delighted to hear it. I know that many areas do that well, but we have to get the very basics at the bottom of the question right.

I believe in design codes because they give people control over the aesthetic of our areas. We all know the kinds of places that we are attracted to when we have a bit of leisure time—we may go there to spend money and to have a day out with family and friends. We have to view our own areas through that lens and ask how we can ensure that they are attractive enough destinations for people to want to come there and spend their money. If our town centres are not attractive because we have allowed the basics to slip and do not take care around the aesthetic and cleanliness of areas, we should not be surprised when people stop coming, businesses do not invest and low-grade retail begins to occupy the void that has been created. I encourage the Government to restore the principle of good-quality design being at the centre of planning decisions, to enforce a greater aesthetic standard across the areas that we represent.

Tied to that has to be an increase in the quality of signage. All hon. Members can cite examples of a low-grade retail unit—possibly one that is questionable in terms of how many people it employs and what its purpose is—opening in their constituencies. I guarantee that in many cases such a unit will come with a garish, ugly and possibly neon sign that local people are frankly staggered that the local authority is allowing to stay in place. The state has to make a much more concerted effort to tackle the issue: the national Government need to devolve powers to local authorities and regulatory services, and local authorities have to have a much stronger will to ensure signage standards across society are of greater quality.

Amanda Martin: Does the hon. Member agree that we need to make sure that data sharing flows, with intelligence, between all relevant organisations, including mayors, local government, the police, and the small businesses that are following the law and doing the right thing?

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Lady is absolutely right, and that links perfectly to my next point, which is on enforcement and the awareness of the state. Members all have examples of such incidents occurring because they have fallen through the cracks of the different agencies that are meant to have responsibility for the issue, so let us think about how the state needs to be rewired to tackle it. The state has to bring together the Home Office, local authorities, police forces, and the Treasury in its role in clamping down on money laundering. The unquestionable effect of illegal migration and county lines sits at the centre of much of this, and far too many of the relevant powers are weak or dispersed to authorities that do not have the will or ability to crack down on the problem. Enforcement and the ability of the state have to be at the centre of this.

On the civic pride piece, we should get back to basics, as some obvious things could be done. My local authority in Bromsgrove does a pretty good job of keeping Bromsgrove and Hagley town centres, and the shopping parades in Wythall and Rubery, clean and tidy, but I would like public authorities to invest a little more in the finishing touches, like flowers, and the quality of the public realm. It is those softer things that make our areas pleasant destinations for people to shop in and, ultimately, for businesses to invest in. Let us bring back trees in the public realm, for goodness' sake. We have seen plenty of instances in which the planning system has prevented the planting of street trees because people are concerned about liabilities, but we know that the public like them, and guess what? With last week's heatwave in mind, trees are beneficial in helping to keep public spaces quite cool, as well as making them attractive.

Another key factor in the deterioration of the quality of high streets across the country is the visibility of institutions, which must be restored in society. Again, I come back to my earlier point: the big things slide when we do not get the basics right. Most of our areas have seen a visible decline in the key institutions that restore public trust in all the things that bind us in society. I am talking about police stations and courts particularly.

Arguably, on the other side of the coin, if there are too many police visible, people think that it is a high-crime area. But guess what? If police are never visible, people feel that justice is not being enforced. Equally, the decline in the number of visible courts in our communities has contributed considerably to the problem that we face and has been a subtle factor in the ability of illicit retail to thrive, because the public authorities and the state are not interested in clamping down on it.

Melanie Onn: The hon. Member is being very gracious with his time. Is he aware that in Dudley there is a very tenacious trading standards officer who has managed to secure 40 closure orders in recent years, which far exceeds any other local authority? Does the hon. Member agree that tools and powers are available but it takes the will to use them?

Bradley Thomas: I do agree. Dudley is next door to my constituency, so I will actively encourage Bromsgrove district council to have a conversation with Dudley council, because it sounds as though it is doing absolutely the right thing.

Rachael Maskell: The hon. Member is being incredibly generous. He has talked about infrastructure and agencies. It is also important to ensure that we have facilities such as public toilets and good seating on our high streets, but the disinvestment in our local authorities over a long time has prevented that. Will he support my call for investment in local areas so that we have seating for the elderly and play areas for children on our high streets?

Bradley Thomas: The hon. Lady is absolutely correct. Those factors contribute to a healthy and thriving community, and it is really important that all local authorities do what they can to support investment in such facilities in their areas. This is not all down to what the state can do; there are other things that local authorities can do. They have a role in getting the factors right to empower the private sector to invest in our areas.

[Bradley Thomas]

Another policy that I would like to see is a greater push towards local economic investment plans. Prior to being a Member of Parliament, I served as a district councillor in south Worcestershire. As leader of Wychavon district council, I pursued investment prospectuses for three main towns. They were not planning documents; they were targeted at strategic investors to say, “These are the reasons why our towns are attractive.” They might say, “There’s a population of x within a hinterland of y. These are all the social and economic indices that make our areas attractive.” But guess what? If we are not enforcing the basics, we should not be surprised if it is difficult to get that investment on the hook. Society, the state and councils are not doing all they can to ensure that the communities that we represent are ultimately very attractive destinations for businesses to come and spend their money.

I am conscious that many other Members wish to speak, so I will draw my comments to a close in a second. Again, I impress on the Government the importance of reducing costs to businesses, which are unquestionably having an impact on our town centres and high streets. The Government need to abolish business rates for thousands of shops, hospitality venues, pubs and small retailers across the country to give our high street traders a boost. They should endorse the Conservative policy that has been put forward. We need to get energy costs down, and the Government can do that by endorsing the Conservatives’ clean power plan.

Let me reiterate the points I have made: we must restore pride in our civic areas, and strengthen the teeth of the state and its ability to collectively identify and tackle these problems. It needs to speak to other agencies with commonality in identifying and tackling the solution. We should not be afraid to use the teeth of the state to clamp down on this, because the very best thing we can do is demonstrate that if illegal, illicit or low-grade retail appears on our high streets, we are serious about cracking down on it so that we can ensure the vitality of our high streets continues for the enjoyment of all our communities.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I ask hon. Members to stand if they wish to speak. I hope to begin the wind-ups at 10.28 am.

9.54 am

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. Our local high streets are the beating heart of our towns and our country, but they have faced profound challenges in recent years. We have seen the rise of online retail, changing consumer habits and years of under-investment in our town centres, and the tax system and business rates have not kept pace with that.

In my view, the answer to all that is not simply to recreate the high streets of 30 or 40 years ago. The successful town centre or high street of the future will look different. We need to work to combine retail with culture, hospitality, housing, leisure, health services and other aspects of community activity. In my constituency, we are trying to do just that: restoring our iconic seaside

pier, investing in public services, supporting creative and cultural sectors—including the Warehouse Arts Centre, which opened just last week—bringing vacant upper floors above retail units back into use as homes, and improving the aesthetics of the town.

However, as well as good intentions, we need—my hon. Friend the Member for Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes (Melanie Onn) mentioned the trading standards officer in Dudley—the confidence and determination to enforce our will. Across the country, our constituents are increasingly raising concerns that premises appear to be operating outside the law. Legitimate businesses, which employ local people and contribute positively to their communities, should not have to compete with enterprises involved in illicit tobacco, counterfeit goods, money laundering or other criminal activity. To combat that, we need stronger partnership working between local authorities, trading standards, His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs, the police and every other enforcement agency, and we need to ensure that they all have the resources that they need to act swiftly. Visible enforcement matters because it helps to restore confidence among residents, visitors and responsible businesses alike.

Alongside enforcement, I want to suggest a more ambitious approach to regeneration and renewal, through what I have previously described as renovation zones. Those would be specifically designated areas, typically focused on existing town centres, in which Government could use a package of fiscal incentives, planning flexibilities and public investment to encourage the refurbishment, repurposing and reoccupation of existing buildings, with the aim of increasing population density, economic activity and civic life. Many of our traditional town centres contain beautiful historic buildings with vacant upper floors and underused premises. Renovation zones would provide targeted incentives to encourage the refurbishment and repurposing of those buildings.

Rather than endless outward expansion with out-of-town retail parks, we could be focusing on repairing, restoring and repopulating the places that we already have. If we combine robust enforcement against unlawful storefronts with a bold programme of renewal and reinvestment, our high streets can once again become thriving civic centres at the heart of community life.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I have to impose a two-minute formal time limit, and Wendy Morton will be the first to show us how to stick to that.

9.58 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I will be delighted to do so, Ms Vaz. It is, as always, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship. I perhaps should abandon my prepared speech and just go for it.

Across the country, our high streets are facing huge pressure. I think all of us in Westminster Hall this morning understand that. Shopkeepers are doing everything they can to keep trading, but they face the double hit of the jobs tax and the bodged business rate reforms, and at a time when our retailers are disappearing, all too often we are seeing those retail units being replaced by vape shops, nail bars and so on, so it is time that real businesses had more support.

In my constituency, Brownhills High Street—you know it very well, Ms Vaz—is home to some fantastic independent retailers, such as Fairy Good Cakes, which is one of my favourites, The Jack ‘Jigger’ Taylor and the butchers A. E. Poxon & Sons. They are serving our local community, but they face a challenging environment that is made more challenging at the minute by the emergence of a sinkhole in the high street. The reason I raise that is that it highlights why, when our high streets have to be closed for emergency work, it is so important that we support local businesses—that we all get out there on the high street. Do not talk; take action—go and put the pound in the tills of these local businesses that work so hard.

In Brownhills, we are fortunate to have received some Pride in Place funding and I hope that the Government will work with me and the community to deliver that. I hope we will be able to receive help with the redevelopment of Ravenscourt, a gap in the high street where we have been working for years to seek some improvement and regeneration. Will the Minister pick up on that for me as well?

I hear day in, day out about the challenges that our businesses face. Briefly, I want to raise an issue that has not yet been raised: car parking. We need car parking that works in the interests of residents and businesses. In Aldridge, some of my residents have recently received a £100 parking charge simply for dropping off family and friends and waiting for a short time on yellow lines, not red lines—

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. I call Jim Shannon.

10 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for setting the scene so well. The reason so many hon. Members are present is because the future of our high streets is of great concern to everyone, myself in particular.

Each high street is different and should reflect the unique character and personality of each community. High street restoration requires shared visions, creative thinkers and strategic planning. I always bring a Northern Ireland perspective, and the high street in Newtownards is important to me because it is in our major town. High streets should be home to places that provide important functional services, alongside cultural, community and leisure functions. Regeneration should be community-led, ensuring that local voices are heard and that our high streets reflect the genuine needs of our communities, fostering a sense of belonging in our town centres.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is up to each local authority in Northern Ireland to bring forward a marketing, tourism and economic plan for each high street to get under the bonnet and start fixing this problem, which has been around for so long?

Jim Shannon: I certainly do, and I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

To ensure that regeneration is lasting, work must continue to be done by all councils across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to prevent unlawful shopfronts and enforce planning permission breaches. The number of enforcement actions

carried out increased by nearly 25% in 2025, compared with 2022. However, significant disparities remain between local authorities, with evidence indicating that some councils are considerably more proactive than others in monitoring such activity.

In Strangford, £1 million has been provided for the Supporting Thriving High Streets programme to create safer and more attractive streetscapes, boost footfall and attract new businesses. These transformations do not happen overnight, and a significant amount of planning and work has already been done to begin the project. All four UK nations record year-on-year declines in footfall. Shopfronts lie deserted, a visual reminder of the economic pressures. Regular health checks should be carried out to assess the effectiveness of these efforts. That would ensure that investment is not only delivered effectively but protected over time, creating resilient, responsive high streets.

I look to the Minister to ensure that UK-wide funding is available to support high streets, to ensure that banks have a high street presence and to re-engage people with the joy of shopping local and sowing into their local economy. That can be achieved, and together we must achieve it.

10.3 am

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. Before my election, I spent well over a decade working as a pharmacist on the high street. I stood behind my counter and watched the flow of the community come and go through the door. I challenged shoplifters, from which I still literally bear the scars. What I lived, and what I now hear about week after week at my surgeries and visits across North Somerset, is worry—worry that our high streets are becoming a symbol of decline, rather than a source of pride.

In Portishead, residents have watched yet another vape shop or barber shop open where a much-loved local business used to be. People notice, and residents ask why. This matters because the high street is not just bricks, footfall and business rates; it is where people feel proud of where they live and it is where community happens. The opposite is true, too. Vacant storefronts and deserted high streets do not just look sad, they breed antisocial behaviour.

That is the backdrop, on top of which our high streets are now under fresh pressure. Just last month, as temperatures soared, footfall on the high street dropped by 19% on the hottest May day on record, and we saw the same pattern in the most recent heatwave. Shoppers stayed home, commuters worked from home and the high street paid the price. Whether it is empty units or empty pavements, the message is the same: our high streets are fragile and need support.

That is why I welcome the Government's action: a £30 million enforcement package with raids, closures and cash seizures against the dodgy vape shops, barber shops and mini-marts linked to organised crime, which launder an estimated £1 billion of criminal cash every year. We can have the renaissance on our high streets that my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) set out yesterday, but first we need to joust with those criminal businesses. The Government's action is significant recognition that our high streets are worth fighting for, but I admit that we need even more.

[*Sadik Al-Hassan*]

We need a co-ordinated vision for what our high streets will look like in 2030 or 2035. We need to manage the future of our high streets, not watch their decline.

10.5 am

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this important debate. Our high streets are facing huge challenges at the moment. Nationally, fiscal pressures have been put on them—employer national insurance contributions, the minimum wage, the business rates increase—and the Employment Rights Act 2025 is making it even more challenging for many of our high street businesses to take on young people. Then, of course, we have the tourism tax, or holiday tax, coming down the line.

Sadik Al-Hassan: I have been a pharmacist and an employer for nearly two decades, and nearly every good business was already doing what is in the Employment Rights Act to recruit staff. Recruiters need to offer those things. It is simple.

Robbie Moore: Then why on earth legislate and introduce further regulations that impose much more of a burden on our high street businesses? That is exactly what businesses are telling me, that this legislation is making it more costly to do business.

The tourism tax will tax businesses in Ilkley and Haworth, imposing much more of a burden on them for less money to be spent locally. What does that do? It gives our Mayor of West Yorkshire more power to use my area as a cash cow for money to be spent in other areas across West Yorkshire, rather than investing it in my constituency.

Locally, Bradford council has imposed car parking charges across the whole of my district, including for on-street parking, which is making it much less attractive for people to come and spend money in Ilkley. A petition signed by 4,000 residents was submitted to Bradford council, but the council went ahead regardless. It costs £3,000 to £10,000 to install a parking machine. In the village of Addingham, which has only 18 parking spaces, it will take decades before the council starts making any money.

My simple request to the Minister—and indeed to Bradford council, which I hope is listening—is to remove those parking charges, take away the cost to visitors and residents who want to spend their money locally, and back our businesses. We are fed up with being used as a cash cow for the rest of Bradford to benefit at our expense.

10.8 am

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this debate. Local businesses are the heart and soul of our communities. The independent café, the family butcher and the local hardware shop create jobs, pay taxes and invest in our communities. They are the reason people feel proud of where they come from.

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): The small businesses that my hon. Friend is talking about make up 84% of store closures nationally. That trend is felt very much in my constituency, as I am sure it is in hers. Does she agree that the Government must urgently reform our business rates system before those independent businesses vanish from our high streets entirely?

Susan Murray: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend on business rates.

I have heard repeatedly from businesses in Mid Dunbartonshire that they are unable to afford to hire young people and give them their first experience of work, or that they have had to cut their hours due to rising costs. At the same time that they are being hit by rising costs and static VAT thresholds, they are competing with online giants that pay a fraction of the tax they pay. Amazon's five main UK companies paid just 7.1% corporation tax last year, while our main high street businesses are expected to pay 25%.

The Government have the ability to put us on a different path by cutting VAT for hospitality and attractions. Our cafés and restaurants are the beating heart of the high street. They bring footfall, they create atmosphere, they give people a reason to go to town centres, and they create community. A great example of this is the Bookmonger at Bearsden Cross, which celebrates its first birthday on 11 July. Aside from transforming the Cross with a new, fresh business idea, Caitlyn, who owns the business, is a cancer survivor who raises a lot of money for the Beatson cancer centre in Glasgow, and I hope that this business can also survive.

The Government should close loopholes that allow online giants to pay a fraction of the tax that our high street traders pay in full. We cannot ask local businesses to compete with not only the economies of scale that those conglomerates bring, but a tax system rigged to punish those who play by the rules. The sad truth is that the soul of our town centres is being slowly eroded: businesses are taxed into administration, their customers have moved online and our favourite shops are slowly replaced by the neon signs of vape shops and barbers. The Government have a choice to back our local businesses.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I have many residents who are really concerned about the high number of illegal vape and barber shops. Epsom and Ewell police force is taking action: it has targeted shops selling illicit vapes, with four busts so far, which is fantastic. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to do more to support local community policing and give local authorities more powers?

Susan Murray: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we need more powers to make sure that the playing field is fair for local businesses in our town centres.

Finally, I ask the Government not to continue loading costs on businesses that hold our town centres together. I ask them to review business rates, cut VAT for hospitality, level the playing field on corporation tax and back the businesses that make us proud of where we come from.

10.11 am

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): As many hon. Members have said, high streets speak to something fundamental about our identity and self-confidence in the places we call home. However, in too

many towns up and down our country, they are now filled with betting shops, charity shops, vape shops or, in many cases, empty shop windows, devoid of life. The hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) spoke about design codes and shop frontages, which is a really important point that the Government should grip in recognising the civic importance of those spaces. If we allow the country to see that our standards have slipped, it is no wonder that standards slip elsewhere.

To create an environment where it is possible for the kinds of businesses that we want to see succeed once again, we must give them what they need most: a community of customers on their doorstep. That means embracing residential-led high street regeneration, which is why I am delighted to support Capital&Centric's confidence in Crewe town centre with its proposed regeneration of the Royal Arcade, supported by 500 homes, plus bars, cafés, restaurants and other uses.

Wendy Morton: On the regeneration of our high streets and town centres, does the hon. Gentleman agree that there should be much more emphasis on bringing empty shops and empty homes back into use? It would help the high streets and the housing situation.

Connor Naismith: Yes, I absolutely agree.

We also need a tax system that incentivises the kinds of economic activity we want to see for the Pride in Place agenda. Too many of my small independent hospitality businesses have told me that it is not where we currently are. Kelly, from St Martha Greek taverna, is campaigning along with 50 local independent hospitality businesses, including the Red Cow and the GOAT sports bar in Nantwich, as well as Noodle Gurus in Crewe, alongside many others, to join our European counterparts in cutting VAT to 10% for hospitality businesses. I am proud to support their campaign.

We need a stronger state, capable and willing to intervene at local level to fix things when the market fails to do so. I am a huge supporter of the high street rental auctions and the Pride in Place agenda, but we must go further in giving local authorities the power, capacity, confidence and funding to put those powers to use so that my constituents can once again be truly proud of the civic spaces that we call our town centres. If we act decisively, we can restore pride in our high streets and ensure that they once again reflect the strength and character of our communities.

10.14 am

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Ms Vaz, and to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas), who introduced the debate and said much of what I would have said in his place.

Let me set out the context for a moment or two. We must make a decision about the character of places. People's sense of place nurtures and nourishes their sense of worth. When we see diminished places, people are diminished alongside them. We have to understand that the decline of high streets is about much more than retail habits; it is about how we comprise community. Community matters because it allows us to deal with the inevitable vicissitudes of human experience. The real issue is what Government can do to nourish and support those communities.

I have some requests for the Minister. The first is to change planning law to limit out-of-town and edge-of-town development. When the life and the livelihoods are sucked out of the centre of places, that inevitably drives people to the extremities of settlements rather than drawing them into the heart of them; consequently, the hearts of our communities are being ripped out.

Secondly, the Government need to crack down on the illegal shops that now pervade much of our kingdom, including South Holland and The Deepings, and to reinforce the powers of local councils to close such shops when they are trading illegally, as many certainly are.

Thirdly, we can re-dignify our town centres. In my time representing my constituency, much of the footprint of government has been removed. Let us reopen closed magistrates courts and local tax offices. Let us see the footprint of government informing and dignifying so much of our country. Things like that, where the Government can take proactive steps to change the character of areas, would make a huge difference to regenerating communities and giving health again to high streets.

10.16 am

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I thank the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this debate. In my constituency, high streets such as Longton town centre and Weston Road in Meir were hit by austerity, with many shops shutting down and left empty—yet despite those odds, the local communities have done fantastic work to revitalise their high streets.

Longton town centre has transformed into a busy retail district with new independent businesses such as Pearl & Gray, Parsley & Sage, the Moroccan Cafe, and Steve's butchers shop. I am campaigning for a banking hub, with a petition that has now received hundreds of signatures. However, that excellent work must not be undermined by a proliferation of illegal shops. To be frank, there is no reason there should be five vape shops, barber shops or mini-marts on one street, especially since we know that many of them are fronts for illegal activity. I welcome the Government's plans to close illegal shops for up to 12 months, as well as the recent cash boost to the National Crime Agency to crack down on illicit shops; but, if a business is repeatedly found to be trading illegally, it should be permanently closed and there should be strengthened police powers to prosecute unlawful activity.

We should also look at how the planning system can give local authorities greater powers to shape the high streets. Councils understand the needs of their communities better than anyone. They should have the ability to consider whether there is already an oversupply of a particular type of premises before another one opens, rather than being forced to accept repeated changes because the current planning rules offer little opportunity to intervene. Since the introduction of the commercial business and service use class in 2020, many commercial uses are grouped within the same planning use class, class E. A property can generally change from one class E use to another without planning permission, so councils cannot easily refuse a new vape shop simply because there are several nearby.

[Dr Allison Gardner]

Greater local control over the mix of businesses on our high street would deliver the variety that shoppers want, support independent retailers and ensure that our town centres remain the beating heart of our communities for generations to come.

10.18 am

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. Too many of our high streets are under immense pressure. Businesses face rising costs, declining confidence and falling footfall. That is a direct consequence of Labour's policies. I do not think it is an exaggeration to say that there is an existential threat to the future of the high street. I want to share one example from my constituency.

In Tarporley, the Little Tap, a small independent bar, recently announced that it would be closing, alongside Terrarium, a popular restaurant across the road. They were much-loved local businesses owned and run by Myles, a local entrepreneur with real community support behind him. Following the closure, Myles said:

"The past 18 months have been extremely difficult for small businesses, particularly in hospitality. Relentless increases in costs beyond my control, combined with current Government policies that have placed ever greater strain on independent businesses, have left me with no choice but to close. Despite pouring everything I had into keeping the business alive, the reality is that I can no longer make it work even though we have been busy.

I am heartbroken. Little Tap & Terrarium has been my life for the past ten years, and I am incredibly proud of everything we achieved together."

I sincerely hope that the Minister has heard the impact of Labour's policies. The reality is that businesses cannot be expected to thrive when they are being squeezed from every direction through rising business rates, increasing employment costs and growing regulatory burdens. That is not how we encourage growth. We need an alternative approach, which is why the Conservatives have committed to ending business rates for thousands of high street businesses. We should be ambitious for our high streets.

10.21 am

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this debate. When he was talking about the enforcement of gaudy signs and the impact they have on communities, I could not help thinking about the old bank in Fenton: it has gone from being a glorious listed building in a conservation zone to being smeared with bright signs advertising all sorts of products—yet trade in there is surprisingly slow for somewhere that opens so often, so I fully endorse what he said about enforcement.

In the brief time I have, I want to press the Minister on three points. One is access to cash. Stoke town is one of the four towns I have the pleasure of representing and it does not have a bank. It has been told that because there is a post office just under a mile away in three locations, the town has sufficient access to cash facilities. It does not. I hope the Minister will work with the Treasury to change the criteria so that it looks at the impact on towns rather than using as-the-crow-flies distances, because that simply does not work.

The second point is travel links. Buses are incredibly important for ensuring that people can get to town centres and use their high streets, and so are trains. I am disappointed that Stoke city council abandoned the plan for the accessibility works at Longton train station; as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) knows, that would have made access into that town much easier and allowed us to bring people to the south of the city using public transport.

Finally, I would like to push the Minister on public toilets, which we have not touched on. One of the challenges with town centres and high streets is the closure over many years—predominantly under the Conservative Government, I hasten to add—of public loos. That means there is a "loo leash" for many people who cannot find public conveniences, so they feel that they cannot go out shopping. Will the Minister look at putting a duty on local authorities to provide public loos? That would be a small, but important, step towards making our high streets accessible again.

10.23 am

Stuart Anderson (South Shropshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this important debate.

South Shropshire residents really value their high street—the 4,500 people who filled in my survey explaining what was important to them on the high street are testament to that. Unanimously, businesses said that taxes were too high and it was so hard to make a profit. Established businesses that have been operating for many years are struggling to make a profit under the current conditions.

Residents also spoke about parking, accessibility and how they get to the high street—a big issue—but also about the state of the high street, from cleanliness to pop-up shops. On pop-up shops, which many Members have already mentioned, we have the Turkish barbers, who have the skill of Sweeney Todd and serve about two people a day, can be closed for months on end and then open, and the vape shops, which have neon signs and displays that are not in keeping with any South Shropshire town. From Ludlow over to Bridgnorth, we see them changing the shape of the high street. Residents do not like it, it is not appropriate and we need to call it out.

I am working with a rural crime officer; we have recently met with the chamber of commerce and local businesses in Ludlow. I am also working with a dedicated police officer in Bridgnorth specifically to look at this problem. It is a complex issue, but we are asking local residents to feed into the police and me any operations on the high street that they believe are illegal. We need to do everything we can to ensure that genuine local businesses can thrive and to get rid of shops that do not belong there, that present a blight on the high street and, in many cases, are fronts for organised crime that need to be closed down.

10.25 am

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms Vaz. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on securing this important debate.

I pay tribute to the invaluable work of Opportunity Bromley and Your Bromley in my constituency to support big and small local businesses. I particularly want to single out Your Bromley, which works tirelessly to make sure that Bromley's high street is an attractive and enjoyable place to visit and shop. In just the past week it held its Floral Fest, which transformed Bromley high street with colourful planter displays inspired by this year's theme, "Growing Together". I look forward to continuing to work with them to support the high street in the weeks and months ahead.

Bromley and Biggin Hill needs its high streets to thrive. Some 21.5% of my constituents are employed in the hospitality, retail and leisure industries, but our high streets, like many across the country, have suffered under this Government's constant attacks. The business rates hike alone, which was forced on local high streets by the Treasury, has faced some high streets with average rateable value increases of up to 82%, meaning thousands of pounds in extra costs.

The Conservatives have a real plan to back our high streets, starting with the introduction of a permanent 100% business rates relief for the retail, leisure and hospitality sector in England. That relief would benefit 250,000 businesses, including many in my constituency, and deliver substantial savings that could be reinvested in better premises, more staff and lower prices, as well as lifting thousands out of business rates altogether.

We need our high streets. They are the centres of our communities, but if the Government do not see the pain that they are inflicting on businesses up and down the country, they will ensure the death of the high street. I will always stand up for the small businesses that are the backbone of our economy in Bromley and Biggin Hill.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): I thank hon. Members very much; everyone got in, and we now come to the wind-ups.

10.26 am

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms Vaz. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) on introducing this important debate, on the constructive spirit in which he introduced the subject and on his generosity in taking interventions. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) rightly highlighted the issue of business rates; they need to be abolished and replaced with an entirely different system, which I will come back to.

High streets are at the heart of our communities. In Taunton and Wellington we have a great range of independent traders, shopkeepers and hospitality businesses. Footfall in Taunton is up by 4.6%, which is way above the national average, in large part due to their efforts and work to promote the independent quarter and other parts of our town. However, they are struggling against the backdrop of energy costs, the difficult financial environment and those dishonest traders who do not play by the same rules as the rest of us.

We cannot allow our high streets to become sites of decline. In Taunton, thanks to the team of councillors, trading standards officers and local police, a number of shops have rightly been shut down—a crackdown that I called for and supported when it happened. Although I am encouraged by the Government's measures on

closures, they must go further on this issue. I reiterate the call I made on behalf of the Liberal Democrats in this Chamber a few weeks ago: there need to be greater powers for police officers to issue closure orders more swiftly and permanently close down repeat offenders and, as other hon. Members raised, measures need to be taken against dodgy landlords who knowingly and repeatedly let their premises to illegal traders.

All those changes must come alongside investment in proper community policing to curb not only that kind of activity, but antisocial behaviour and shoplifting, which drive customers away. The Liberal Democrats would call on the National Crime Agency to establish a dedicated unit to tackle organised shoplifting gangs and give small businesses the tools they need to protect themselves.

Several hon. Members rightly raised planning controls. Someone walking down many of our high streets will find units that are technically occupied and trading but with shop windows deliberately blacked out with various coverings. It is a simple point, but a shop usually has a shop window and a display, not an opaque screen hiding the internal activities from view. The window on to the street provides natural surveillance into and out from the premises. It is an invitation to the customer, and what makes the high street feel alive—it is part of its aesthetic appeal. Although it is difficult to quantify, that is incredibly valuable to the vitality that makes our town centres places where people want to go. Planning enforcement could be used to enforce that principle.

If a business converts its shopfront into a blank wall or an entirely blacked-out façade, it is no longer operating as a retail unit in the traditional sense of the word. Planning use classes A and E define what a shop is, and both those classes include several mentions of a display. With an amendment to the guidance to clarify that one feature of a shop is a display of some sort or a shop window, enforcement action could be taken, and a stop notice could be issued under the Planning Act 2008, requiring unauthorised use to end. I urge the Government to include that measure in their review of powers, as well as addressing the issue of illuminated signs, which was raised by several hon. Members.

We should all recognise that antisocial behaviour can be deeply traumatising; as well as bringing back proper community policing, the Liberal Democrats want more use of directly employed community safety wardens, and mobile CCTV to enforce localised issues such as fly-tipping and harassment. However, enforcement alone will not regenerate a high street. In Taunton and Wellington, I often speak to local traders who offer brilliant products and services, but they are under massive pressure to make ends meet, given the cost pressures and tax increases that have been levied. The Government increases in employers national insurance are a jobs tax, and they hit businesses hardest. That is why the Liberal Democrats oppose them at every opportunity. I call on the Minister to lobby the Treasury to reverse those increases and take more costs off our small businesses, which are the backbone of the UK economy and its single biggest sector.

In some cases, business rates now exceed rents and squeeze out the independent businesses that give high streets their character. Our long-standing position is clear: replace business rates with a system of commercial landowner levy, based on land value rather than capital

[Gideon Amos]

value, thereby shifting the burden from tenants to landowners and prioritising high streets in the process, stimulating the investment that we need. It is no matter how nice our high streets are if people cannot visit them, so we have called for bus fares to be cut to £1 for all. A family of four making a trip into Taunton from a nearby village have spent a significant sum at £3 each before they have spent a penny in a local shop. Homes above shops also have a transformative role, putting more people on to our high streets day and evening, weekday and weekend. The current policy framework allows for that, but shop owners often have neither the time, expertise or resources to navigate the system. We need more support for them to convert those spaces into residential use.

In conclusion, the Liberal Democrat asks are clear: swifter, stronger closure orders; penalties for landlords who turn a blind eye; planning enforcement against opaque store fronts; the reversal of employer national insurance rises; bus fares cut to £1; and more help to unlock homes above shops. Our great traders and small businesses deserve that support, and they will repay it in bucket loads if we give it to them.

10.33 am

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I welcome the new Minister to her place; I know that she has a background in these issues, and I look forward to working with her in the weeks, months or years ahead. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this debate. He is a great champion for his community. This issue is close to his heart, and given his previous career in local government he is very knowledgeable about it.

I welcome the opportunity to contribute to this debate. My hon. Friend mentioned a range of topics, which shows how much he is involved in his constituency and community, ranging from flaws in the banking hub criteria to the aesthetics of our high streets. I know that that comes from his time as leader of a local authority. I am also his Whip; after this morning, he can be guaranteed a good mention in dispatches later.

We have heard some entertaining and knowledgeable speeches from my colleagues. My hon. Friends the Members for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune), for South Shropshire (Stuart Anderson), for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) and for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and my right hon. Friends the Members for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) have shown their in-depth knowledge of the challenges in their constituencies.

Traditionally, high streets have been seen as indicators of the health of our economy, with the British Retail Consortium calculating that retail generates nearly £500 billion in annual sales and nearly 3 million jobs. According to the Office for National Statistics, around 4.4 million people work in businesses located on British high streets, which represents roughly 14% of all employment in the UK.

The contribution of the sector to the UK economy is vital to any Government seeking economic growth, especially regionally driven growth, which I have reason

to believe the incoming Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), is enthusiastic about. This growth will be much better able to sustain communities and help them thrive. It will empower local people, business owners and decision makers to improve the areas they know and love better than any centrally planned project ever could.

As I have said in previous debates, however, the high street is more than a place where cash, services and goods change hands. It is at the heart of our communities—a place where people can come together to catch up over a coffee or a beer, have a natter in the nail bar or have a quiet read in the local bookshop. The value of our high streets cannot be quantified by simple sums of money, or by the business rates or council tax that they generate for the Treasury and local government. They are so much more than that.

As has been outlined this morning, however, there is a sad story of decline on our high streets. Many factors explain that, and colleagues from across the House have touched on many of those, including the rise of online shopping, cost of living pressures, economic stagnation, high taxes on businesses, planning issues, poor local transport links and stretched public services. There are many causes of the problem, and many people lose out from dying high streets.

Perhaps the greatest tragedy is the impact on young people. Retail has always been one of the UK's great entry-level employers. It has given generations of young people their first job, taught customer services skills, teamwork and responsibility, and provided a pathway into management and business ownership. As Members will be aware following the publication of Alan Milburn's report, youth unemployment stands at a staggering 16.2%—an increase of almost two percentage points on last year; at the same time, youth employment has fallen. More than 3 million 16 to 24-year-olds across the country are unemployed and economically inactive.

We should ask ourselves a simple question: how many of those young people have been pushed out of work, or denied work in the first place, by the continuing decline of our high streets? Increases to the minimum wage, the surging cost of employer national insurance contributions and council tax hikes are just a few of the burdens heaped on to businesses, which have been pushed to the wire. In 2024 alone, more than 13,000 high street stores closed, and over the last two years the retail sector has lost almost 250,000 jobs. Every shop that closes represents not just another empty unit but another lost opportunity for someone hoping to take their first step into employment. If we genuinely care about tackling economic inactivity, we cannot ignore what is happening in our town centres and high streets.

The picture is no better for Britain's pubs. At this point, I had better declare an interest: I like being in pubs quite a lot. Changes to employer national insurance contributions have added around £7,200 a year to the wage bill of the average pub, which employs eight people. Layer on top of that business rate reforms, which were presented as a lifeline but for many businesses have proved to be anything but, and it becomes easy to understand why so many publicans are questioning whether they can continue. The consequences are stark: across Britain, two pubs close every day.

At the 2024 autumn Budget, the Chancellor promised to “permanently lower” business rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, telling Parliament that this would

help to level the playing field for our high streets. That ambition was welcome, but when the detail emerged many businesses concluded that the reforms would do the opposite. Rather than providing certainty, the changes have raised serious concerns that many larger retailers and hospitality businesses—the so-called anchor tenants that attract shoppers to our town centres—could face significantly higher costs. Those businesses generate footfall for everyone else. When a department store, a supermarket, a major retailer or a large hospitality venue closes, it is not just the business itself that suffers; small independent retailers, cafés and local shops lose passing trade.

Sir John Hayes: The Government need to know when to step back and when to step forward. They need to step back by reducing the costs that my hon. Friend has set out, and they need to step forward by restricting where businesses can be located. The Government should be obliging businesses to reinvest in the high street.

Paul Holmes: I agree entirely with my right hon. Friend. That is something that this Labour Government have never got to grips with.

Businesses already operating on tight margins face £40 billion of tax rises, including substantial increases in national insurance contributions, which will place further strain on them. I am delighted that colleagues on the Opposition Benches mentioned the Leader of the Opposition's pledge to abolish business rates for most high street businesses.

Alongside the economic challenges facing our high streets, we must also confront an uncomfortable truth, which many Members have mentioned: our constituents are increasingly concerned that some high street premises are being used not as genuine businesses but as vehicles for tax evasion, money laundering and organised crime. Those concerns are frequently raised in relation to certain cash-intensive businesses, including some barber shops, nail salons, mini-marts and vape shops. The overwhelming majority of those businesses are of course honest, hard-working enterprises that serve their communities and deserve our support, but the ones that are not undermine legitimate traders, distort competition and damage public confidence in our town centres.

Gareth Snell: The other point that I want to raise—this is the small part of the hon. Member's speech that I agree with—is that those places also tend to have people who are in indentured work or modern slavery, so there is a human impact as well as an economic one.

Paul Holmes: The hon. Member is absolutely right. As I will come to, we welcome the Government's early actions to tackle those businesses, but we think they could do more, and we offer our support in that.

The Government introduced the economic crime levy, which we support, ensuring that those operating within the regulated financial sector contribute towards tackling money laundering and wider economic crime. It reflected the principle that protecting the integrity of our economy is a shared responsibility. However, there is clearly more to do. Without properly resourced investigations, effective intelligence sharing and robust action by enforcement agencies, there is a risk that the powers will exist only on paper. Trading standards, local authorities, HM Revenue and Customs, the police, immigration enforcement and

the National Crime Agency all have a crucial role to play, but they need the resources and capacity to act. Evidence from trading standards professionals is particularly striking: 96% had encountered serious organised crime groups in their work.

My time is fast approaching. I hope there is cross-party agreement on how we can tackle such businesses on our high streets, but there is more work to do. The Conservative party has put forward a platform to enable our high streets to thrive. This Government's economic policies have damaged them. Maybe that will change when we have our new Prime Minister, but I sincerely doubt it.

10.42 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes), for his warm words welcoming me to my place. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) for securing this important debate, and I thank all Members for their passionate contributions, reflecting their commitment to their local high streets and to the people they represent.

High streets are integral to our communities. They are where people work, shop and spend time together. At their best, they are vibrant and welcoming places, supporting local communities and building pride in place. However, as Members have articulated, too many high streets face real challenges, from changing consumer habits to vacant units and declining footfall. In some areas, those challenges are compounded by the rise of businesses used as fronts for criminal activity. The Government are determined to address both sides of the challenge: to support regeneration and renewal, while tackling the unlawful activity that undermines all our high streets.

Thriving high streets do not just happen by accident. They require investment over a long period, planning, and a clear vision for the future—backed, crucially, by local leaders with powers to protect their towns and high streets. I understand that well; having served as a council leader, I know how passionate debates about high streets can become. Later this year, the Government will publish a cross-Government high street strategy, because saving our high streets needs a cross-Government approach. The strategy will be backed by £300 million to support the retail, leisure and hospitality sectors—I was pleased to meet with representatives of the hospitality sector last week—and to help them to reimagine the role of the high street in modern Britain.

Sir John Hayes: To do that, we must reimagine the role of Government. The Government need to stop their preoccupation with driving people online. How wonderful it would be if the Government suddenly said, "You can no longer do this online. You must do it face to face." Those personal interactions, with all their civilities and courtesies, make up the tapestry of civilised life.

Nesil Caliskan: I do not disagree with the right hon. Member. We have seen the impact of online retail, and I think it would be misleading to say that we are about to see its disappearance. Instead, we have an obligation to think about what our high streets might look like in the

[*Nesil Caliskan*]

future. Local communities want to be able to shape their high streets. The partnership between a local authority, businesses and residents can shape future high streets, not least through the commitment to densification—an important point made by a number of Members today.

Gareth Snell: As part of that densification process, I encourage the Minister to look at living accommodation in town centres and on our high streets. There are examples in Hanley, in Stoke-on-Trent, where new apartment blocks have driven footfall into the town centre while providing accommodation that meets the demands of local people. That model has worked incredibly well, and I hope the Government will consider it as part of the high street strategy.

Nesil Caliskan: Footfall is a key part of keeping our high streets alive. That comes partly through home building, but it also comes from ensuring variety on our high streets. A key part of the Government's high streets innovation partnership will involve working with selected places to set out new approaches, boost activity and support a shift towards a mixed use of high streets. Alongside that, the Government are investing almost £6 billion into Pride in Place programmes over the next decade to give communities the power and funding to transform their local areas.

Wendy Morton: I want to mention quickly something that I did not have time to talk about earlier. I welcome the funding that we have had for Brownhills, but will the Minister work with us to ensure that it goes to the areas of Brownhills town that we need it to reach? Would she accept that regeneration of the high street is critical?

Nesil Caliskan: I am very happy to work with the right hon. Member. I was about to say that I would be happy to meet her to talk about Ravenscourt, which I think she referred to in her speech, but I extend that to any part of her constituency that will benefit from the Government's Pride in Place funding.

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Nesil Caliskan: I will make a bit of progress, if that is all right.

Supporting high streets means Government backing our high streets. Each place—each town, high street and village—has a different personality and identity. The role of Government should be to support them and enhance the place they live in. The Government believe that people who live in those places know them best. That is why we are moving beyond a one-size-fits-all approach, equipping places with practical levers for change and shifting funding, decision making and accountability from Whitehall to the hands of mayors, councils, local businesses and residents.

The high streets rental auctions are a key example of that, giving councils the power to bring persistently vacant properties back into use. We have just announced £10 million to support the expansion and roll-out of that programme, helping councils to identify opportunities, engage landlords and get properties back into use. Alongside the community right to buy, now backed by

£61 million of funding, that will give local people a greater say in the future of their area. In my experience, local people are not short of opinions on how they want to shape their area, but crucial actions by Government are needed to back that vision.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Southport (Patrick Hurley), who spoke about the need to renovate older buildings. The Government have taken some good steps on that. Members today have called for changes to address the blight of betting shops and vape shops. The Government have taken some action with the gambling cumulative impact assessments, but I recognise that many are looking for further action, so that we can put a stop to the betting shops popping up all over our high streets. It is not enough simply to respond to change. We must empower local communities and provide the resources to those local communities and councils to shape their high streets.

The points hon. Members made about beautiful design and places looking nice are important. There is not a lot a local authority or community can do if people have to step over rubbish or, frankly, do not feel safe in the local park in the town centre. Design codes are important, as is the national planning policy framework.

Bradley Thomas: I thank the Minister for her speech. Will she implore her colleagues to restore beauty to the centre of the NPPF, and consider mandating design codes to local authorities, so that they can boost the aesthetic quality of their local area?

Nesil Caliskan: I thank the hon. Member for that important point. I recognise how passionate people are about that. The NPPF does set out some of that, but the truth is that beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Having been a council leader, I know how challenging that can be. It is important that the public realm is shaped by local people. The best examples are where there is co-production and co-operation between local partners, residents and businesses.

Sir John Hayes: Beauty is not in the eye of the beholder. As Keats said, beauty is truth, truth beauty. That truth is about recognising that the aesthetic of a place informs people's association with it. All my hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) is asking is for design codes to have statutory force and not simply be guidance, which is not enough.

Nesil Caliskan: I acknowledge that call, and I believe the NPPF goes some way towards doing it. I understand there may be gaps; Government will always be willing to look at that and work with the Local Government Association, for example, which supplies some of that guidance. Whether a statutory response is appropriate is yet to be debated. I am confident that the NPPF provides what is necessary. I do accept the point that the public realm is a key part of regenerating our high streets and town centres.

On the points about organised crime and illegal activity, I assure hon. Members that the Government recognise that we will not see high street regeneration or thriving town centres without tackling that head-on. Regardless of how many functions we devolve and high streets we regenerate, they simply will not thrive if illegal businesses are left to take hold. I recognise the concerns raised by

the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hamble Valley, that too many high street premises are being used as fronts for organised crime, facilitating money laundering, tax evasion, illegal working and the sale of illicit goods.

Although opinions may differ on what looks nice in relation to design codes, nobody wants to see illegal activity on our high streets and in our town centres. The Government have announced £30 million of investment over three years to target those businesses and crack down on the corrupt networks operating on our high streets. A sum of £20 million to strengthen national co-ordination and local enforcement will make a difference, which we are seeing already, with hundreds of so-called businesses conducting illegal activity targeted, visits to thousands of premises, hundreds of arrests and the seizure of millions of criminal proceeds.

We are strengthening the role of trading standards, which has been left for too long without the required resources, with £6 million to boost its capacity in priority areas. I recognise trading standards is still under pressure, and local government representatives frequently raise the subject with me. Alongside enforcement, we are strengthening powers to act quickly and effectively. I hear too often that local authorities want to take power but feel restricted. We are extending and reviewing closure powers, including consulting on increasing the maximum duration of closure orders to 12 months.

Dr Gardner: Absent landlords are a blight. In Longton town centre at the top of The Strand, there is a building without a roof following a fire, with several shops functioning underneath. Trying to get powers under section 215 to chase the landlord to undertake maintenance required is extremely difficult. Will the Minister look at how to make that process easier?

Nesil Caliskan: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss whether the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government can do something to support the local authority in rectifying that situation.

As I say, the Government are also extending and reviewing closure powers. We want to ensure a sustained, long-term response alongside that, so we have established a new high street organised crime unit to bring together government, law enforcement and partners. Over and over again, we have seen that a committed approach to data sharing and understanding the role of local government alongside intelligence from local policing can really make a difference in closing down illegal businesses.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): The extension of closure orders to 12 months would be very welcome. There was a closure order a few years ago in Gravesham, but the shop was still selling illegal cigarettes and even hormone replacement therapy medication literally that day and that month. I welcome the new powers, the strengthening measures and the focus on getting these criminals off our streets.

Nesil Caliskan: I thank my hon. Friend for reiterating that important point. The Government will make changes here in Westminster, but we have to ensure that those changes are embedded in our local communities, so that local authorities feel they have the agency, the powers and the resources they need to implement those changes, and that local businesses know what the legislative

framework is so that good businesses feel they are supported and illegal businesses know that they cannot get away with it. In essence, that is what helps to build thriving communities for our high streets and town centres.

Valerie Vaz (in the Chair): Order. The Minister may want to give the Member in charge two minutes to wind up.

Nesil Caliskan: Let me just address the points on business rates, Ms Vaz. Members will recognise that business rates are a long-standing issue. The Government are determined to remove barriers to investment. That is why we have introduced new multipliers that are worth over £1 billion per year and benefit more than 750,000 properties. They will give long-term certainty to high streets and businesses. We know that the cut must be a sustainably funded model, so the Government are paying for it through a high-value multiplier on the top 1% of the most expensive properties.

Pressures on businesses are complicated. Business rates play a part, but viable businesses depend on footfall, place-making of a high street and support from agencies such as the local authority and the public sector. A number of points have been raised, including about the importance of footfall, the role of public services relocating into high streets, making sure that family hubs exist where there is footfall, and densification through things such as banking hubs.

I thank hon. Members for their contributions, and I thank the hon. Member for Bromsgrove again for securing such an important debate.

10.58 am

Bradley Thomas: I am grateful to all Members across the House for their contributions, and to the Minister for her remarks.

It is clear that this issue is widespread. We all recognise the profound importance of strengthening our high streets and tackling the challenges at the centre of their trajectory of decay. I stress to the Minister that she needs to go back and speak to her colleagues and whoever the new Prime Minister may be about the importance of slashing business rates, and to colleagues in her Department about the importance of strengthening the role of design and beauty at the core of the NPPF. It cannot be overstated. When society does not get the basics right and places do not look good, we should never be surprised if investment and footfall do not follow.

I was pleased to hear the Minister talk about a review of closure powers, which is much needed across the country, and a focus on tackling organised high street crime and its effect on our communities. At the core, the Government have to be pragmatic. They have to take a long-term view rather than place short-term sticking plasters, and I hope the Minister will continue in the spirit that she projected when she was talking about the importance of those two aspects. I thank all Members for their contributions.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for regenerating local high streets and removing unlawful storefronts.

Nationally Significant Energy Infrastructure Projects

11 am

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the contribution of nationally significant energy infrastructure projects to communities.

It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Vaz. I am grateful for having secured the debate, and I welcome colleagues across the House who will want to contribute.

With this debate I seek to ask two simple questions. First, what contribution should nationally significant energy infrastructure projects make to the communities that host them? Secondly, how should communities be supported when they face disruption from significant energy projects? As the MP for Suffolk Coastal, a constituency that shoulders more of the burden than perhaps any other part of the country, I am well placed to ask those questions on behalf of my constituents.

It is often said that up to 30% of Britain's future energy will be generated in or transmitted through Suffolk Coastal, if planning permission is approved. We will host multiple significant infrastructure projects within a 10-mile radius, including LionLink at Walberswick; Sea Link near Aldeburgh; Sizewell C, which is Europe's largest energy project, in Leiston; and converter stations at Friston and Saxmundham. All those projects sit in or cut through nationally important landscapes: sites of special scientific interest, the Suffolk heritage coast and Royal Society for the Protection of Birds reserves, all served by B roads and country lanes and all arriving at once, without any co-ordination, and some projects without any serious community benefit.

I have raised this issue many times in the House, and the Minister has heard about it in much detail, both in this Chamber and one to one. He will be glad to know that I am here not to repeat many of those points but to set out new challenges and alternatives. I remind him, though, that my constituents are not opposed to clean energy—many are proud that Suffolk will be leading the charge against climate change in our drive towards green energy and away from fossil fuels—but they are taking on enormous disruption.

Suffolk Coastal's dashboard is now flashing red, and we are asking for more help. Businesses, people, community and nature are all asking for more help. The community investment programme should be the main opportunity to provide it, but we need better leadership. I ask Government to do what the previous Government failed to do: to provide leadership, which will sometimes mean challenging developers and telling them that my community and this country deserve better.

I want to set out what the Government have done, and I do not want my case to be mistaken for opposition to their policy. In March 2025, the Government published the "Community funds for transmission infrastructure" guidance, which included £200,000 per kilometre of overhead line, £530,000 per substation or converter station, and bill discounts of up to £250 a year for 10 years for nearby households.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady; I spoke to her beforehand to ascertain her intentions. The Government proposals for mandatory

community benefit funds and local bill discounts are a welcome step forward, and we should look at the positives. Working families see only increased energy prices and no benefit. Does the hon. Lady agree that robust statutory enforcement mechanisms should be put in place to ensure that developers cannot simply tick a corporate social responsibility box? Does she further agree that the Government must guarantee that such projects deliver real, permanent economic legacies, such as localised grid upgrades, direct household bill reductions and long-term apprenticeships? If they do those three things, we will go a long way. I ask the Minister to make it better.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I agree with a lot of what the hon. Gentleman says. The projects that we are discussing should deliver that as part of their long-term investment, and many of those things do not need to sit within the community investment programme itself.

The guidance also included an obligation for the transmission owners, National Grid and ScottishPower Renewables, to run grant programmes, ranging from £10,000 grassroots grants up to £500,000 strategic grants. Importantly, the guidance rests on five key principles, including lasting legacy and transparent outcomes. If the developers depart from the guidance, they must explain why. It is a serious framework and the Government deserve credit for it. But the rates are recommended rates, not diktats. They should be the minimum, not the maximum. In Suffolk Coastal, we are seeing the minimum rather than the maximum far too often.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. She is making an important point about the fact that we need not just the minimum but the maximum. We need really strong commitments. The Cleve Hill solar development in the village of Graveney in my constituency is huge. It has obliterated 900 acres of agricultural land and marshland. While it has been in construction, there has been enormous disruption to the local village and schools, and damage to the roads and to people's properties. I want my constituents to get proper compensation and ongoing economic benefit—not just lip service in the form of a playground or cycle path, but something that recognises the massive impact of the development on their lives.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I could not agree more. We need to make sure that we compensate for the impact, especially when projects are built out. I will come to that later in my speech.

The National Grid's Sea Link energy transmission project, a 138-kilometre interconnector between Pegwell bay in Kent and Suffolk Coastal, has a proposed community fund of £2.1 million, split between Kent and Suffolk. Let me break that down: that is roughly 0.1% of Sea Link's total project budget. For a project that cuts through some of the most important nature sites in our country, in a county proud of nature-based tourism, 0.1% is not an investment strategy; it is a rounding error. It might meet the letter of the guidance, but it falls far short on delivering for our communities. The guidance is explicit that funds should deliver lasting benefits. I want a community-owned energy fund that is locally owned, locally governed and delivers permanent accountable benefit.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows, the other part of that project is hosted partly in my constituency, and we agree that £2.1 million is a rounding error in the National Grid's project budget. Does she agree that if we are to establish properly the principle of host communities being able to truly benefit from the energy infrastructure that they will be home to, there should be proper accountability? An energy foundation should be established to benefit that community for energy purposes, rather than it being bought off with playgrounds or university fees for a handful of residents.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: It will not surprise you, Ms Vaz, that I agree with every point that my hon. Friend just made. She and I have spoken about this at length. I was about to say that under the current Sea Link plans—the £2.1 million rounding error of investment—my community is likely to have to bid for £20,000 funding pots. We can barely get a spade in the ground for a playground for £20,000. We want access to bigger sums that can deliver real ambition from these projects in the long term, where and when we need it.

It is worth noting that under National Grid's plans, training opportunities sit inside the community fund and are counted against the total. That is plainly wrong. Local jobs should be a contractual commitment built into the design project, not a line inside a community fund. The guidance states that community funds are not in addition to benefits such as local employment; I gently suggest that some developers have not read the guidance.

I have raised many times the fact that there is no legal duty on nationally significant infrastructure projects to co-ordinate, even when building in the same area at the same time and impacting the same community. The Minister has heard me talk about this at length. My community is expected to host multiple billion-pound schemes simultaneously without statutory tools to enforce co-ordination. Ofgem now chairs co-ordination meetings, which is welcome, but it can only convene, and there is no obligation to attend and no powers to compel change. Co-ordination by good will is not co-ordination, and there is not even a requirement for community funds to be co-ordinated. In my constituency, we will likely see Sea Link and LionLink running separate investment programmes while co-locating on adjacent land.

My constituents are therefore asking for three things: better management of the cumulative impact on businesses and communities; to be properly compensated when disruption causes real harm in real time; and genuine ambition to protect and nurture nature in how projects are designed and delivered.

That brings me to my second and most important question, as I set out at the beginning. The Theberton Lion in Theberton has lost around £35,000 in trade this year because of road construction for Sizewell C. The landlord, Tom, sees the benefits that Sizewell C will eventually bring, but his business needs help now. Road closures, continual roadworks outside his pub and poor signage have all had a very real effect. The community investment fund is generous, and Sizewell C's investment fund is held up nationally as what good community investment should look like, but it is not being used to support businesses that are struggling with the real impacts of construction today.

Similarly, the Refill shop in Leiston tells the same story. Amanda runs the shop and, just like Tom, is not against Sizewell C, but her business is struggling today because of the construction works disruption. The support on offer does not reach her, because the strategy has not been designed to help businesses to manage the day-to-day impact.

Mr Angus MacDonald (Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire) (LD): The Minister knows that in the highlands we have had three massive pump storage sites move to the next level of development. Cumulatively, they will store 4 GW in an area that has the highest fuel poverty in Britain, at a cost of £5 billion. At the moment, the pumps will do very little for the highland economy, as there will be almost no local jobs, no legacy housing and no community benefit. It is a sorry state; it is all downside and no upside for the people of the highlands. I would love to see that addressed.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I feel the hon. Member's pain, and I share many of his frustrations in the arguments that I am laying out today. If our communities are hosting vital infrastructure, they should feel the benefit.

I was talking about Amanda, who runs the Refill shop in Leiston. Her business is struggling and she needs support today. These businesses could flourish once construction is complete. Neither Amanda nor Tom is asking for extra money; they are just asking that the generous £250 million already committed by Sizewell C for community investment be made accessible to businesses that are genuinely feeling the impact right now. Millions of pounds from Sizewell C's fund has already reached citizens advice, Home-Start Suffolk and local schools and sports clubs. That is great, as it is genuine, lasting community benefit. But businesses are also asking for support to survive. We need to hear that cry for help.

Do the Government agree that National Grid's £2.1 million for Sea Link meets the standards set by their own March 2025 guidance? If not, what action will follow? Will the Government ask Ofgem to review the fund's adequacy before consent is granted? Will they back communities asking for a community-owned fund, as the guidance's own principles support? Will they look at the impact of Europe's largest energy construction project on businesses in my constituency, and what can be done to support those who are struggling because of it?

Villages and market towns in my constituency are breaking under the strain of these projects—they are flashing red on the dashboard. We are asking for help, and for the Government to step in where unintended consequences risk affecting the legacy of projects such as Sizewell C. My constituents want to be equal partners around the table, and they deserve to be treated as such. I urge the Government to enforce the framework they have built, and to make clear that communities like Suffolk Coastal should not accept less than they are owed, nor pay the price for the UK's energy goals.

11.13 am

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship today, Ms Vaz.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) not only for securing the debate but for all the conversations we have had. She should never fear repeating the same message; it is

[*Michael Shanks*]

important. She does a great job championing her community in this place; she has always sought to do so, in all the meetings I have had with her. I might add that she has also sought to be constructive, as she reflected in her opening remarks. Her constituents are not against the move to clean power, and know how important it is, but they recognise that there are impacts locally. That is a really important place to be on this issue.

Communities that host nationally significant infrastructure obviously experience disruption and change, and that comes with real consequences. I understand the challenges that such infrastructure places on communities at a local level, and it is right that we not only take account of those concerns when they are raised but do everything we can to provide those people with the community benefits. They are hosting infrastructure on behalf of the nation, and they should benefit from that.

This important debate also comes to the heart of the broader question facing the country, and why we have, as a Government, decided to move even further and faster to deliver the infrastructure that not only delivers economic growth and energy security, but gets us off fossil fuels as quickly as possible. Infrastructure does matter, and I am not going to shirk away from making the argument that after a long period of not building the infrastructure this country needs, we have to build it. But communities have to be at the heart of that decision as well.

It is great to see that some young people have joined us for the debate, because at the heart of our reason for building this infrastructure is the future of our planet, as well as our energy security right now. For decades, we have not done enough to tackle the climate crisis, but neither have we done enough to safeguard ourselves from the volatility of fossil fuels, which has put all our bills up year after year. That is what this is all about, and I know my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal absolutely supports that point.

It is also an economic opportunity. Just last week, we hit the huge milestone of £100 billion of investment in clean energy since this Government came to office almost exactly two years ago. That is creating jobs and boosting our energy security. As I have said, every wind turbine, every solar panel, every nuclear power station and every bit of transmission line that we build helps to create a more secure and resilient energy system now and in future. I do not say that lightly, as if building those projects does not come at any cost for people locally. New infrastructure does mean difficult decisions, and there will always be local impacts. I fully recognise that will bring concerns for local residents, just as much as it brings huge opportunities nationally.

My hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal powerfully outlined some examples of the impact of Sizewell C, one of the most important energy projects that we are building. The last time we built a nuclear power station in this country, I was not even born, so it is really important that we push forward on those projects. However, I recognise that the scale of Sizewell C has an impact on roads and local businesses. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend again to talk specifically about that point; I would also be happy to set up a

meeting with her and the team at Sizewell C, because I know that they are also seized of the importance of getting this right.

I should also say that this is partly why we have a rigorous planning system. All nationally significant infrastructure projects have to address the cumulative impacts to which my hon. Friend referred, and there are many opportunities for communities to have their say. I recognise that communities do not always feel that that is taken into account, but I say genuinely that it is taken into account. Projects have to demonstrate that they have considered the cumulative impact of other NSIPs as part of their process through the system.

I have said that communities providing a service to the country by hosting this infrastructure have to benefit from it. We have already taken decisive steps to ensure that they have tangible and lasting benefits. For the first time ever, we have announced community benefits from network infrastructure: direct bill discounts for consumers, so that those closest to transmission lines and substation upgrades feel the benefit in their energy bills, but also wider community benefits, so that communities can benefit from funding. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and other hon. Members raised a point about long-term, sustainable and really impactful benefits. My constituency is close to some of the biggest onshore wind farms in Europe, and in truth we have not seen the long-lasting community benefits that we might have seen. This is about trying to shift that, so that there are real investments in communities.

Ms Billington: I recognise what my hon. Friend says, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Jenny Riddell-Carpenter) pointed out, these are guidelines at the moment rather than obligations. Because they are only guidelines, they can be ignored. Including things like jobs and traineeships within the community allowance limits the genuine potential benefit for host communities. We are grateful that we now have biodiversity net gain for nationally significant infrastructure projects. There should be a similar obligation to make sure that communities benefit and have ownership of and accountability for how that money is spent. I will say this now on the record: £2.1 million, as my hon. Friend said, is a rounding error. That should be multiplied by 10 if we are really going to get the benefit for our communities in the long term.

Michael Shanks: Let me come to both of those points. First, we are potentially confusing two different things. Community benefits for transmission infrastructure are mandatory; we have separately consulted on whether community benefits for wider energy projects should be mandatory, and we will respond to that consultation soon, because I recognise many of the points that have been made. What we do not want to do, though, is create one-size-fits-all solutions in Whitehall that will work differently in different communities. As a Minister, I do not want to sit here and say: "This is how your community benefit will work in your community." Instead, I want to empower communities to figure out how that works best in their local area. I have seen models of that in all the visits that I have made across the country.

The minimum standards should be there to make sure that the process is transparent, with communities and not developers in the driving seat, and that there is long-term certainty. I do not think that we should say

that play parks and cycle paths are bad things to invest in, but there should be some long-term investments alongside them. I have seen some good examples, just in the past few weeks, of that being done well. We need to separate out those two things.

I have wrestled with the cost point as well. In principle, I would like to see communities having even more community benefits, but we have to recognise that the cost of them will be borne by bill payers right across the country. The balance that we are trying to strike, as a Government determined to tackle the cost of living, is to have communities benefiting as much as they possibly can but without putting up bills significantly for all bill payers across the country, which would be a disproportionate impact at a time when the affordability crisis is our No. 1 priority.

Helen Whately: On the point about considering the community benefit, what counts as a community is really important. In some circumstances—this has come up in my local area—a large geographical area is considered as a community, even though the number of households that are very substantially affected is very small. It is what they want that should really matter. Yes, of course I care about what the wider community wants, but we need to think about the small number of households in which there has been a real impact on people's day-to-day lives.

Michael Shanks: I totally accept the hon. Member's point, although the point has been rightly raised that the impact of building these projects is often felt by a much wider community, which is why the community benefits are wider. I should also say that we have to separate questions of compensation from questions of community benefit. Compensation is paid, as part of a process, to those who have been significantly disrupted or whose land has been changed in whatever way: that is a contractual negotiation between a landowner or resident and a developer, and it is not for the Government to intervene in it. Community benefits are about a much wider view of how these projects benefit the wider community.

I take the point about the design of the community, which is really important. With something like the Sea Link offshore cable, it is sometimes hard to look at what the community around it would look like. We have wrestled with how to define it: there is a danger that if we have too broad a definition, the community benefit funds will not get to the people who would benefit most. There is probably more that we can do on that, and I am very open-minded about contributions from hon. Members on that point.

On the level of benefit—I know that these points have been raised before—the electricity bill discount will give the people living closest to the infrastructure money off their bills. We are seeking to remind people that the more of this infrastructure we build, the fewer constraints we have on the grid and the more we can get cheap, clean power into homes and businesses and bring down bills for everyone. There is an impact beyond the projects themselves.

Jenny Riddell-Carpenter: I do appreciate that argument, and I have toyed with saying this publicly, for good reason. Of course that is true, but in my constituency I also have lots of people who are off grid and are

reliant on heating oil. With a lot of this infrastructure being built and hosted in my community, many people will not feel the benefit if they are reliant on other forms of energy. Until we understand that, we will not get to the heart of the frustrations that people living in Suffolk Coastal and other rural areas feel about this upgrade.

Michael Shanks: I take that point, to an extent, although being off the gas grid does not mean being off grid from electricity, so those people will benefit from cheaper electricity bills. I think that electrification is the answer, to support households off heating oil wherever possible. I know that that is not possible in every case, but there will be a lot of households that we can move away from heating oil, which protects them in the long term. We have also provided support for people on heating oil in the ongoing middle east crisis.

We have produced a working paper and a call for evidence on community benefits, which we are going through at the moment. We are also going further around shared ownership of low-carbon infrastructure. This Government do not see this issue as being just about community benefits. It is also about how we get communities either owning the entirety of the infrastructure themselves and holding the wealth that is generated in their community, or at least owning a share in it.

To their credit, in the Infrastructure Act 2015 the previous Government—although I suspect that they may not have realised this when they passed the Act—created a power to allow shared ownership. It was never enacted. We are now seeking to work out how to enact it so that communities can genuinely own a share. We know the difference that it makes: ownership matters, because it puts communities right in the driving seat when it comes to what they spend that money on. Whether they choose to make long-term or shorter-term decisions would be in their hands. That makes a hugely important difference to communities, as I have seen on visits.

Ms Billington: That is definitely the case for renewable energy generation projects, but we are talking about infrastructure projects. There needs to be some kind of mechanism by which we have some ownership and accountability for the communities that are hosting infrastructure projects. There particularly needs to be an energy foundation that allows them to reduce their energy bills, which would also take some of the overall burden off the grid.

Michael Shanks: I do not think we are disagreeing. Energy generation projects are infrastructure projects: whether the community owns them or not, the infrastructure still needs to be built. I would just like to see more communities owning those projects. We said in the local power plan that we want to make it possible to sell power locally, which would actively bring down bills, and for that wealth to be held locally. The grid and network infrastructure has to be built alongside that, which in previous years has not happened as much as it should have.

One of the biggest changes, which my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal mentioned, has been about the cumulative impact and the sense that there has not been sufficient planning or a strategic approach. We will shift that with the national strategic spatial

[*Michael Shanks*]

energy plan and, from that, the centralised network plan. We should have been doing that years ago. We have built lots of renewables projects, but have not worked out how we are connecting them to the grid. That is costing us in constraint payments, but it also means that we do not have as strategically aligned a grid as we should have. Unfortunately, we have to start from where we are. We will plan it more strategically moving forward, but I recognise my hon. Friend's points.

Returning to the central point of this debate, I recognise that communities should absolutely be at the forefront of the energy transition. We want to see much more community and shared ownership as well as partnerships with communities, but the Government are also unashamedly building the energy infrastructure that this country needs to weather the uncertain world we live in today. That will protect us in the future and unlock huge economic benefits from electrification and the industries of the future. That means building things, and they have to be built somewhere.

My hon. Friend has frequently made the point that she agrees, but that she thinks Suffolk Coastal has faced a disproportionate number of those projects. I have some sympathy with her. We have to do everything we can to make sure that her communities and others like them benefit. The hon. Member for Inverness, Skye and West Ross-shire (Mr MacDonald) made a point about pumped-storage hydro, which is an example of the infrastructure our country needs. We need to get the community benefits right that come with these projects.

We have made huge progress in two years, but I am not going to stand here and say that the job is done. We need to continue to make sure that communities benefit as much as possible—not least because, in a fractured debate on the energy transition, we have a job to do to convince the public that this is a journey that benefits all of us. It will bring down bills and protect us in an uncertain world. Fundamentally, if communities are hosting it, they are doing the country a favour and we thank them for it, but they should also get some benefit.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal again for securing the debate. I look forward to meeting with her again; she should never fear bringing up these issues with me again and again, because they are hugely important. I take them seriously, and so do the Government. I hope that together we will find a way through.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Antisemitism: University Campuses

[*SIR JOHN HAYES in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab):
I beg to move,

That this House has considered antisemitism on university campuses.

I want to begin by paying tribute to the Union of Jewish Students for its stellar work to represent Jewish students and fight antisemitism. I also thank Jewish communal bodies for all their work on this issue and more widely.

This debate is deeply personal for me. I am not Jewish, but my experience at university alongside Jewish students helped to shape the person and the politician I am today. When I was a student at the University of Leeds in 2008, I decided to stand with the Jewish society. Even then, despite not having a deep or ingrained knowledge of the issues surrounding Israel, Palestine or modern antisemitism, I could see that my fellow students were subject to racism and discrimination just because they were Jewish.

As a member of the Labour party, a party for which equality is a core value, that shocked and appalled me. As chair of the university Labour club, I stood by Jewish students. As a sabbatical officer on the student union executive, I stood by Jewish students. Now, 20 years later, having had the honour and privilege of being elected by the good people of Leeds South West and Morley as their Member of Parliament, I stand with Jewish students again, as I always will.

We must be clear at the outset about the scale of the problem and its source. We must also be clear that those who deny that there is a problem are part of it. As the Community Security Trust has detailed forensically, antisemitism soared on our campuses following the 7 October attacks, rising by 413% between 2022-23 and the following academic year. October 2023 saw over a year's worth of antisemitic incidents in just one month.

A poll commissioned by the UJS and published this year found that a quarter of all students—25%—do not care very much, or at all, if Jewish students are forced to hide their identity on campus. Even more shockingly, 20% of students say that they would be reluctant to, or would never, live with a Jewish student. Antisemitism has, in the words of the UJS, become “normalised on campus”.

We will never be able to grasp or tackle this crisis until we recognise that it is driven primarily by antisemitic anti-Zionism, the ugly form in which centuries of Jew-hate finds its most virulent expression today. The CST says that over 70% of the antisemitic incidents that it recorded in higher education last year were overtly related to Israel and the middle east, while also demonstrating anti-Jewish hate or motivation.

I must be crystal clear: this is not about the legitimate criticism of the policies of the Israeli Government—goodness knows, I have been a critic. That criticism is expressly protected in the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of antisemitism. Nor is this about the legitimate protests that people carry out in support of the Palestinian people.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I commend the hon. Member for his unity and solidarity with Jewish students and Jewish people. Does he agree that conflating Israel with all Jewish people is also something that should be avoided, as it can lead to an increase in antisemitism?

Mark Swards: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. The purpose of the debate is to talk about antisemitism on campus, what drives it and how we can solve it. I want to be clear that a lot of what drives antisemitism on campus today relates to the denial of the equally legitimate right of the Jewish people to self-determine—there is no question but that that is one of the causes. It is about abusing some of the most precious aspects of our democracy. The right to free expression and the right to protest are being twisted to intimidate, harass and abuse Jewish students, in pursuit of a cause that we often see animated by racism, hatred and violence. That is why half of all students have heard chants or slogans that glorify Hamas, Hezbollah or other antisemitic terror organisations. It is why similar numbers of students have witnessed the 7 October attacks, the bloodiest day in Jewish history since the Holocaust, being justified.

This is what globalising the intifada means in the real world. It is the student trying to take her biology exam while chants calling for the destruction of Israel and praising terrorists who massacred Jews on 7 October were screamed through a megaphone outside. It is the student who had to listen to their lecturer saying that hostage taking was

“the only way for Palestinians to negotiate.”

It is the students who have witnessed so-called pro-Palestine societies holding bake sales on Holocaust Memorial Day and the anniversary of the 7 October attacks.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. Not many people know this, but on my father's side I have Jewish ancestry, so I have an affiliation with Israel. With Jewish students across the UK describing the last couple of years as among the worst that they have ever experienced for antisemitism, does the hon. Member agree that the Government and colleges have a great deal of work to do to change mindsets so that Jewish students feel safe on their campuses?

Mark Swards: The hon. Member is absolutely right. Later in my speech, I will come on to what I think the Government should be doing, but as the hon. Member mentions colleges, I will say that the Government should adopt David Bell's recommendations once he has completed his review into antisemitism in schools and colleges. We have to stamp this out wherever we find it.

The effort to stigmatise, isolate and harass Jewish students has even, on occasion, been accompanied by physical violence. Last year, I was pleased to return to Leeds JSoc to hear the first-hand testimony of Jewish students. They told me of being taunted by shouts of “Free Palestine” when they were going to Shabbat dinner at Hillel House, an event that had nothing to do with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. They told me what it feels like to have a lecturer boast of how proud he was of seeing his son arrested for supporting a proscribed terrorist organisation. In some instances, they also told

me personally that they were hiding their identity from their flatmates because of the fear of how they might react.

Peter Fortune (Bromley and Biggin Hill) (Con): The hon. Member is making an incredibly important speech. As someone who has visited the site of the Nova music festival, I have sensed some of the horrific slaughter and how awful that must be for those generations who are living with it. Referring to what the lecturer said, what powers should universities have to discipline members of staff who make such outrageous statements?

Mark Swards: Having stood on the same site, I know just how powerful it is. Those people must be remembered for all time. I will come on later to recommendations for the Government; I realise that time is getting on, and I want to make some progress, but I will address the hon. Member's point later.

Abuse and intimidation on our campuses is not just directed at Jewish students. Rabbi Deutsch, the university's Jewish chaplain, was hounded, bullied and, with his family, forced into hiding after death threats—that was at Leeds University again. Beyond Leeds, Jewish academics and staff on campuses have been subject to appalling antisemitism. Israeli professor Michael Ben-Gad was targeted by activists last year. He was threatened with beheading, and mass protesters stormed his teaching and his classes. Professor David Hirsh, a world-renowned expert on antisemitism, was forced to quit the University and College Union, of which he himself had been a founding member, because he found it intolerable to stay. Quite rightly, we would never accept such behaviour being directed at any other group of students or staff from any other minority background. In Britain in 2026, Jewish students and staff should not and must not be denied the safety, dignity and respect that we expect all students and staff to be afforded.

Although it has obviously worsened considerably over the past three years, antisemitism on our campuses is not a new problem. Fifty years ago, anti-Israel activists on British campuses responded to the passage of the UN's now infamous “Zionism is racism” resolution by attempting to ban Jewish student groups who supported the idea of a Jewish state, in effect banning huge numbers of Jewish students from campus. Half a century on, technology has exacerbated the challenge. The Antisemitism Policy Trust has rightly warned:

“Campus antisemitism is the direct physical consequence of the online ecosystem. Social media platforms, AI chatbots, search engines and computer games have allowed extreme, conspiratorial antisemitism to shift from the dark fringes of the web into the mainstream student experience.”

Two aspects are particularly noteworthy. The first is the manner in which well-networked extreme student groups operate anonymously, allowing them—sometimes in co-ordination with hostile state actors, it has to be said—to launch harassment campaigns against Jewish staff and students, with little or no risk of ever facing exposure or discipline.

Secondly, no 18-year-old arrives at university without exposure to social media and what the APT terms “algorithmic grooming”. This speaks to a wider point. Campuses are not hermetically sealed bubbles. We know that through the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps—the nefarious IRGC—Tehran and its media mouthpieces are seeking to radicalise young people here, spread

[Mark Sowards]

antisemitism and amplify anti-Israel activism and narratives. In recent years, IRGC commanders have addressed UK-based student groups in online seminars, urging them to become “holy warriors” in an “apocalyptic war” against the Jews. Universities, one of them suggested, “have become the battlefield”, and they are calling them to arms.

We must not allow our seats of higher education and learning, which at their best should promote, cultivate and guard the Enlightenment values of reason, tolerance and freedom of expression, to become incubators of extremism, fundamentalism and hatred. Too many universities have been too slow, too timid and too ineffectual in tackling antisemitism. In some instances, they have failed Jewish students and staff, the wider student body and the very purpose and principles underpinning academia and university life.

That brings me on to my actions and what I ask of the Minister today. In the face of this challenge, I commend the action that the Government have already taken, especially the Prime Minister’s announcement that universities will be required to publish information on the scale of the problem on their campuses, as well as the specific steps that they will take to clamp down on it. I believe—to go back to what the hon. Member for Bromley and Biggin Hill (Peter Fortune) said—that the Government should also consider the establishment of a statutory framework for the investigation and disciplinary handling of hate crime incidents in higher education and universities. The Charity Commission, the Office for Students and other regulatory bodies should all be empowered to ensure proper conduct and strengthen student union accountability, implementing sanctions where unions fail to address antisemitism. Higher education should be designated as a priority area for the extremely welcome Government agenda, “Protecting What Matters”, which was announced in March this year; it contains a lot of good material, but not necessarily the timelines in which to deliver it.

I note that in the past UJS has provided a vital early warning system about emerging extremist threats. For instance, in the cases of the neo-Nazi National Action group and the Islamist Hizb ut-Tahrir, the Government have followed with proscription, recognising that a threat on campuses soon becomes a wider threat to the safety of everyone.

I would very much appreciate it if the Minister could clarify a few points. What is the timetable for implementing the measures set out in the “Protecting What Matters” strategy? Will he ensure that higher education is a priority area? Will the Government consider UJS’s proposal for formalised taskforces to better co-ordinate action by the police, universities and Government to combat criminality and extremist activity on our campuses? That includes the provision of clear public order guidance for universities and the police, to strengthen the enforcement of both new and existing powers. Finally, will the Government consider the proposals developed by the Antisemitism Policy Trust to tackle the threat posed by social media? That includes developing a dedicated strategy to address the role of algorithms, gaming platforms, encrypted online networks and generative AI systems in facilitating the spread of antisemitic conspiracy theories, extremist narratives and online-to-offline radicalisation.

I want to acknowledge the work of Jewish societies, student unions and university administrators. Some of them are doing tremendous work right now to deal with this problem. I will give three quick examples. King’s College London adopted UJS’s antisemitism awareness training, working with it to adapt that important resource for many of its staff. Keele University’s campus security team responded to the appalling attacks on the Jewish community in north London by inviting Jewish students to speak about their concerns and what they can do to address them. In communications with all students, City St George’s student union in London encouraged them not to engage with City Action for Palestine, which has repeatedly shared content supportive of terrorism and proscribed organisations.

I will end today with where it all began for me. This year, I had the privilege of attending one of Leeds University JSoc’s Friday night dinners, one of the first I had attended in 18 years. The invitation described it as a small gathering, but I was delighted to find that it was a rather less intimate event than that. There were over 150 students there, and there had been 300 the week before; I think the lower attendance in the week I came was not because of me, but because it was half-term. It was a pleasure to be there and to speak to as many students as possible. Around the tables, some students were discussing their studies. Many spent the evening gossiping and making new friends—everything that student life should be about for everyone.

Our Jewish fellow citizens are not asking very much from us: simply the right for their children and grandchildren to expect and enjoy the same experiences at university, with all its new opportunities, discoveries and challenges, that so many of us cherished and enjoyed.

2.47 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your guidance in the Chair this afternoon, Sir John, and a genuine privilege to follow the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards); I congratulate him on making an excellent speech, on putting this issue forward and on giving it the prominence that it deserves. Like him, I was a sabbatical union officer—some time before him, I suspect.

In the late ’80s and early ’90s, I was a member of the national executive of the National Union of Students, when the marvellous Maeve Sherlock, now Baroness Sherlock, was president, followed a year after by a friend of many of us here, Stephen Twigg. I remember the role that the Union of Jewish Students played not just through the Jewish society in Newcastle University, where I went, but nationally. It was a place where I felt safe as a non-Jewish person spending time with Jewish students who just wanted to talk about the things that students mulled over in the late ’80s—normally the fate of Margaret Thatcher and other such things.

I was aware even then, in a perhaps less fevered time, of the threats to Jewish people, as someone who comes from a gentile background and a relatively non-diverse part of north-west England. As I became friends with many in the JSoc at Newcastle, I understood what it means to live life as a Jewish person and the persecution that is always around the corner. Antisemitism is perhaps the oldest and most insidious form of racism—and all forms of racism are thoroughly evil. I pay tribute to the

UJS again today for the work it is doing in even more fevered and dangerous times: supporting its members, reassuring Jewish families and challenging university establishments so that they actively take care of Jewish students and positively fight against antisemitism on campuses.

I recall being in this place a week or a fortnight after the 7 October pogrom. I was in Portcullis House at about 8 o'clock in the evening, and saw two Jewish friends of mine having a cup of tea in the atrium, as everything else had closed. "Why are you still here at this time?" I asked them, and their answer was, "I don't feel safe going out in this"—there were, of course, anti-Israel, pro-Palestine protests taking place on the street right around Westminster.

As the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley said, it is perfectly legitimate to strongly criticise the Israeli Government; I do it all the time. Netanyahu is an appalling man and the current Israeli Government are guilty of all sorts of terrible actions. That is probably the view of the majority of citizens in Israel, and we await an election there with some eagerness. Nevertheless, let us remind ourselves what it means for two young Jewish people to feel that they cannot leave this building when there are protests of that sort going on outside. Give me all the what ifs and what abouts—that does not change the fact that two Jewish people felt unsafe walking on our streets.

All of us here have security at our surgeries these days. We regret that we have to have it, but after the deaths of our dear friends Jo Cox and David Amess, we accept it. Last week, I was talking to the security guard at my surgery in Kendal. He said his work has increasingly been around Greater Manchester supporting Jewish communities at primary school gates and synagogues. It occurred to me that I can just walk into our local primary school and go to my church without any thought whatsoever of security. Yet for some Jewish people in our communities, these are not safe spaces to go.

We have heard accurate reports of Jewish children who go to Jewish schools being told not to wear their uniform on public transport. That should make us shudder and feel totally appalled. In the past couple of years, I have been privileged, as many Members have, to meet with the hostages' families. We post supportive comments on social media and then see the bile we get for having done that. That gives us a tiny fraction of a sense of what it must be like to be Jewish in this utterly toxic environment.

Earlier this year, I was privileged to do something that I had never done before: I took advantage of a four-day visit to the west bank and Israel. I am obviously not an expert from having spent that time there, but it gave me great insight. It gave me the opportunity to meet with victims of the Nova festival massacre and visit a kibbutz where Hamas murderers—racist, violent thugs—attacked and murdered people in front of their children and children in front of their parents. I got a sense of why the people of Israel feel a sense of utter and complete collective trauma. Unless we understand that, we will not have wise reactions to what is happening.

Again, that does not change the fact that I am a complete opponent of the current Israeli Government, but we can separate that from the question of believing that the state of Israel has a right to exist and the people of Israel have a right to self-determination. I saw how

appalling the illegal settlements on the west bank are. I saw how the Israeli Government withholds tax money from the Palestinian Authority in the west bank. That is costing schools and hospitals and causing active harm. I spoke to many Palestinians and saw many things that I am deeply angry at the Israeli Government for, but I also saw a country that is the only liberal democracy in the middle east, which we should be careful to respect.

I also recognise how important Israel is in the hearts and minds of so many Jewish people around the world and in this country. If we conflate the Jewish people with the state of Israel, and especially with the actions of the current Israeli Government, we will have sadly tip-toed, if not strode confidently, into antisemitism.

The Minister will be unsurprised to hear me ask: what can we proactively do to tackle antisemitism in education? My constituency may not be the most diverse, but, as the Minister and hon. Members will know, it is the place where half of the children who survived the Nazi death camps were rehabilitated in August 1945. They are collectively known as the Windermere children, and we are deeply proud of their legacy. Some are still with us, but sadly most have now passed on. Their story is one of the horrors of the consequences of antisemitism in Europe in the 1930s and 1940s, but there is a little extra something to the story of the Windermere children. It is a story not just of the horror of the death camps and of where antisemitism can lead, but of hope and what it meant for those young people when they began life on the banks of Windermere in my constituency.

Those young people, in their own words, went "from hell to heaven." They went from the horrors they had experienced to being welcomed by a country that they fell in love with, served and became utterly committed citizens of. That is a reminder of what is true about Britain—certainly in my community, and everywhere else as well. In our hearts, we are an accepting and tolerant people. That does not apply only to our Jewish communities, of whom we are deeply proud.

As the Minister knows, we have put a bid in to honour the lasting legacy of the Windermere children by rebuilding the Lakes school on the site where they lived. It will be a place for Holocaust education and remembrance, where hope can be built for a country that does not tolerate antisemitism and where we teach a hatred of hatred to the youngest in our society. That is a real opportunity, and I ask the Minister to look favourably on the bid to rebuild the school and create a lasting memorial to the Windermere children.

Antisemitism is with us in every single generation, as is racism of all kinds, and that makes me angry, but it is our job to sow the seeds to tackle antisemitism from the youngest possible age and to declare proudly that this is a country where we welcome our Jewish family and friends—our brothers and sisters—and that we support and stand alongside them against the scourge of antisemitism.

2.56 pm

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) for introducing this important debate.

[Mike Reader]

I am fortunate to have had a positive relationship with the small but perfectly formed Jewish community in Northamptonshire for many years. The Northampton Hebrew congregation is a welcoming, open and very hard-working group. Through the work of Michael Necus and the trustees, Jewish students at the University of Northampton have a safe place to pray, to be part of our community and to connect with others.

Although antisemitic hate and crime is very low in my county and at my university, the experiences of those at my nearest JSoc at the University of Warwick have been very different. The stories I hear bring home how challenging it can be to be Jewish and attend a UK university and that we must continue to take every step possible to make sure our universities are safe for all students, no matter their religion. Through these stories, I have also heard how universities such as the University of Warwick and the University of Northampton are working hard to create inclusive spaces for all students.

In my contribution to this valuable debate, I will focus on the role of universities, because what we are seeing on campuses is not just down to bad actors but to how universities respond. At Warwick, there have been some clear examples of best practice. In the days after the 7 October attacks, several individuals infiltrated the freshers WhatsApp group of Warwick Jewish society and sent a stream of abusive antisemitic messages. At a time when members of the society were trying to get to know each other at a social gathering, they watched this unfold on their phones in real time. It was frightening. Jacob Lederman, the society's treasurer, told the BBC and other media outlets that, alongside the immediate impact on students, it has put long-term safety and security pressures on the society that other societies at the university simply do not have to face.

The positive is that the incident did not slow the society down. It is still running weekly events with security in attendance, and the society praised the campus security team, saying that it could not be more grateful for the support it was given. Thankfully, the police were able to find the individuals responsible, who were not students. They were arrested and rightly prosecuted. That is an example of the kind of incident that universities have to deal with, and it shows the importance of a serious response, working with the police, acting decisively and treating the issue with the gravity it deserves.

Unfortunately, that is not the only experience of antisemitism that Warwick students have faced. In the summer of 2020, four members of the University of Warwick Conservative association were filmed singing and dancing to a Nazi propaganda song. That is completely unacceptable. The society was suspended, and disciplinary action was taken. Again, that is what a good response should look like: clear action, visible consequences and a message sent that such behaviour has no place on campuses. That is the reality: it is not just enough to say the right things and put policies and procedures in place; universities have to act, and those actions have to be applied consistently. When they do not act, the consequences can be quite serious.

Steve Yemm (Mansfield) (Lab): I am encouraged to hear about the experience that my hon. Friend has recounted, but does he share my concern that Jewish

students often have limited confidence in universities' complaints procedures? Quite frequently, reports of antisemitism are dealt with rather slowly or without any form of consequence.

Mike Reader: My hon. Friend picks up the next point I want to make. Unfortunately, there have been cases, including at Warwick, where complaints of antisemitism have not been handled well and where those raising concerns have felt unsupported, and that creates a wider culture in which people hesitate to speak up. It may not even be about major incidents; it can be the drip, drip, drip of smaller things and their cumulative effect. Lecturers crossing the line in terms of their professional boundaries, protests that blur into hostility, or a sense that standards and processes are not applied equally to Jewish students—all of that feeds into whether a campus feels inclusive.

However, we should recognise what works. Warwick has developed a strong, outward-facing Jewish community, and perhaps it is not by accident that the newly elected president of the Union of Jewish Students, Raphi Leon, came through Warwick himself. His focus on building connections across campus, rather than retreating into isolation, is exactly the kind approach universities should be supporting.

We know from experiences at Warwick and other places what good practice broadly looks like. It means regular engagement with students and staff. It means clear and accessible reporting systems. It means proper support for chaplaincy and campus groups. Crucially, it means acting consistently and quickly when things go wrong. It should not be complicated, and there is guidance out there, including UJS's recent "Best Practice Guidance" and "A Good Practice Guide", published by Lord Mann and the all-party taskforce on antisemitism in higher education, which is supported by the excellent Antisemitism Policy Trust.

The expectations are clear: universities have a duty under equality law to provide a safe environment for all students and staff. The issue is not whether universities can get this right once; it is whether they get it right consistently. In the end, it comes down to leadership. Where leadership is clear, we see confidence and inclusion; where we do not have clear leadership, we see confusion and a loss of trust. Our universities, of all places, should not be environments where people feel like they have to hold back who they are.

3.2 pm

Joy Morrissey (Beaconsfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John.

How did we end up here again, in another debate in Westminster Hall, just like debates in the Chamber, that is full of warm words calling for action? We have heard that the Union of Jewish Students has reported a shocking 400% increase in antisemitism incidents on campuses following the 7 October attacks, and about the rise of antisemitism in our universities and on our streets that our British Jewish students are experiencing on a daily basis, and we seem unable to tackle the issue. Half of Jewish students have heard chants glorifying Hamas and Hezbollah, with protests disturbing learning for 65% of them. The stories Jewish students and staff

members share are harrowing, with physical attacks, antisemitism normalised in lecture theatres, and protests outside exam rooms.

Although many would like to blame that on the current state of geopolitical affairs, it is difficult to do so when one need only look back at the history of the interwar period. I do not want to drag in my educational background, but that period plays a vital role in why we need to clamp down on antisemitism today. In the interwar period, there was no Israel; there was just the rise of antisemitism. We had the same kind of economic situation we have today, and we had people looking for someone to blame. Week after week on university campuses, we saw protests by many different movements. At that point, there was a large Jewish population in Germany. They were fully integrated: they were German of the messianic faith. They had fought in world war one and had received the Iron Cross for bravery.

The protests began, and the antisemitism rose on university campuses first. Jewish students assumed that they could argue, debate and find a logical way through the situation to allow common sense, reason and decency to prevail. They had been German in the era of modernity—through the Romantic period—and they believed that they were German. They believed that, through rational argument and debate, they could quell the antisemitism on university campuses. That was not the case. The protests grew for weeks and weeks and then months and months, until violence finally erupted and Jewish students were killed. Then protests erupted throughout Germany, followed by the night of broken glass. The rise of antisemitism and the first ghettoisation of German Jews was a 10-year process; it was not a quick process, but a slow, incremental one that started on university campuses.

The reason I am so adamant that we stop the rise of antisemitism in our universities is that they are where future leaders—the next generation of British men and women who will go on to lead in Parliament, business and commerce—are being trained. The United Kingdom has always exhibited fair play and decency to the rest of the world; when the rest of the world has lost its mind, the United Kingdom has held decency and morality at the heart of its judgment. I do not want our country to go down the route of rising nationalism, as Germany and even the US did in the interwar period.

Stopping antisemitism at university level is vital to protect the next generation from making the mistakes made in generations past. It is not a case of thinking, “Oh, well—we should probably be just a little more fair-minded.” No, every student deserves equality of access to education, and every student, when they go to university, deserves to feel safe in their exams and when walking about. They should not be harassed, bullied, shouted at or attacked because they are wearing a Star of David or any kind of religious symbol. I would say the same for any ethnic minority.

The reason I know about the interwar period and the rise of antisemitism is that I worked in Kosovo with Muslim Albanians who were attacked, so I studied the rise of nationalism and how it affected European countries. In recent times, we had a similar thing happen in Europe, in the Balkans: a 10-year slow creep of people turning against their neighbours, who they had lived with and been perfectly fine with for centuries. Then, all of a sudden, they developed feelings of hatred and

division. I love this country—I came here as an immigrant and was welcomed—and I do not want us to lose the fabric of what makes our society great: tolerance and inclusivity.

British Jewish students are being excluded and treated with a level of hatred because of a country many of them have no connection to and have never been to. Before these issues came to the forefront, most of the members of the London Jewish community I spoke to had very few views on Israel: they were not involved, they did not care and it did not concern them. They have been dragged into this, and they have been treated with racism and hatred because of something that does not involve them. They are British citizens and are a part of British culture, but they are being treated with hatred and disrespect because of a war that is happening in the middle east.

I ask that politicians look at the gravity of this situation and take seriously the recommendations of Jewish university students. They have brought forward a number of very good proposals, and there are six recommendations that I think we should accept. Will the Government insist that universities adopt the Union of Jewish Students “Best Practice Guidance”, which sets out practical recommendations for universities to tackle antisemitism? I hope the Government will strongly take into consideration those recommendations and actually use them, because they are from the students and by the students, and are a very good solution.

If we fail to act now, we fail the thousands of British Jews. We will set our country on a course to a future in which antisemitism is not just normalised, but is the norm. We will make our universities seats of hatred, not seats of learning. I hope we will come together in this debate and send a clear message to Jewish students and staff: we are with you, we see you and we will take the action needed.

3.10 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. The right to freedom of religion is a fundamental human right and must be protected. I congratulate my neighbour and West Yorkshire colleague, the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards), on securing the debate. I speak to join him and others in trying to help tackle antisemitism in UK universities, but also antisemitism anywhere and everywhere in our wonderful country.

I begin by placing on the record my clear and unequivocal belief that antisemitism, like all other forms of religious discrimination, is a scourge that has no place in our society, and that we should do all we can to stamp it out. Freedom of speech does not mean freedom to hate or to incite hatred or violence against others, including against Jewish people. It deeply saddens me when I read news stories about how Jewish students have been feeling increasingly unsafe on university campuses in recent years, or reports about things such as the Union of Jewish Students poll that found that one in five students would be reluctant to, or would never, house-share with a Jewish student. I am not Jewish and I am not going to try to deflect attention away from the subject of this debate, but I share some of the experiences of Jewish students. They may not, thankfully, be as extreme or intense, but I understand some of what those students

[*Iqbal Mohamed*]

are or may be going through and I have complete sympathy. I could cite similarly harrowing statistics, but other Members have already mentioned those, so I will skip them because of the lack of time.

This reality is unacceptable, plain and simple—no ifs, buts or maybes. No Jewish student should be made to feel intimidated or of less worth because of their beliefs. We must demand a far more proactive and co-ordinated response from Government, higher education institutions and civil society organisations. Universities must not only have robust policies in place, but actively enforce them. Reporting mechanisms need to be accessible and trusted. Support services must be properly resourced. And there must be a clear message from leadership at every level that antisemitism has no place in our educational institutions or our society.

At the same time, it would be remiss of me not to say that it also deeply troubles me when I look across the pond to the United States and hear accusations of antisemitism—including at protests on campuses—thrown around without sufficient care in response to criticisms of the Israeli state's actions in the middle east. Just last week, the independent UN inquiry found that Israel continues to commit genocide by deliberately targeting Palestinian children in Gaza. However, Israel is a state. It is a Government. It has its army. It does not represent or reflect the views or actions of Jews around the world.

However, on campuses and across our country, many students are engaging in protests because of their principled opposition to these gross injustices. Those protests cannot and must not include acts or words of antisemitism. It is therefore vital that we do not conflate legitimate and courageous defiance of this Government's apathy in the face of inhumanity with the specific and pernicious form of racism that antisemitism constitutes. Safeguarding free speech and the freedom to protest is not in tension with protecting Jewish students from discrimination. Rather, the two must go hand in hand. If we dilute the definition of antisemitism to incorporate righteous criticism of Israel, we risk eroding trust among students and communities.

It is also important to acknowledge that discrimination rarely exists in isolation. Alongside antisemitism, we are witnessing worrying and cascading levels of Islamophobia, with hostility and suspicion towards entire Muslim communities intensifying and spreading in response to individual incidents and subsequent inflammatory comments by politicians and public figures. What is needed is a consistent, principled approach that protects students from harassment and hate, while also upholding their rights to political expression and peaceful protest, and that brings communities together, rather than pitting them against one another.

Ultimately, this is about the kind of society we want to be—one where Jewish students are safe and supported, where Muslim students are free from prejudice and suspicion, and where all students can engage critically with the world around them without fear of being mischaracterised or silenced. We must be able to hold two truths at once: that antisemitism on campuses is real and must be confronted decisively, and that legitimate political dissent from students and academics, peaceful,

principled and rooted in justice, must be protected. If we can strike that balance, we will not only make our universities safer, but we will make them stronger.

I conclude by extending my support to the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley and Members across the House in working together to tackle and address antisemitism in UK universities and wider society.

3.17 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I say a big thank you to the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) for introducing the debate, and I congratulate him on doing it so well. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken so far for their contributions highlighting the difficulties faced by our British Jewish communities and the work that needs to be done to protect them.

The StandWithUs UK “Voice of Students” report exposes a terrifying, deep-rooted national crisis across our higher education institutions. The traditional verbal hostility of recent years has escalated into raw intimidation, targeted harassment and physical violence against Jewish students.

I should have welcomed the Minister to his place, and I look forward to his contribution. I am sure it will be salient and will give us some reassurance, which is what we all seek from this debate.

It is no secret that I am a friend of the people and the nation of Israel—I have been all my life, and I continue to be. As I have said before and will say again, I recognise that Israel is not perfect, just as I am not perfect and nobody in this room is perfect. Israel does things that I have concerns about, but I stand by Israel whenever I get the opportunity, and today I will highlight the issue of antisemitism on university campuses.

When I visited Israel some two years ago, we had an opportunity to visit the Nova music festival site and the kibbutzim. If ever we needed to see man's inhumanity to man and the hatred that the Hamas terrorists have for Israel, that was the day we saw it and that is why I am here to highlight the issue of antisemitism today.

As a Unionist, I believe fundamentally in the rule of law, the right to personal safety and the preservation of free inquiry, yet British universities are failing in their most basic legal and moral duties to protect a religious minority. Most damningly, academic staff are increasingly implicated in fostering, legitimising and actively participating in this marginalisation, which is the reason why we are debating the issue today.

I will highlight a few extracts from the testimony bringing this to light that most shocked me, and I am sure it will be shocking to every Member of the House. Forgive the terminology, but I am going to quote exactly the words used in a number of universities. These are direct quotes of the slurs being faced. Although they are disturbing, they must be put in the *Hansard* record. For that purpose, I will quote them exactly. At Royal Holloway, a student was subjected to jihadist threats to blow up the Jewish society and faced vile text messages calling him a “faggot Jew boy”. He was trailed by students taking photos to mark him out as a “Zionist”.

At the University of Birmingham, a lecturer told a student to shorten her name because it sounded “very Jewish”, while others performed Nazi salutes and created a group chat entitled, “No Jews allowed”. At King's

College London, a student faced a Kafkaesque punishment by the university to write a 1,000-word essay explaining why displaying an Israeli flag was wrong. He should come to my office, because I have one there and am proud to show that flag and let people know.

At City St George's, a Jewish student was ambushed from behind and nearly pushed down a staircase, while campus protests featured Arabic chants calling for the literal killing of Jews. That is most outrageous.

Steve Yemm: I occasionally meet Jewish students at the University of Nottingham for dinner on a Friday evening, hosted by Chabad. Those students talk about being proud of their faith, but they frequently question whether they can be openly Jewish on campus. Does the hon. Member agree that no student should ever feel that they have to hide their identity on a university campus?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. That is another to add to the words of shame from some universities across the United Kingdom. I want to refer to Bangor University, where a professor physically confronted a Jewish student while screaming medieval blood-libel tropes and calling him a "baby killer". If that level of targeted vicious harassment were directed at any other minority group on campus, the institutions would be shut down, funding would be stripped away and the perpetrators would be immediately expelled. That is what would happen if it were anybody else but, because it is Jews, what happens? When it comes to Jewish students, we see institutional paralysis and a culture of denial.

As an MP from Northern Ireland, I want to comment on Queen's University Belfast and Ulster University, which are by no means immune to this toxic atmosphere. We have seen a deeply alarming trend where extreme political activism on these campuses has crossed the line from legitimate debate into outright intimidation and the exclusion of Jewish and Zionist voices. I have spoken personally to some of those Jewish students who have given me their testimony and told me their stories. They told me that on occasion they are scared to be active on their own campuses.

When Jewish students in Belfast or Londonderry feel compelled to hide their identity, skip lectures, avoid campus spaces out of fear for their safety, the leadership of those universities has failed fundamentally. Higher education in Northern Ireland must be a neutral, safe and meritocratic environment for everyone. Vice-chancellors in our Province must not remain silent or indifferent. They must apply the exact same zero-tolerance approach to anti-Jewish racism as they do to any other form of sectarianism or discrimination, ensuring that all universities remain places of learning, rather than hotbeds of radicalisation and exclusion.

The report rightly underscores that modern antisemitism has evolved into a toxic political framework. I challenge anybody to say otherwise. Cowardly, it hides behind the shield of extreme anti-Zionism, denying Jewish self-determination and calling for the destruction of Israel. That is a cynical abuse of free speech, designed to make campuses "judenrein", the German for "Jew-free". God forbid that day should ever come to this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

We must draw a firm line in the sand, and I believe Members have done that today in this Chamber. These are my two asks of the Minister. First, the UK Government must state unequivocally that anti-Zionism, including calling for the destruction of the Jewish state, will be treated with the exact same seriousness and moral clarity as classical racial antisemitism. Secondly, we must follow the successful precedent set in the United States and summon vice-chancellors before a parliamentary Select Committee to look us in the eye and account for the catastrophic failures in all the universities I mentioned, and probably in many others, such as Nottingham. How many are there?

Our universities cannot remain safe havens for hate speech and terror sympathisers. I believe it is time to restore law, order and basic human decency to campuses. The first step must be the determination in this Chamber today to send a message that while the United Kingdom supports freedom of speech—I believe in that with all my heart and will stick up for it—we do not tolerate threats of violence. These examples show that the line has been crossed and that action must be taken. Let it start today.

3.26 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir John. I warmly congratulate the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) on securing this debate and setting us up very strongly with his excellent opening remarks.

Antisemitism has no place in our society. That should be a simple statement, and it should be agreed by all in this House. The Liberal Democrats have continued to be clear that we must be committed to tackling hatred in all its forms. My constituents care about this issue and they raise it with me. They are worried about the rise of antisemitism in our country. I am grateful to my constituent Caroline from Marple, who came to my advice surgery just this Saturday to share her thoughts about the worrying rise she sees across our country.

Even though most believe that antisemitism has no place in the UK, there is evidence that for far too many Jewish students, the university campuses where they should feel free to learn and build friendships have instead become places of fear. The "Time for Change" report from the National Union of Students shows that almost a quarter of Jewish students have witnessed behaviour that targets them for their religion or ethnicity.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I am proud that my constituency has the largest population of Jewish students in the country. I was a Jewish student at the University of Leeds, as were my parents. We have had a Hillel house for over 70 years. It provides kosher accommodation for five young, vulnerable, isolated students on the edge of the campus. In early 2024, there was a graffiti attack on that Hillel house. It was absolutely unjustified, and it created a culture of fear on campus that has taken us years to correct. Does the hon. Member agree that it is absolutely unacceptable to have any form of graffiti or any type of harassment or intimidation on our campuses?

Lisa Smart: I am grateful to the hon. Member for raising that incident. He will not be surprised to hear that I strongly agree that it is wholly unacceptable and entirely abhorrent. It is a well-trodden path that those

[Lisa Smart]

who seek to divide us and sow hatred in our community use graffiti, which is a cowardly way to convey a message of hatred and divisiveness.

When I was in Bournemouth last year, I felt honoured to be invited to visit the synagogue and its rabbi who had been the subject of an antisemitic graffiti attack on his home. The impact that had on him and the whole community was profound, and I am grateful that he took the time to explain it to me. I can only imagine the fear that must have been felt by those who were targeted. The hon. Member is entirely right that it is wholly unacceptable.

The report I mentioned earlier showed that one in five students would be reluctant to, or would never, house-share with a Jewish student—others have mentioned that. In the report, Jewish students described physical and verbal abuse, social exclusion and antisemitic attitudes that have become disturbingly ordinary on the very campuses that are meant to welcome them. Additionally, almost half of students have heard slogans or chants glorifying Hamas, Hezbollah or other proscribed groups.

I am grateful to the colleagues who have brought the voices of students into Westminster Hall. The hon. Members for Northampton South (Mike Reader) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke about the experience of Jewish students on campus, while the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) powerfully reminded us of why we should care about what is happening on university campuses. We have seen, throughout history, what this looks like. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield mentioned the experience on German university campuses. My grandmother, who was Jewish, came here from Germany in the 1930s at the age of 18—not as a student, but as a domestic worker—because of the climate in which fear and hatred were being sown. As the hon. Member rightly said, it often starts on university campuses.

The Liberal Democrats will always defend free speech. Universities should be home to rigorous and well-informed debate, because the freedom to question and explore difficult ideas sits at the heart of academic life. Criticising the actions of any Government, including the Government of Israel, is legitimate and must remain so, but there is a world of difference between vigorous debate and the harassment, intimidation and abuse documented in the report that I mentioned.

It is possible, of course—I will say it again—to fairly and rightly criticise the actions of the Government of Israel, but let us be clear: the dangerous antisemitic trope that suggests that British Jewish people are somehow puppets for a foreign state, or that there is a secret conspiracy to exercise undue control over the Government, must be actively called out. We should robustly and unequivocally reject any such antisemitic conspiracy theories. No one should use concerns, whether about foreign interference or otherwise, to stir up hate or to smear and stigmatise the Jewish community on university campuses or elsewhere. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) for reminding us of our role in positions of political leadership. Some of our colleagues would do well to remember that their inflammatory statements have an impact.

Under the previous Government, the Liberal Democrats did not support the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) Act 2023. We did not believe that it was evidence-

based or proportionate, and many universities and student groups, including Jewish student groups, warned that it risked compelling universities to give a platform to speakers with known extremist views. From September, the Office for Students will operate a new complaints scheme that will allow university staff, external speakers and non-student members to make free-speech complaints. The OfS will then investigate claims, and has the power to issue fines. The scheme should not be a mechanism for the back-door legitimisation of hate.

More than that, we believe that the Government should bring forward an urgent comprehensive action plan to tackle antisemitism at its root and ensure adequate high-visibility police protection for synagogues, schools and Jewish community centres nationwide. The “Time for Change” report sets out a sensible path and enforceable standards for universities to investigate and punish hate crime, with mandatory reporting to the Office for Students and real sanctions for those who fall short; proper co-ordination between universities, the police and the Government; and sector-wide best practice on Jewish inclusion, including antisemitism awareness training. Other colleagues have mentioned the excellent work of the Antisemitism Policy Trust. I have been lucky enough to benefit from some of its training, which was very strong. We should also welcome initiatives that celebrate Jewish life, not merely defend it.

I welcome the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who reminded us of the story of the Windermere children. He spoke about how the country could use education to build on our history and foundations, and about how we should push for a hatred of hatred—I warmly welcome that. Universities exist so that students from every background can come together without fear. Right now, that promise is being broken for too many Jewish students. The Liberal Democrats will keep using our voice in this House to speak out against antisemitism in every form. I ask the Government and the Minister to match their words with action and a timeline, to offer Jewish students not just warm assurances but the safety, protection and respect that they are owed.

3.35 pm

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): It is a privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John, and to respond to this moving and, sadly, harrowing debate. I am the vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group against antisemitism. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) for securing this incredibly important debate, for his dedication to this cause and for his moving speech. I also acknowledge the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey)—my good friend—who set out passionately why this debate is so important and why we are all here, even though we wish that we did not have to be.

Jewish students face some of the worst antisemitic abuse in society and in universities. According to the Community Security Trust, there are over 9,000 Jewish students at universities across the UK, and they have faced a terrifying rise in antisemitism. In 2022-23, there were 53 university-related antisemitic incidents; that number rose to 272 in 2023-24—the highest total recorded for a single academic year.

The Union of Jewish Students has published a harrowing report highlighting the fact that antisemitism is now effectively normalised on our campuses. It found that one in four students have seen behaviour that explicitly targets Jewish students for their religion. More broadly, the report demonstrates that universities are failing to confront the open glorification of terrorism. Nearly half of students have heard chants glorifying proscribed terrorist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah. The research also shows that

“student groups have explicitly called for violence against Jews”, even justifying the sickening terrorist attack in Bondi Beach last year.

As well as the terrible glorification of violence, and the sense that antisemitism is normal because it always goes unpunished, antisemitic protests also disrupt students’ learning. Students who have witnessed Israel-Palestine protests at university feel that it still goes unaddressed, and four in 10 students have seen Jewish students being harassed.

Britain has a proud history of tolerance but we cannot be complacent in our fight to protect our fundamental values of decency, tolerance and support for each other. I thank hon. Members from all parties for speaking up in solidarity with British Jewish students. However, those freedoms, which are fundamental to our democracy, and proud traditions are under ever-increasing threat. Society is becoming more fractured, driven by divisive rhetoric online and offline that drives populism and pushes more people towards the extreme. The fact that our society is more divided is having a real impact on the everyday lives of the hundreds of thousands of Jewish people in the UK. The Community Security Trust estimates that there were over 300 antisemitic incidents per month in 2025—that is double the number in the year preceding the war in the middle east.

Student testimony collected by organisations such as the CST, the Union of Jewish Students and the Pinsker Centre demonstrates the hostile environment faced by Jewish students on campus since October 2023. Although some have already been shared, let me share a few of those comments. In a focus group run by the Pinsker Centre, one student said:

“Some people suddenly radicalised...after October 7th and now don’t speak to me. They have blocked me on social media, ignore me or have explicitly told me that I am complicit in genocide.”

In summer 2024, a Jewish society committee member in Bristol approached a pro-Palestinian encampment to have a civil conversation. That night he was recognised, physically attacked and assaulted in a nightclub by individuals who had heard him earlier in the day. His shirt was ripped and his back was covered in scratches and cuts. Too often, we hear about Jewish students being chased, attacked and abused because they are wearing kippot, or skullcaps.

As we heard earlier, a Royal Holloway student—Evaldas, whom I spoke to earlier today—received calls in which the caller read out his home address, warned that they were coming to get him and made an explicit threat to blow up the Jewish society. He told me that he got those calls 10 times a day, and that, at one point, because his address was publicised, bloody period pads were put outside his door. As we heard earlier, a professor at Bangor University physically attacked a student while calling him a “baby killer”—a medieval antisemitic trope.

I spoke today to Evelyn from University College London, who told me that, at an antisemitism stall, she was approached and called an “effing white supremacist bitch”. I paraphrase, because the abuse went on and on. She had a recording, but last week she found out that no action was being taken. I hear repeatedly about how many members of the faculty at UCL are members of the boycott, divestment and sanctions movement, which is clearly helping to exacerbate the situation.

I spoke to Ben from the London School of Economics, who told me about the launch of a book titled “Understanding Hamas: And Why That Matters”. There was a protest outside the book launch, and a counter-protest to the protest. He eloquently said to me, “If you are counter-protesting at a protest against a proscribed terrorist organisation, what does that make you?” As we heard earlier, a King’s College London student had to write a 1,000-word essay explaining why it was wrong to display an Israeli flag on campus. Imagine if that had been a Palestinian flag. Would the result have been the same? The list goes on and on.

Something has gone horribly wrong. It is clear that a permissive culture of antisemitism and abuse has been allowed to fester. Antisemitism has been covered up as activism and protest. Hate is being legitimised, and British Jews are left isolated and living in fear. Our Jewish communities need us. In this moment, we cannot falter.

I am pleased that the Government have announced some new steps to ensure that universities publish the scale of antisemitism on campuses—that is a welcome step forward—but we need further clarity on what exactly the Government will do if universities continue to fail to tackle antisemitism, examples of which I have listed. Saying, “We will set out next steps in due course” is not enough. Our Jewish community need to know today what the Government intend to do to clamp down on this. Will the Minister address that?

The shadow Secretary of State for Education, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Laura Trott), has said that universities that fail to clamp down on antisemitism should have their funding stripped to ensure that there are real and serious consequences for that failure. I therefore ask the Minister to identify the steps that the Government will take to punish universities that have allowed antisemitism to become normalised.

Too many students tell me that the complaints system is insufficient. The Office of the Independent Adjudicator for Higher Education, which they have to go through, has no meaningful sanctions. We need a complaints system that works for students. I encourage the Minister to look into that. My hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) wrote to him about it, but he is yet to receive a reply. Will the Minister address that?

Is the Minister working with the Office for Students to better tackle antisemitism? I recognise that an independent investigation into antisemitism in schools, colleges and universities is due by the autumn, but will the Minister update the House on specific timetabling, as other Members have asked him to? The evidence we have heard today shows how important it is to tackle antisemitism urgently.

The importance of this debate cannot be overstated. It goes above party politics, so I offer my sincerest support to the Minister in helping the Government to tackle extremism of all kinds in our universities. I say to

[*Saqib Bhatti*]

British Jews: His Majesty's Opposition will never shy away from standing up for you, and we will do so without fear, knowing that we are standing up for what is right. There are too many platitudes, too many never agains, and yet nothing changes.

When I meet British Jews, as I did yesterday, I too often see fear and anxiety in their eyes. I too often hear that they are not sure if this country—their country—is safe for them. To hear about raging antisemitism on our university campuses, which should be a safe place for all, is a stain on our society. A future Conservative Government would ensure that universities do not allow antisemitism to fester. Those that do not comply would face the toughest of sanctions. Hate preachers who come to this country to spread hate would, under the Conservatives, be deported. Where the law is broken, we would empower the police to enforce it to its fullest extent.

To British Jews, let me say this: your fight is our fight, you are of us and we are of you, and we will not fail you in this endeavour.

3.44 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Josh MacAlister): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) on securing this important and timely debate.

I will turn to a few of the remarks made by Members in this debate, starting with my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). He is right to highlight the number of former student sabbatical officers in this place, present company included, and the important history of the Windermere children. I am keen to do what I can to support the case he is making to find ways to both rebuild the school and bring greater Holocaust education to the north of England, and I share many of his aspirations in that respect.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) for praising the leadership of UJS, of which many representatives are here today, and for highlighting the leadership of Michael Necus. In setting out the historical context, the hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) reminded me of Baron Finkelstein's excellent foreword to the UJS "Time for Change" report, highlighting that antisemitism can be taken as a warning sign of moral collapse.

The hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) rightly stated that we must not conflate the action of the Government of Israel with the Jewish community, and I thank him for making that point so clearly. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) powerfully brought to life the harrowing experiences of Jewish students, and I thank him for taking the time in his speech to make sure that their voices have been heard here.

Universities are places where ideas are tested, challenged and, where necessary, shown to be wanting, through evidence, scrutiny and debate. Exposure to different viewpoints, including those with which we strongly disagree, is an essential part of higher education. Students should leave university having had their assumptions

challenged and their perspectives broadened. Freedom of speech and academic freedom are therefore central to the university experience.

At the same time, universities have a duty to ensure that all students can participate fully in university life without fear of intimidation, harassment or discrimination. That is particularly important in the light of the significant rise of antisemitism. Too many Jewish students have been subject to abuse, exclusion and hostility because of their Jewish identity.

Although robust debate, including on controversial political issues, is a vital part of academic life, freedom of expression is not a cover for antisemitic harassment, discrimination or abuse. Universities must therefore both uphold the freedom of speech and take effective action to ensure that Jewish students can study, participate and thrive, free from antisemitism. Our task is not to choose between those principles, but to uphold both. In a liberal democracy, we do not resolve disagreement by shutting down debate, nor do we accept intimidation as the price of free expression. Instead, we create the conditions in which robust debate can flourish and everyone can participate with confidence. That must be our ambition for higher education.

The rise in antisemitism reported by Jewish students is not simply a challenge for one community; it is a test of whether our universities can remain places of inclusion, academic freedom and respect for all. When Jewish students feel unable to speak openly, participate fully or express their identity without fear, something fundamental is at stake.

The scale of the problem is clear, and has been set out by many hon. Members in this debate. In 2025, CST recorded 3,700 antisemitic incidents in the UK—the second highest annual total on record. Antisemitism is not an historical issue; it remains a present and persistent threat, and we must challenge the ideas and narratives that give rise to these incidents.

Too often, antisemitism is expressed through familiar tropes and conspiracy theories: allegations of secret influence, dual loyalty, collective responsibility or hidden power. Those claims can sometimes appear superficially innocuous, but they draw on centuries-old racist myths used to marginalise, persecute and dehumanise Jewish people. We should be clear that those ideas are antisemitic and we should have the confidence to speak out against them, and the Government must provide leadership on that. It is never acceptable to hold Jewish people or Jewish communities responsible for the actions of a foreign state. Criticism of the Government of Israel, like criticism of any Government, is legitimate; holding British Jews collectively responsible is not.

Tackling antisemitism cannot be left to Jewish communities alone. It requires a whole-society response and education is among our most powerful tools in doing so. That is why we are investing £7 million to tackle antisemitism across education and helping schools, colleges and universities prevent incidents, respond effectively when they occur, and foster environments where Jewish students feel safe, welcome and valued.

Iqbal Mohamed: Does the Minister agree that people who are trying to divide us will sometimes pit one community against another, and where one community is being rightly and legitimately supported, they will try to weaponise that in another community and create

friction? Does he also agree that the steps taken by the Government can be replicated across communities, and that communities and leaders in each of the discriminated-against communities should work together so that the support cannot be weaponised?

Josh MacAlister: The hon. Member is absolutely right to make that point. To pick up one thread of today's debate, a number of hon. Members have raised the power of algorithms, which feed off people's fury and anger and the differences that exist between them. Many of the themes highlighted in this debate could equally apply to other groups in society where our attention is also needed.

Government-funded training is already supporting university staff and leaders to recognise antisemitism, support Jewish students and respond appropriately when concerns arise. Last week, we agreed to fund projects through our innovation fund to help students navigate misinformation, engage constructively with difficult issues and develop a deeper understanding of different faiths and communities. We are also developing a new community cohesion framework with students in partnership with the University of Salford and the National Union of Students. Alongside that work, we continue to support University Jewish Chaplaincy to provide pastoral wellbeing and practical support to Jewish students across the country.

In his opening speech, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley asked about the statutory framework. Given the time remaining, I will give the brief update that the Office of the Independent Adjudicator is due to update its good practice framework for higher education providers in handling reports of harassment later this year. In addition, we are working with the sector to improve transparency and accountability for tackling antisemitic abuse. We are also working with Universities UK to undertake a rapid assessment of institutional disciplinary and incident reporting processes and we will develop recommendations and priority actions in autumn this year.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for that very comprehensive answer. In my contribution, I suggested that when universities fall short of their obligations, their vice chancellors should be called in to answer to a parliamentary Committee as to why no action had been taken. Does the Minister consider that that would be an effective way of ensuring that universities protect Jewish students and those of Jewish faith? Could calling in vice chancellors be a way of squeezing universities—and squeezing them tight?

Josh MacAlister: The hon. Member is right to highlight the essential aspect of accountability. The Office for Students has been given additional powers in recent years. It is also true that the scale of the challenge that we see with antisemitism on university campuses, and the challenge that many universities are facing in meeting their obligations to uphold the freedom of speech while also creating the climate and culture necessary for freedom from intimidation, may lead a Select Committee to hold an inquiry on that. It would, of course, be a matter for Parliament and a Select Committee to do so, but if that were to happen, the Department for Education would be very interested in its findings.

We know that many of the conspiracy theories and hateful tropes that underpin antisemitism are also features of extremist ideologies. Left unchallenged, they can

create an environment in which radicalisation becomes more likely. At their most serious, they can form part of a pathway towards terrorism. Prevent data shows that in the year to March 2025, there were 8,778 referrals, 21% of which were linked to extreme right-wing concerns and 10% to Islamist extremism. Although Prevent does not record antisemitism as a stand-alone category, those figures illustrate how antisemitic narratives can, and often do, form part of extremist worldviews that carry a risk of terrorism or serious harm.

Most antisemitic incidents fall well below the threshold for Prevent intervention. Nevertheless, the data demonstrates that, in the most serious cases, ideas rooted in historical antisemitic prejudice can become part of a trajectory towards terrorism. That is why, through our wider Protecting What Matters programme, we are taking action to challenge antisemitism and extremism wherever they arise. We are strengthening oversight of universities' Prevent duties; updating guidance on external speakers and events, which is due to come out very soon; improving our ability to identify emerging extremist activity; enhancing whistleblowing protections; and increasing transparency around incidents of antisemitism.

Mark Swards: Can the Minister give us a more specific timeline than "very soon"?

Josh MacAlister: I reviewed a draft of that guidance a matter of days ago, and it is due to be published very shortly. The issue is probably more that there is a queue of things to be published, rather than it not being ready to go.

We must remain alert to the actions of hostile state actors who seek to exploit social tensions, spread disinformation and undermine community cohesion. The Government are therefore strengthening their response to state threats through tougher powers to identify and disrupt hostile activity, greater transparency around foreign influence, and stronger measures against those acting on behalf of foreign states. Where there is evidence of unacceptable activity linked to foreign actors, including Iran, we will not hesitate to act.

Our message is simple and unequivocal: there is no place for antisemitism, extremism or hostile state interference in our universities or our society. We will defend lawful free speech, protect students from intimidation and ensure that campuses remain places where learning, debate and mutual respect can thrive.

3.56 pm

Mark Swards: It has been an excellent debate, and I value everybody's contributions today. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron), who talked about his experience compared with that of Jewish people, how wildly different it was and how insane it is that we tolerate that in this day and age. I compliment my hon. Friend the Member for Northampton South (Mike Reader) for talking about the experiences of Warwick students, both good and bad. The hon. Member for Beaconsfield (Joy Morrissey) gave an excellent history lesson and spoke about the fact that this has happened before—and before Israel even existed. Antisemitism flares up on campuses regardless of the circumstances, and we must deal with that.

I could not find a fault in the first half of the speech made by hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed). He invited me to work with him to deal

[Mark Swards]

with this problem, and I gladly accept. I would gently say—I did not intervene at the time, because I wanted other Members to get in—that there is clearly a problem on campuses, and we have to intervene now, if 20% of all students say that they do not want to live with Jewish students. I would also say, on the issue of universities clamping down on free speech too much, that there is clearly still a problem if Jewish students have to live in fear on campuses today. It is worth having a discussion about that after the debate.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke brilliantly about experiences of Jewish students from across the country. The hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) was excellent in her summation; I have to say that she, the hon. Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) and the Minister almost spoke with one voice, giving a new, positive meaning to the word “uniparty”.

I will end by saying a huge thank you to UJS, which has provided a lot of the statistics and evidence that we have used in our speeches today. I commend its members for their work, and I know that it will continue. I want them, and everybody outside this place, to know that they will always have a friend in us.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered antisemitism on university campuses.

High Streets

4 pm

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I will call Gregory Campbell to move the motion; I will then call the Minister to respond. I remind other Members that they can make a speech only with the prior permission of the Member in charge and of the Minister. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the future of high streets.

When I was considering a title for this debate, I toyed with “High streets: a future?” or “High streets: is there a future?”, but I settled on something more neutral. We had a debate on a similar topic this morning in which many of us took part, such is the concern in almost every town and city across the United Kingdom.

It is not the case that there is absolute and total dereliction in 100% of town and city centres. Some towns and cities are getting by, but they are the exception, not the rule. Many high streets, unfortunately, have a poor look. In some town centres that I know of, there are shops that have been empty for so long that people have received small grants to paint them as if they were occupied. There is a door front, a window, curtains and some flowers painted to make a passer-by who does not look too closely think that it is an occupied dwelling, when in fact it is an empty shop and has been so for a number of years.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I completely appreciate the point that the hon. Gentleman makes about the decade of decline for our high streets, but does he agree that initiatives such as high street rental auctions and Pride in Place are putting money back into them? Does he recognise that those are positive schemes for his high streets and that they need to be made more widely available across the United Kingdom?

Mr Campbell: I agree, and in a few moments I will talk about some of the positive developments, but they are chinks of light, not the answer. I believe that we need to look at this issue much more radically.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. Anchor institutions on our high streets, such as banks and post offices, are disappearing. Across the United Kingdom, 7,000 banks have disappeared, including 11 in my constituency, and post offices have disappeared in my constituency too. According to a YouGov poll, 76% of Britons say that access to a physical bank branch in their local area is important to them. Does my hon. Friend agree that that issue is contributing to the decline of high streets and that steps must be taken to ensure that high street regeneration policy reflects the importance of maintaining anchor institutions to sustain economic stability?

Mr Campbell: I agree that that is contributing significantly to the downturn.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is being very generous in giving way. I concur with the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The removal of banks from our high

streets and village centres in Westmorland has had a huge impact. The relationship with post offices is important. High street banks have saved about £2 billion every single year by evacuating our town and village centres. For doing their work, post offices receive from the banks merely £350 million a year, less than 20% of that saving. Does the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) agree that to underpin our post offices, which are the centre of our village and town centres, the banks need to pay more of what they have saved?

Mr Campbell: I agree. The roll-out of banking hubs has helped in a small way, but has made only a marginal difference.

The other issue is the difficult problem—or the advantage, as some would see it—of online shopping and its effect on the high street. I go out weekly to distribute my MP business cards on doors in my constituency, in a whole range of areas. On every third or fourth house I see a little Post-it note that says, “Leave the parcel in the garage,” or, “Leave the parcel in the porch.”

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a powerful speech. With reference to the change in the nature of our high street, he is absolutely right that online retail has taken over. Does that not mean that we need to look at a mixed-use offer that takes into account things like housing, the impact of health in the area more broadly and general disadvantage, which have an impact on how high streets look and feel for communities?

Mr Campbell: I do not know whether the hon. Member is a mind reader, but I was about to come to that very point. The prevalence of online shopping has dramatically changed the high street. People are free to take advantage of online shopping, but on many occasions it is to the disadvantage of the high street. On numerous occasions, we have heard about things that can help in a small way. For example, urban improvements such as better seating can make town centres more attractive and bring people in. They do help, but they are on the margins.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): In Truro, the city council has bought a property to convert to commercial and residential use. It is using some of its town deal—what would have been Pride in Place money—to invest in properties and restore some of the flats above shops that have been empty for so long. Does the hon. Member agree that that is progress and that it would be good to have more funding available for that sort of thing?

Mr Campbell: Yes, I agree. When I conclude, I will try to draw some of these threads together into a proposition that I hope the Minister will consider.

Charity shops and vaping shops are now prevalent on many of our high streets. I have sometimes been criticised, unfairly in my view, for being an arch-critic of the BBC. I do not regard myself as an arch-critic of the BBC: I always say that I commend it when it does well and criticise it when it does wrong or shows bias. If I am seeing more reasons to criticise it—well, I will leave people to pass judgment on which is more accurate. I have to say that in the past few months, though, BBC News has

been excellent on vaping shops on the high street. It should not have been the BBC that had to do that work, but I am glad that it did.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman talks about the BBC investigation work that has been undertaken in recent months, which has exposed a huge amount of organised crime, including child sexual exploitation, money laundering and links to false asylum claims. Given how the fronts of these shops—so many of them are fronts—are tearing down legitimate businesses and making things so difficult for them, is it time to have a central agency to take responsibility, maybe under the guise of something like the national retail police?

Mr Campbell: I agree. If we are to see the clampdown that the Home Secretary has outlined, as I hope we do, the problems that we are discussing will not get better in the short term. There will be more vacant shops, because illegal shops will be put out of business. That is a good thing, but we need to ensure that there is no gap and we need to get life back into our town centres.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): We are talking about vacant shops, but there is also a lot of antisocial behaviour on our high streets, which in some cases is largely due to the existence of vacant shops. I was speaking to the headteacher of a school in Glastonbury that is based just off the high street. The children there are already vulnerable; they are being exposed to violence and antisocial behaviour on the way to school, and teachers cannot get into school safely because there are altercations and violent incidents daily. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the current arrangements for managing some prolific and repeat offenders are simply not working, and that we need to make our high streets a safer place?

Mr Campbell: Yes, I agree, and I will come on to that point. If we make our high streets more attractive to families, to shoppers and to those who live and work in town centres, the vacuum that enables antisocial behaviour will reduce as we increase the number of people in town centres.

Julia Buckley (Shrewsbury) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman is being generous in giving way. Does he join me in congratulating Barnsley market, a local market that is leading the way by bringing health services into the town centre, which is driving up footfall and has led to a thriving community? We will be leading a delegation from the all-party parliamentary group on local markets next week, so we can all learn from that example and hopefully feed into the high street strategy.

Mr Campbell: Yes, I do, and I am glad to hear that. I hope that the Minister can deal with that type of intervention.

I secured a similar debate in Westminster Hall just 18 months ago, but unfortunately things have not improved since then. I believe that what we require is a radical, fundamental overhaul of how we develop our town and city centres. I have listened to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), who will presumably be our next Prime Minister, and he has talked about the promise of devolution and more devolution. I believe that that approach offers the opportunity, whether it is in northern England or southern England, for mayors

[Mr Gregory Campbell]

and others involved with the devolution settlement that exists in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales to come together in a format that accepts the need for a radical overhaul of our town centres right across the UK.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. Given the current pressures on high streets across the UK, including in my constituency of North Down, does the hon. Member agree that everything should be on the table when it comes to supporting small, independent and hospitality businesses, including measures such as VAT and national insurance relief, and expanding the British Business Bank and the local growth fund to back high street start-ups and expansions? Does he also think that part of the problem is the growing number of out-of-town supermarkets, which also affects our town centres?

Mr Campbell: The hon. Member is right. I agree that edge-of-town and out-of-town retailing are having an impact on city centres and town centres.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP) *rose*—

Mr Campbell: I give way to my hon. Friend, who I think is the only hon. Member I have not yet given way to in this debate.

Carla Lockhart: “The best till last”—I am sure that was coming. I agree that we need to take a real look at town centres and their problems and issues, but does my hon. Friend agree that the biggest complaint from the businesses that still exist and are still working hard in our town centres is about business rates? He mentioned charity shops; they are rates-exempt. He mentioned online businesses; they do not have business rates to deal with and cope with. Does he agree that a UK-wide look at business rates is needed and that we should really start supporting our businesses in that way?

Mr Campbell: Yes, I agree. Edge-of-town and out-of-town retailers have the advantage in one sense, while the huge multinational online retailers have the advantage in another sense—and they have both put our high streets at a major disadvantage.

I move on to some of the positive contributions that have been made. In Northern Ireland, our own Department for Communities has a Shaping Sustainable Places programme under my colleague Gordon Lyons, the Minister for Communities. That draws together a range of Departments to try to revitalise town centres and co-ordinate more closely on how that can best be sustainably delivered for the future.

Here in Westminster, along with colleagues, I have been pressing the Government for the past 12 to 18 months to complete the future towns fund, as they now have. As a result, Londonderry and Coleraine—one is entirely in my constituency and the other is partially in it—will get £2 million per year over the next 10 years. That is progress and something of a start, but it must become part of a co-ordinated approach that includes other Departments and some of the local councils that have been mentioned, to radically reassess where we take town councils in the future.

I hope the Minister will agree that discussions are needed between devolved Ministers and their Departments on whether an agreement can be reached about a pilot scheme in the English regions, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, to see how to transform town and city centre landscapes—not just over the next year or two, but the next decade or two. If the decline continues, it might not be me back here in 10 years’ time—I probably will not be, or anywhere else for that matter—but someone will be, saying, “When are we going to do something to transform and revitalise our town and city centres?” We need a radical overhaul. I hope the Minister responds positively so that various Government Departments and devolved institutions can co-ordinate to deliver the tangible change that people want.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I must point out that this is our second debate on this subject on the same day, in the same place and with the same Minister, whom I invite to respond. You will say something like what you said earlier, I guess.

4.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan): Thank you, Sir John. As I look around the Chamber, I see that some of the Members who were here earlier are still here. I thought I might get away with repeating much of what I said this morning—but then I saw that you were chairing the debate, so I will have to say some other things, but in absolutely the same spirit with which I spoke this morning.

This is such an important topic. I thank the hon. Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) for securing this debate: high streets matter to every Member of Parliament because they matter to everybody up and down the country and across the devolved nations. They symbolise the places where people live, the communities that they are part of and the places that they identify with. They are more than just bricks and mortar; they are also the spirit of where individuals live and the communities that they are part of.

Like every Member here, when considering this debate I thought about the high street in my own constituency. I thought about the brilliant businesses in Barking that I have had the pleasure of coming across since being elected; they include businesses from the beauty industry, which I hosted in Parliament last year, and other businesses too. I thought about the fact that high streets have so fundamentally changed in recent years. The hon. Member for East Londonderry is absolutely right that the challenges we face exist in every corner of the country, but every high street and town centre should be different because they are about the character of that place. We must help different businesses to thrive and give local communities the power to shape their high streets for the better.

The Government are taking action on that, whether through the £300 million of funding to support those efforts or the £10 million used to expand high street rental auctions, which Members have already referenced. That has been successful at tackling the issue of empty shops. We are launching a £61 million fund as part of Pride in Place, and the community right to buy fund is also making a difference.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Unfortunately, Cornwall was unsuccessful in the latest Pride in Place funding round. Does the Minister agree that Cornwall desperately needs a proper devolution settlement so that Cornwall council can fill the many empty shops in Bodmin, in Launceston, elsewhere in my constituency and across Cornwall? The council does not currently have the power to easily put shops back in community use or put them to other excellent uses.

Nesil Caliskan: I thank the hon. Member for raising Cornwall; he and his fellow Cornish Members of Parliament make excellent representations. He eloquently set out the case for giving power back to local areas. I know he is disappointed that Cornwall has not secured Pride in Place funding, but he will forgive me for recognising that lots of other places have. They are celebrating that as they should, because Pride in Place funding provides an opportunity for areas to regenerate their high streets. Perhaps even more importantly, Pride in Place provides a different way of doing things, because the boards allow communities to shape what the money is spent on over a longer period of time.

Funding is important, but it is not the complete answer. We need indeed a radical rethink of how high streets work. Although retail remains important, high streets cannot rely on it solely; online shopping will remain, so we need to be more creative, as the hon. Member for East Londonderry recognised. High streets must become more diverse. They need to include hospitality, leisure, public services, and art and culture.

Melanie Onn: The Minister is making a really important point. Grimsby town centre has diversified what the town centre offers; there will be a new cinema and more activities for families. That all ties into a youth offer with the brand new Youth Zone, a community hub for people in crisis, and town centre housing, which was desperately needed. It is absolutely essential to take a holistic view of how we rebuild our town centres.

Nesil Caliskan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. Diversification is very important in town centres. It drives footfall, which is what keeps high streets alive. Footfall, coupled with having money to spend, will mean that businesses can thrive. The Government are committed to publishing our high streets strategy, which looks at all the elements referred to already in the debate. We have announced funding for innovation partnerships to support local communities to reimagine and revive struggling high streets and make them purposeful and fit for the future.

Naushabah Khan: The Minister is making a powerful point about community partnerships and how we work together. Does she agree that involving the community in decisions about the future of the high street, as we are doing in Gillingham, is really important? It will secure the future of high streets.

Nesil Caliskan: I know my hon. Friend's area well, and she does good work not only to champion it but to campaign for improvement. She is absolutely right: if local communities have a real say, and that is coupled with backing from central Government, we can see real progress in our high streets and towns. That is important not only for local communities to feel ownership and pride; it is also crucial for employment. High streets are

often where young people go for their first jobs. Small and medium-sized businesses are the backbone of the local economy for many towns, so being able to support high streets, including through the high streets strategy, is a crucial part of the Government's agenda.

The hon. Member for East Londonderry was absolutely right to talk about the opportunity to relocate public services to high streets, which could improve the accessibility of those public services, as well as drive footfall and boost vibrancy. Many places are already doing that effectively.

Sarah Dyke: The Minister is talking about driving footfall, but driving footfall in rural areas is sometimes quite difficult because of the sparsity. Rural high streets face significant challenges—if car parking charges are forced on our local authorities, for example. Will the Minister outline what specific support she is putting in place to help our rural high streets to thrive?

Nesil Caliskan: On car parks in particular, a review is under way; I am happy to write to the hon. Member to set out timelines for when we will have the responses.

The point about rural communities is important, which is exactly why the Government are committing to making sure that while we do what we can from central Government, we really allow communities to shape their own services locally. The density point is important, particularly for rural communities. Banking hubs, for example, have been a real lifeline for communities that have had no banks in their area. As a Government, we have committed to almost 300 hubs; more than 230 have already opened. It is important that we commit to more initiatives like that, so that high streets get the support that they need.

As I say, there are good examples of public services locations. Barnsley, for instance, has opened a community diagnostic centre in its Glass Works shopping centre; that has led to more screenings and fewer missed appointments, and has brought a £3 million boost to the local economy. I could list many examples from across the country that really make the point that the relationship between the relocation of public services and our high streets can be a powerful tool in regenerating our high streets. The Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government has been working closely with other Government Departments, including the Department of Health and Social Care, to encourage them to roll out like health centres in other locations.

I recognise that we have to go further. With local community leaders, we have to think about how central Government can be more strategic and purposeful and how we can support those leaders to deliver locally. We have to work with local government and mayoral strategic authorities so that devolution and reorganisation can lead to tangible improvements on high streets.

Local capacity is an issue for local authorities, which is why MHCLG is committed to supporting local councils to shape high streets in a way that works for local residents. We are bringing vacant shops back into use and tackling the perverse incentive that makes shops remain empty. As I said, high street rental auctions have already proved successful—we have been oversubscribed, which is why we are expanding the programme. We are supporting local authorities by upskilling local authority officers so that they can use compulsory purchase order

[Nesil Caliskan]

powers to bring landlords to the table, enabling more transformational change for areas that have a particular problem with empty shops. The national planning policy framework is playing a role in some of that work, too.

Finally, I will address business rates. Many retail, hospitality and leisure businesses are grappling with rising costs. We are committed to supporting high street businesses so that they can compete with online and out-of-town alternatives. Most of that is about appropriate place making, but we are also reducing the burden of business rates on independent high street businesses and introducing permanently lower business rate multipliers for retail, hospitality and leisure properties, giving greater certainty and long-term support. The new multipliers are worth £1 billion per year, will benefit more than 750,000 properties and will give long-term certainty and support to high streets.

I thank Members for their contributions. I recognise that high streets are a topic that people feel passionate about, and rightly so. They are intrinsic to constituents' identity and local place. I thank the hon. Member for East Londonderry again for securing the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Financial Inclusion: Young People

4.30 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered financial inclusion for young people.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir John. Today, young people are one of the groups most at risk of financial exclusion. Analysis by Fair4All Finance has identified 2 million unsteady starters in financially vulnerable circumstances across the UK. That includes 11% of financially vulnerable adults in Hertford and Stortford. Predominantly under 35, those young people are facing a combination of pressures: low financial resilience, higher housing costs, insecure work, rising insurance costs and a growing exposure to online financial risks. They experience poorer financial wellbeing as a result, closely linked to poor mental health, creating a vicious cycle that can undermine their educational attainment, employment prospects and economic participation.

Financial inclusion is about more than access to banking; it is about access to affordable credit, insurance, savings, trusted financial guidance and opportunities to build a financial track record. I am pleased that the Government have recognised the importance of tackling financial exclusion in the financial inclusion strategy. If we can break down the barriers to financial inclusion, we can improve the lives of millions of people and unlock growth across the country. In this afternoon's debate, I want to examine the barriers to financial inclusion that young adults face, and consider where Ministers could build on the financial inclusion strategy to prioritise practical interventions to support young people.

Although a young person may pay rent regularly, meet mobile phone payments or have built responsible financial habits, they often lack sufficient credit history to access mainstream financial products on fair terms. We know that young adults are over-represented in the gig economy, temporary employment roles, part-time work and on zero-hours contracts. The insecure and variable income they receive is compounded by the high cost of living. It is harder for them to budget effectively or qualify for mainstream financial products, and they are more reliant on costly forms of borrowing as a result.

As the cost of living crisis continues to eat into disposable incomes, young people struggle to build emergency or long-term savings. They typically have fewer savings than older adults, which leaves them acutely vulnerable to financial shocks: losing a job, an unexpected bill, increased rent or transport costs. In those circumstances, without emergency savings to draw on, many face a poverty premium, paying more in the long term through instalments because they cannot afford the cost of an up-front payment.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this forward. The situation in Northern Ireland is no different from the one he described in his constituency and the wider United Kingdom. Young people face unprecedented barriers to building financial security. High street bank closures

are turning rural and working-class communities into banking deserts. At the same time, the aggressive use of unregulated “buy now, pay later” schemes and predatory online lending apps is driving vulnerable young adults into spirals of unmanageable debt before they even secure their first mortgage or full-time career. Does he agree that the Government must implement comprehensive, mandatory financial literacy education in our schools, as a priority?

Josh Dean: I could not agree more about the importance of financial education for young people, which I will come to in my speech.

We can already see how those overlapping pressures exacerbate a young person’s financial insecurity. Insurance is another area where they are left facing vulnerability to financial shocks that they are already ill-equipped to absorb. I was shocked to learn that 18 to 24-year-olds are significantly less likely to hold contents insurance, even though they are more likely to experience flood damage, escape of water, fire damage, burglary and theft. That is especially true when they live in rented accommodation, which many young adults do.

I want to draw particular attention to the cost of motor insurance. Young people often make significant personal investments in driving lessons, to make it easier to get to work or education, only to find they cannot access affordable insurance when they pass their test. That directly impacts their ability to access work, training and other opportunities, especially in semi-rural communities such as the one that I represent, and it highlights how young people can face financial exclusion even when they are doing everything right.

Too often, young people are entering adulthood without the tools, confidence or support networks that they need to navigate increasingly complex financial decisions.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): My hon. Friend is an incredible advocate for young people in his constituency, but also across the country. What is his opinion of a lot of young people getting financial education from social media or AI chatbots? The Government need to regulate that but also, ahead of the social media ban, ensure that we are bringing financial education into schools and other real-life forums, so that young people do not miss out.

Josh Dean: I could not agree more about the importance of regulating access to financial information across social media and AI, which is an emerging challenge. Embedding financial education in school is so important, particularly ahead of the social media ban, which my hon. Friend mentions.

Research has shown that young people have the lowest confidence in managing their money. The latest MoneyView survey from the Money and Pensions Service found that although 41% of adults lack confidence managing money, the figure rises to 63% for 18 to 24-year-olds. That is the highest for any age group.

I welcome measures in the financial inclusion strategy to embed financial education in the primary school curriculum, helping children to develop healthy attitudes towards money at the earliest stage, but there is a need to go further. A report in 2025 by the London Foundation for Banking & Finance highlighted a significant gap in financial education provision. Financial capability

programmes are concentrated in primary schools, the early years of secondary school and workplaces. There is comparatively little structured support for young people aged 16 to 24 as they transition to financial independence. That is one of the most financially vulnerable periods in a young person’s life. They have to navigate leaving school, entering work or going to university, and living independently for the first time.

Particularly as students, young people are vulnerable to developing bad financial habits, experiencing a financial crisis or falling into debt. They are often having to balance their education with work. If a financial crisis hits, they face the prospect of sacrificing more of their education to pay down debt, with a potential impact on their future life chances. These significant moments in a young person’s life are when small mistakes and unexpected costs can quickly escalate. Early support in this transition period is critical to prevent longer-term financial problems.

All this takes place in a rapidly evolving digital landscape. Young adults are adopting AI tools faster than older generations, which is providing them with opportunities for more accessible guidance, but leaving them at risk of exposure to inaccurate information, scams and poor or misleading financial recommendations. MoneySuperMarket’s latest Money Talks research with the Campaign Against Living Miserably found that 44% of 18 to 34-year-olds are turning to generative AI as a private space to express their money worries. That is almost half of young people who are being exposed to unregulated financial advice.

Financial exclusion does not only increase economic inequality between those who have savings, access to financial education and good support networks, and those who do not; it also has a significant impact on young people’s mental health. Financial anxiety is no longer associated just with moments of crisis. For many, it has become a daily occurrence. Research from MoneySuperMarket, CALM and UM showed that one in two young adults is in debt, one in four young people has used a food bank in the past year and, more than social media, body image or relationships, money is the topic causing young people the most worry right now. Young adults are 77% more likely to have experienced suicidal thoughts because of issues with money or money worries than the wider adult population. One in 10 young adults with debt will have had suicidal thoughts in the past 12 months because of worries about making repayments.

There is a profound link between financial difficulties and poor mental health. It is often cyclical, with financial stress leading to more mental health challenges, and poorer mental health making financial management harder. We must recognise that relationship and how financial insecurity and exclusion are leaving young people lacking agency in our society and without hope. Beyond arguments about economic growth and inactivity, this alone should spur us on to do better.

What might solutions to the barriers I have set out look like, and where might we be able to go further? First, on credit visibility, small sum lending can support young people with thin or non-existent credit files to establish their financial identity, and therefore access affordable financial products. For example, Fair4All Finance is piloting small sum lending in partnership with Monzo, and I would be keen to hear the Minister’s reflections on the role of small sum lending in that area.

[Josh Dean]

What further action can the Government can take alongside regulators to support young people to establish a financial track record?

Secondly, on insurance affordability the interim findings of the recent Milburn review highlighted the stark challenge of 1 million young people who are not in education, employment or training. I know the Government are committed to tackling the high number of NEETs, but I would be grateful if the Minister would set out what work is being undertaken with regulators and industry to improve access to affordable motor insurance for young drivers, and to tackle the prohibitive costs restricting their access to work and education, leaving them financially excluded. Modelling from WPI Economics has found that improvement in that area could increase the UK's GDP by £369 million annually through increased employment and participation in the labour market—there is an economic opportunity here.

Thirdly, will the Minister reflect on how the Government can expand financial education and support in that critical period of transition for 16 to 24-year-olds, and share what consideration she has given to the growing influence of AI on financial decision making? Finally, on financial wellbeing and mental health, will the Minister commit to working across Departments to ensure that financial resilience forms part of the Government's wider approach to supporting young people's mental health and wellbeing?

If we want to grow the economy, tackle the NEET challenge and improve young people's mental health and wellbeing, we must ensure that they are not excluded from the financial system that underpins modern life. Real financial inclusion must mean that every young person can build a secure and sustainable financial future. A young adult who can save, build a credit history, access affordable insurance and make informed decisions about their finances is more likely to succeed in work, education and life. They will feel that they have agency in our society, and they will have hope for the future.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. I should remind Members that they need to bob, though I see they already know that. I call Robbie Moore.

4.42 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I commend the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) for securing this important debate, and congratulate him on his speech—I thought he made some excellent points. Many young people are entering adulthood without the knowledge, confidence and access to the financial services that they need to build secure futures. Some 70% of adults believe that better financial education in their younger years would have improved their ability to manage their finances, and two thirds of young people believe that the lack of financial education has played a role in their amassing the debts they hold.

I wish to talk through a few issues that have been raised with me, particularly regarding access to apprenticeships and the challenges that those in our rural economy face with increased costs. I recently

visited Keighley college in my constituency, where I met the principal Kevin O'Hare. Kevin highlighted to me a key issue that is putting young people undertaking apprenticeships at a financial disadvantage compared with those who decide to stay in full-time education, if they are from financially deprived backgrounds.

Currently, young people who remain in full-time education after the age of 16 continue to be treated as dependent children for the purpose of a range of household benefits. In contrast, young people who enter an apprenticeship are generally treated as employees, which can lead to a loss of income-related support linked to household benefits. For some low-income families, the resulting loss of benefits can exceed the apprentice's initial earnings, meaning that a household might be financially worse off when a young person chooses an apprenticeship, compared with had they remained in full-time education.

I am keen to understand what conversations the Minister is having with the Department for Work and Pensions and the Department for Education on that classification, because that appears to run counter to the Government's objective of promoting apprenticeships as a prestigious pathway that is equal to academic study. It may disproportionately affect participation among young people from disadvantaged communities. I have seen that in the casework coming into my office. What assessment have the Government made of the impact of household benefit losses on participation in apprenticeships among 16 to 18-year-olds? If the Minister cannot answer that in her speech, I would be grateful if she would write to me.

The second issue that I want to raise follows a meeting that I had this weekend with Silsden and Skipton young farmers club, whose members were keen to raise the cost of car insurance. Young people in rural areas face a crisis of skyrocketing insurance premiums, which makes it difficult for them to get around. Limited public transport makes owning a car essential, but they face huge costs. They cannot take up job opportunities and education if they are priced out of the market.

The hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford spoke about the mental health implications when young people feel the strain of debt, whether from going through education or simply because of the cost of living in rural areas. The key underlying point is the Government's failure to grow new opportunities for young people. Unemployment has risen to 5% and youth unemployment has risen to 16.2%. In January to March 2026, an additional 110,000 young people aged 16 to 24 were unemployed than in the same period in 2025. Young people at Keighley college who wish to pursue opportunities through apprenticeships face being worse off. That is further exacerbated by the rise in employers' national insurance and the minimum wage, and the Employment Rights Act 2025, which has created challenges.

Fiscal inclusion is about education and, crucially, about fostering an economy that rewards hard-working and ambitious young people, rather than punishing them. I would be grateful for the Minister's thoughts on those points.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. Four Members are standing, so they have about five minutes each.

4.47 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. Thank you for allowing me to speak. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) for giving us the opportunity to reflect on the importance of financial inclusion among young people. As the former co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on financial education for young people, I am really pleased to see the work that the Government have already done to expand education to support young people. I will focus on financial education as a way to remove the barriers to financial inclusion for young people.

In its 2025-26 review, the London Foundation for Banking & Finance found that 64% of young people surveyed felt anxious about money, and that only 19% could answer basic financial literacy questions. It is therefore vital that we roll out our curriculum changes as soon as possible, as 80% of those youngsters wanted to learn more about finance—they are willing and ready. Will the Minister set out how we will provide financial education for young people? How will we ensure that there are enough teachers and that they are supported to teach that vital skill?

It is crucial that we do not focus just on those still in school. Financial inclusion for young people must also include young people over 16. Before coming to this place, I worked for a housing association, and I undertook a significant piece of work on financial and digital inclusion. It was immediately clear that many adults need support, so how can we ensure that financial inclusion also covers those who are post 16? It is clear that financial vulnerability leads to high loan interest—a poverty premium, so to speak. That burden falls particularly heavily on young people. Young people in temporary accommodation are often financially trapped by their circumstances.

I put on the record my thanks to Young Enterprise and particularly Alice Clarke, not only for its support as the secretariat for the APPG but for being a leader in this space and helping to prepare young people for the future. We will be doing an investigation into how to support financial inclusion post-16, because 16 to 18-year-olds in school or college are at a key stage in their lives when it comes to making financial decisions about their future. There are excellent examples of engaging with schools to support teachers with lesson plans and resources, but we need to ensure that we have an equivalent for those aged 16 and above, so that those young people can continue to be engaged. Will the Minister set out how we can ensure that when they are rolled out, the youth hubs can continue to engage 16 to 24-year-olds, particularly on financial inclusion, so that we can support our young people to grow and learn financially?

Finally, as the parent of a 19-year-old, I know about the barriers faced by young people, including with car insurance. Like the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), I have a rural constituency, so having access to a car is important because the lack of transport is holding people back. We need to understand how to work with the insurance sector to ensure that young people are not unfairly penalised for the financial cost of insurance.

4.51 pm

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) on a terrific speech and on gathering us in Westminster Hall today.

May I take a moment to take you back to your first job, Sir John? I am sure you will remember your pride at bringing home your first payslip. In today's society, young people are turning to TikTok for beauty advice, fashion trends or the latest dance craze. It is where they learn how to spend their hard-earned cash, but it has also become a place of toxic influencers, where so-called get-rich-quick opportunities are being targeted at young people. All of a sudden, things on social media can start to feel slightly odd, because for young people those opportunities are often promoted on familiar apps that they know, in formats that they recognise and delivered by people who seem relatable.

An influencer who a young person might like may appear to be educating them about money, as perhaps a big brother or sister would, but we often find that those types of ads and reels can become exploitative. As a former Financial Conduct Authority regulator, I think we are now entering a phase of TikTokification of financial advice. The FCA, my old place of work, must be commended on its work on financial promotions, but unfortunately it has found that in some cases the majority of TikTok ads breach its finprom rules.

I call on social media giants and big tech to do more to take heed from the FCA's work on two fronts. First, social media giants must ensure that influencers properly declare any conflict of interest. Secondly, there must be greater education, almost like public good messaging inbuilt into the algorithms, where officially verified types of financial education filter through them. Aviva found that one in five children under 16 are now getting financial information from social media platforms, and only one in eight said that they would get their financial advice from school or college, so the math really ain't mathing. Boys in particular are being brought via the toxic hinterlands of the manosphere into Ponzi schemes and get-rich-quick schemes linked to body dysmorphia and other dangerous influences in the manosphere, which is an important link.

A good way to get young people into healthy financial habits is through savings. Gordon Brown understood that, as shown through the child trust fund, which was scrapped in 2011. Today, a child born into a family with money is likely to have a junior ISA opened in their name, as I have done for my children. Compound interest works favourably over the years, so by the time those young people are adults, they have a foundation that can act as a springboard for life. We need to have that nudge theory built into the system from the start. We have to think about how products delivered by fintechs can get young people saving.

I will briefly touch on fraud, because I am concerned that many of the social media ads I talk about are fraudulent. Some 47% of 18 to 34-year-olds have lost money to scams in the past year. The average loss is three grand; that is over a month's wages. It could be the first home deposit wiped out in one. That is what financial exclusion does.

[*Mr Luke Charters*]

I am particularly thankful to the hon. Members who have mentioned the car insurance market. There is a phenomenon called ghost broking, where fraudulent car insurance—insurance that does not really exist—is sold to young people. They are a young driver, they think “premiums are high”, they are sold a pup and an insurance policy that does not exist. They then get into an accident, and things go wrong from there. I would like to see social media companies and the Government prioritise ghost broking and for them to listen to the Association of British Insurers’ work on that.

I want my two boys to grow up in a world in which the first financial lessons they receive come not from a stranger with a ring light and a referral code, but from good, hard-working northerners who know how to match that graft with good financial advice. I think that is the world all of us want to see when it comes to sound financial education for all.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Just for the record, my first job was in Chiesmans, a department store that then existed in Lewisham, where I served in the china and glass department.

4.56 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a honour to serve under your chairship, Sir John. My first job was on the deli counter of my local supermarket. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) on securing this important debate.

In the middle of a cost of living crisis, whether a young person knows how to manage their money, can afford to stay in education, can access affordable financial services and advice they can trust, can avoid problem debt and can build a secure future has never mattered more. Young people are facing challenges that previous generations did not. Money has changed. For previous generations, it was coins in a pocket or cash in a wallet. Today it is numbers on a screen—online banking, apps, digital wallets, “buy now, pay later” schemes, cryptocurrency and social media influencers offering financial advice that often benefits themselves rather than the young people following them.

We assume that because young people are comfortable with technology they are financially literate, but those are not the same things. The Milburn review laid out the importance of financial inclusion for young people. Between January and March of this year, 1.01 million people between the ages of 16 and 24 were not in education, employment or training. The number of young adults regularly relying on borrowing has increased by 45% in just one year. Many are using unsecured loans and buy now, pay later products to cover everyday essentials, while one in five were employed on zero-hours contracts, making it almost impossible to budget or save. This is not just about people on the lowest incomes; it is increasingly affecting younger people who are working hard but cannot get ahead.

The challenges are even greater in rural constituencies such as West Dorset. Financial inclusion depends on being able to access financial services, yet facilities that make this possible—bank branches, cash machines and post offices—are disappearing fastest from rural communities because they are considered commercially unviable.

Meanwhile, our communities are expected to embrace digital banking despite persistent mobile phone and broadband blackspots in villages such as Drimpton, Burton Bradstock and Stoke Abbott. Across the country, 1 million people have cancelled internet packages because of the cost of living crisis. Digital banking cannot be the answer if people cannot get online.

True financial inclusion should be about giving people the confidence and knowledge to make informed decisions throughout their lives, yet less than half of children receive meaningful financial education either at home or in school. Nearly one quarter of young adults have low financial capability. Most children say that they would ask their parents’ financial advice, yet only about half of parents feel confident having those conversations. Financial education should become a core life skill, taught from primary school onwards.

Every young person should leave school with an understanding of budgeting, saving, borrowing, mortgages, pensions, taxation, credit scores, fraud and the long-term consequences of debt. Those are skills that will benefit them throughout their lives. Financial education should not stop when the school day ends. Family hubs, community hubs and banking hubs could and should become centres of financial guidance, not just financial services. Parents and carers should receive greater support because they remain the single biggest influence on their children’s financial behaviour.

We must also recognise the growing risk facing financially excluded households. An estimated 2 million people are now borrowing from illegal moneylenders—an increase of about half a million since 2022. More people are turning to payday loans simply to pay their rent or mortgage. That is not sustainable and we must do better. We must ensure that everyone has access to appropriate and affordable financial services, regardless of where they live, and can access affordable credit and independent debt advice before they reach crisis point.

For constituencies such as West Dorset, financial inclusion is also about opportunity. It determines whether a young person can take up an apprenticeship, manage their first wage, avoid exploitative lending and build financial independence. When we fail to equip young people with the skills and services they need to manage their money, we do not simply leave them financially excluded; we rob them of opportunity itself.

5 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) for securing this important debate on an issue that matters greatly to my constituents. My first job was as a paper boy; I would not say that I had to lie, but I certainly had to say that I was a little bit older than I really was to secure the job.

In a debate about financial inclusion, it would be remiss of me not to mention student loans, one of the greatest barriers to young people achieving financial security. In the financial inclusion strategy, the Government rightly recognised the importance of embedding financial literacy in the curriculum to empower young people to make informed financial decisions. However, there remains a glaring gap when it comes to student loans. Young people seeking to go to university do not have a proper

understanding of what they are signing up to. They are either unaware of the scale of the student debt they may incur or are misled into believing that student loans are not real loans. Some are told, “You don’t even have to pay them back.”

One constituent told me that although she wanted to pursue an apprenticeship, she was instead encouraged to go to university. All the virtues of university were relayed to her, but none of the drawbacks. She was told that student loans would be the easiest loans she would ever take out. Now she is saddled with tens of thousands of pounds-worth of debt and mounting anxiety about how she will ever pay it back. Financial literacy cannot simply mean learning about taxes, savings and budgeting. It must also mean understanding student loans, the first debt many young people will ever take on, so that they can make a genuinely informed decision about whether university is the right path for them.

Although I welcome the Government’s ambition to encourage saving and prevent people from being burdened by debt, unless we fully address the student loans crisis, millions of young people will be saddled with loans of around £30,000 and upwards right at the precipice of their adult lives. The debts continue to grow despite repayments, imposing a seemingly insurmountable financial burden on young people for the majority of their working lives. That inevitably impacts their ability to save. A Barclays survey revealed that savers with student loans put away £2,000 a year less than their peers without student debt.

If we are serious about improving financial inclusion, helping young people to save and building financial resilience, we cannot ignore their single biggest financial commitment, which many of them make before they have even entered the workplace and can end up feeling for the majority of their working lives. I welcome the Government’s financial inclusion strategy and the steps they are taking to ensure financial inclusion for young people, but we must tackle every barrier to financial security. That includes addressing a student loan system that leaves young people feeling weighed down by debt before they even have the chance to get ahead.

5.4 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) on his work to secure this debate and his excellent opening remarks.

The decline of high street services has been an ongoing issue in the UK, with banks and other essential services disappearing at an increasing rate. Local high streets provide a variety of vital services to their local communities, but the current landscape is extremely challenging for many local enterprises. I join other Members by referring to my first job, which was at WH Smith on Camberley High Street; I reflect on how many of the jobs from our small sample this afternoon were in a retail environment on a local high street, and how important that is for young people looking to get their foot on the ladder of a future career.

I am sure that colleagues from across the House have heard from countless local businesses in their constituencies, on their high streets and in the hearts of their communities, about the challenges they face, from the Government’s national insurance contributions rise to sky-high energy

bills, and uncertainty about what the Employment Rights Act 2025 means for them. This is placing an unsustainable burden on many businesses and services.

In the past three years, nearly 2,000 bank branches have closed across the UK, due to declining in-person transactions and the rise of online banking. Many villages and small towns now do not have even a single bank, forcing residents to travel long distances for financial services. These challenges are often compounded by limited broadband or limited access to the internet, leading to swathes of people in rural communities being excluded from online services and digital banking. Alternative solutions such as banking hubs are emerging, but there are not enough of them. The Government should be facilitating more to ensure that people across the country can access vital services when they need them and to prevent digital exclusion.

The Liberal Democrats are concerned about the inequality of provision as the 5G network is rolled out. We believe it is wrong that people should be disadvantaged simply because of where they live. I urge the Government to prioritise major investment in broadband for underserved communities. It is deeply concerning that some 2.4 million people are unable to complete basic tasks such as opening an internet browser and that over 5 million employed adults cannot complete essential digital work tasks. It is reported that basic digital skills will become the UK’s largest skills gap by 2030. Beyond that, 1.7 million households have no mobile or broadband internet at home, and around 1 million people have cut back or cancelled internet packages in the past year, as cost of living challenges have forced people to find ways to cut and save. As we live in an increasingly digital world, the lack of access to digital services will exacerbate the difficulties faced by young people in trying to get their first job.

The Liberal Democrats made a manifesto commitment to introduce a national financial inclusion strategy, requiring both the Financial Conduct Authority and the Prudential Regulation Authority to have regard to financial inclusion, such as protecting access to cash, especially in remote areas, supporting banking hubs and expanding access to bank accounts. We are also supportive of the introduction of a fair banking Act in the UK to help to tackle financial exclusion.

Compared with similar economies, the UK has some of the worst levels of financial exclusion, leaving millions without access to essential financial services. Even before the pandemic, over 10 million people in the UK were unable to access affordable credit, with over 3 million resorting to high-cost lenders such as payday loan providers, which often charge extortionate interest rates.

Small businesses also struggle to secure fair financing and receive only a small fraction of bank lending. This has created a multibillion-pound financing gap that stifles economic growth, particularly in underserved regions outside London and the south-east, as well as within marginalised communities. We must do more to bring an end to the affordable credit crisis and help millions of people who are struggling with unsustainable debt.

Regarding broader financial inclusion in education, a lack of financial engagement is an issue that permeates much of the UK beyond the younger generation. Research by TheCityUK shows that the UK has relatively low levels of retail investment compared with international

[Sarah Olney]

peers, which has implications both for long-term household outcomes and for how effectively domestic savings are channelled into the real economy.

Britain's investment gap undermines our economic future. The Financial Conduct Authority estimates that around 22 million adults with £10,000 or more in cash savings might be missing out on the benefits of investing, and many small businesses are missing out on the benefits of receiving that investment, which would help them to grow.

The UK continues to have a relatively narrow base of retail participation, with a significant proportion of households not engaging in market-based investment products at all. This limits both wealth creation at the individual level and the breadth of capital available to UK markets. One in four UK adults invest outside their pension, which is the lowest rate in the G7. It is a structural brake on household wealth, economic growth and social mobility.

This is a systemic challenge. Low levels of retail investment reinforce economic inequalities, weaken the link between savers and UK businesses, and reduce the overall effectiveness of the UK's saving and investment ecosystem. Mobilising long-term savings into productive investment is central to unlocking future growth, strengthening UK capital markets and ensuring that the UK remains internationally competitive.

The investment gap reinforces financial inequality. Those who invest pull further ahead while millions remain outside the wealth creation system. Proactive individual investment can help to bridge the gap, offering the potential for higher returns and greater financial security in later life. However, that requires proper financial education, and the gains are so much greater when young people can start investing earlier and see the value of investing.

The recent review of youth unemployment warned that one in six young people will not be in education, employment or training in five years unless action is taken, with more than 1 million already not in education, employment or training. That is a really alarming figure. The Liberal Democrats repeatedly warned that Labour's job tax would hammer job opportunities for young people, and that their business rates hikes would kill off high street job opportunities that give so many young people their first job. The Government must urgently take action to unlock the skills and opportunities that young people need to build a future they can believe in, and that includes, critically, ensuring access to financial education, financial services and employment.

5.11 pm

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. You have launched an unfortunate trend of people fessing up to their first jobs; however, it gives me the opportunity to make a point about the context in which we are debating the financial inclusion of young people. My first job—probably illegally, at the age of about 10—was a Saturday job helping out a milkman on the milk round. I then had a Christmas holiday job helping the Royal Mail to deliver Christmas letters, and a summer job packing electric parts, all of which I did in Bedford.

The key point, which relates to financial inclusion, is that a lot of what this Government are doing is turning employers away from being able to offer those job opportunities to young people. I really hope that they will rethink that, because as we have heard, the number of young people out of employment is going up quite considerably.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) on securing this debate. I also thank him for the tone and the insights with which he opened it, which all subsequent Members reinforced, and would like to refer to some of the points made. The first was from the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford, who recommended more action to support small sum lending and spoke about the beneficial effects that that can have on credit track records; I will reinforce that point a little later in some questions to the Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) raised a point that the hon. Member for Ilford South (Jas Athwal) spoke about from a different angle, which is that young people make quite an important decision that affects their financial wellbeing: university versus apprenticeships. At the moment, it seems that both paths lead to potentially detrimental effects on young people's financial wellbeing. They spoke about the decision to take out a student loan at a young age, and whether people get the right advice about what that might mean for their long-term financial wellbeing. My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley made a really interesting point about the potential disparity in how young people who decide to take an apprenticeship are treated in terms of access to financial resources, versus those in full-time employment, so perhaps the Minister can also say something about that.

The hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) used her experience on the APPG for debt and financial inclusion to talk about the excellent work undertaken by Young Enterprise to improve young people's understanding of money. That is quite timely, because My Money Week, which Young Enterprise started to try to teach young people in schools about finance and expand their knowledge, has just concluded. I echo the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire in saying that it would be good to extend that level of involvement beyond the age of 16 to young people more generally.

The hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) used his experience to echo a point made in an intervention by the hon. Member for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting) about how young people are turning to social media as their source of understanding. Turning to social media for anything is usually not good for one, which is one of the reasons why the Government have come around to banning young people from social media. When it comes to getting advice about finances, young people are already at risk through a lack of knowledge and understanding. Social media is a very dangerous source of information that can undermine what they might learn from their parents or schools. I also echo the point made by the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello): familiarity with technology is not the same as access to financial services, although there is an opportunity for us to do something with financial technologies.

Financial inclusion for young people is a passion shared between my party, the Liberal Democrats and the Labour party. This is one of the areas where we are all looking to make progress. Under the last Conservative

Government, we made financial education for 11 to 16-year-olds compulsory in the curriculum. I think the evidence shows—the Minister may confirm this—that we were not getting all schools doing what they should be doing, or at least that the results were not as we would have wished. However, it was the right step and the Government are moving now to make that compulsory in primary schools. That has to be a positive step.

The last Government also made progress in improving student attainment in mathematics. In the PISA—programme for international student assessment—ratings for mathematics in 2009, England, as education is a devolved matter, was ranked 27th; by 2023, it was ranked 11th. That is good progress and is part of ensuring that young people understand numbers and can therefore get to grips with things.

In the Government review by Professor Becky Francis, she commented on life skills and talked about the importance of young people learning about budgeting, interest, mortgages, pensions and financial planning. One thing that young people have to their advantage—the hon. Member for York Outer also mentioned this point—is the beauty of compounding interest. If they get the right start at a young age and are able to put some money aside, by the time they get to my age—perhaps even to your youthful age, Sir John—people will find it remarkable how compounding interest has worked on the savings that they have put aside. On the other hand, if they fall into debt, compounding interest can drive them the other way and into a much worse situation. It is absolutely crucial that we teach people the power of compounding, both positive and negative.

Let me move on to my questions. As I did not have a chance to advise the Minister of my questions in advance, I would be happy to receive a reply in writing afterwards. First, ironically, I want to ask about cryptocurrencies. What assessment have the Government done of the potential for cryptocurrencies to promote financial inclusion? I am sceptical, but there may be potential benefits as well as risks; cryptocurrencies can provide an easier way in than financial institutions and have lower transaction costs. I am interested in the Government's view.

Secondly, I echo the point that the hon. Member for Hertford and Stortford made about microfinance. What assessment have the Government made of the use of microfinance platforms targeted at young people, to enable them to take the first steps in building up a credit record or potentially being small-scale entrepreneurs—another great thing that young people could do?

Thirdly, what is the Government's view of the merits of leapfrogging traditional financial systems in favour of educating young people on emerging fintech platforms? Is that something that might raise young people's engagement with financial education, and that might ultimately be in their best interests?

I have a small point on “know your customer” rules—I am not too familiar with this point, but the Minister may have a view. Is the Minister satisfied that the way the “know your customer” rules currently work is effective for maximising young people's access to basic financing and banking facilities?

Finally, I am sure that the Minister and I agree on the need to ensure that schools are teaching financial inclusion at both primary and secondary level. How satisfied is

she that schools are complying with the compulsory rules on financial education? What can we do collectively, as constituency Members of Parliament, to ensure that schools are delivering the quality of financial inclusion and financial education that we would all like to see?

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I call the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. Rachel, could you allow a short time at the end for Josh to wind up and for me to put the Question?

5.20 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Rachel Blake): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I am grateful that my first chance to speak as the Minister in Westminster Hall is in such a thorough and rich debate on this topic. Let me join in with the tradition of talking about our first job by saying that I spent many a happy afternoon doing a Saturday job on the high street in a sadly now-closed women's retailer. I am very proud that jobs like that still exist: it gave me a thorough and deep understanding of the importance of the high street.

It would be impossible to cover or respond to all of the rich and broad points that have been raised this afternoon. I also want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) a chance to respond; I thank him for securing this debate and for all his work to focus the Government and colleagues on young people and the particular challenges that they face.

We have had a really broad range of contributions, including from the hon. Members for West Dorset (Edward Morello) and for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and from my hon. Friends the Members for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack), for York Outer (Mr Charters) and for Kettering (Rosie Wrighting). It has been a powerful debate. We can all agree on the importance of ensuring that everyone across the UK has access to affordable financial products and services to enable them to engage in the economy. In responding, I want to talk briefly about youth employment and support for mental health, and then try to get through the questions put to me by my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford.

Following the Milburn report and the contributions made today, we have to be clear that the Government are in no way complacent about youth unemployment. We are absolutely determined to unlock the potential of young people across the UK. Funding for employment support is increasing to more than £3.75 billion per year by 2028-29. At the last Budget, the Government committed to more than £1.5 billion to back young people through the youth guarantee and invest additional funding in the growth and skills levy.

This afternoon, we have heard interesting suggestions as to how that work can be undertaken, whether it is in youth hubs or in other youth settings. It is the responsibility of us all to consider how that investment can be made most effective, with industry working with the Government to provide jobs guarantees for a wide range of people and ensure that there are youth jobs grants under which businesses receive £3,000 for every young person they hire between the ages of 18 and 24. This is a partnership approach between industry and Government, and one that I believe will make a real difference.

[*Rachel Blake*]

I also want to talk about the significant issue of mental health and its prevalence in society, particularly among young people. Today, we are talking specifically about its interaction with financial inclusion. The strategy recognises that mental health can significantly affect people's ability to access and use financial services, along with the interrelationship between people's mental health and their attitudes and ability to work with particular financial products. It is therefore important that we strengthen the support available for individuals through interventions to improve debt collection practices, expand the breathing space scheme to support individuals in problem debt during a mental health crisis, and examine how pre-existing mental health conditions are treated in the travel insurance market. Each of those approaches is very much under way.

Robbie Moore: I welcome the Minister to her place. On the issue of mental health, many young people in my constituency raise the challenge of getting into work. With youth unemployment now at record levels, does she realise that one of the best ways of tackling mental health issues is to enable people to get into the job market in the first place, so that they do not have the additional pressure and anxiety of not being able to earn funds? Does she not recognise that things like employer national insurance, the Employment Rights Act 2025 and minimum wage increases have exacerbated the unemployment figures? Will she work with industry to address the concerns that are being raised with me and, I am sure, with her in her new role?

Rachel Blake: As the hon. Member will expect, I disagree with his characterisation of employer NI and the Employment Rights Act. I remind him of the positive impact that both those measures are having on workers, our NHS and the services that they are funding, and of the specific ways in which they operate with young people. His evidence base therefore does not entirely stack up.

I turn to the issue of building up a credit record. The Government are continuing to engage with the FCA on its work with industry to tackle thin credit files. As part of that, the FCA has recently consulted on introducing mandatory credit information sharing by regulated firms, which would mean that any firm reporting to one designated credit reference agency must report the same information to all such agencies, ensuring full and consistent information on a consumer's file.

To give my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford a chance to respond, I will rattle through actions on insurance. The Government recognise the

important role of insurance in supporting individuals' financial resilience. There are pilots among social renters, led by Fair4All Finance, and the Government also recognise that affordability is a key issue.

We have had quite a thorough discussion about scam ads. The Online Safety Act 2023 places duties on the largest social media platforms to tackle fraudulent adverts. Ofcom is due to consult on those measures later this year, and once they are implemented it will be able to impose fines of up to £80 million or 10% of qualifying revenue, whichever is greater.

I certainly want to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford. There is much more to cover, and I commit to doing so in writing. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing the debate, and will be happy to continue the conversation.

Robbie Moore: Will the Minister give way?

Rachel Blake: No, I have finished.

Robbie Moore: But we have half an hour.

Rachel Blake: No, only three minutes.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Absolutely. You missed the cut there, Robbie. I call Josh Dean to wind up very briefly.

5.27 pm

Josh Dean: I will keep it brief, Sir John. To add to the trend, I will just share the fact that my first job was in a local coffee shop.

It has been great to hear about rurality, the importance of car insurance, social media, fraud and student loans; I will not share just how high my student loan bill is, having checked recently. The importance of financial inclusion has really been brought to life, as have the challenges that young people face. I thank all Members who have contributed to this important debate, and I thank the Minister for her response. Every young person deserves to build a secure and sustainable financial future. I hope that the Treasury will continue to think ambitiously about how we can support them in doing so.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered financial inclusion for young people.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 30 June 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

Employment Rights Act 2025: Implementation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): The UK Government are today announcing further progress in the implementation of their landmark Employment Rights Act 2025, as part of the plan to make work pay. This update includes the launch of a public consultation on holiday pay compliance and enforcement, and three Government responses—detriments for workers taking industrial action, electronic balloting, and tipping. Further detail on each is provided in this statement.

As laid out in the “Implementing the Employment Rights” publication, we will not build a robust and growing economy through employment insecurity. Instead, we are building an economy based on fair competition between businesses, greater productivity in the workplace, job security for workers, and fair reward for hard work. The implementation of the Employment Rights Act is a vital step towards doing this, creating the best environment for doing business, maximising job security to raise productivity, improve skills and cut the costs of staff turnover. Meanwhile, offering opportunity and security for working people requires profitable businesses that are supported to invest and grow.

The Government have committed to delivering this change in partnership with businesses, trade unions, public sector employers, and civil society. That is why we are undertaking full and comprehensive consultation with these groups on key changes. By delivering this change together, we are backing businesses that do the right thing and giving hard-working people the job security and opportunities that they deserve.

Consultation 1: Holiday Pay Compliance and Enforcement

The Employment Rights Act enables the expansion of state enforcement to a wider range of pay rights, including holiday pay. The Government want to build a compliance and enforcement framework that is fair, proportionate and effective for both workers and employers. As a part of our framework, the right to holiday pay will, for the first time, be backed by state enforcement, with the Fair Work Agency promoting compliance, investigating non-compliance and taking enforcement action where employers fail to meet their obligations.

The Government will be consulting on the proposed approach to enforcing holiday pay from 2027, as well as consulting on a number of important design features and how the Fair Work Agency can support employers to comply with their obligations.

This consultation will be open for 12 weeks, closing on 22 September 2026.

Government Response 1: Detriments for workers taking industrial action

The Government believe that industrial relations should be conducted with integrity, fairness and mutual respect. Although it should always be treated as a last resort, if workers do choose to express their collective voice through industrial action, it is important that they are treated fairly and respectfully.

The Employment Rights Act introduced new legislation that provided protection for workers from detriments that employers might enact to penalise, prevent or deter them from taking industrial action. This legislation gave the Government the power to introduce secondary legislation to either prohibit all detriments, the Government’s lead option, or to create a prescribed list of prohibited detriments. A consultation ran between 26 February and 23 April seeking stakeholder views on these two options.

The Government response, published on 23 June, sets out that following this consultation the Government will be introducing regulations, coming into force in October 2026, that will ban all detriments and enable awards to be adjusted by up to 25%.

Government Response 2: E-balloting

The Government have been clear that trade union law must be brought into the 21st century. Under current legislation, almost all trade union statutory ballots must be conducted solely by post, which is outdated and risks limiting participation. We are therefore introducing electronic and workplace balloting for certain statutory trade union ballots in a phased approach. In this first phase, electronic balloting will be permitted for all ballots except statutory recognition and de-recognition ballots, while workplace balloting will be extended to industrial action ballots. This will make participation easier and will align with modern voting practices already used widely across political parties and listed companies, supporting the commitment we set out in our plan to make work pay.

To support the introduction of these new voting methods, we are also issuing a new statutory code of practice. The code will provide clear and detailed guidance on how electronic and workplace ballots should be conducted, giving all parties confidence that union ballots are carried out to a high standard.

A consultation on a draft of the code ran from 19 November 2025 to 28 January 2026, seeking views from employers, trade unions, scrutineers and workers to ensure that the guidance is clear, balanced and workable in practice.

The Government response to this consultation, published on 22 June, outlines the changes made to the draft code in the light of the feedback received. At the same time, the updated draft code of practice has been laid in Parliament alongside the necessary secondary legislation to enable electronic and workplace balloting. Both the code and the legislation will be subject to parliamentary scrutiny and will come into effect following approval by both Houses.

Government Response 3: Tipping

The Employment Rights Act strengthens the law, adding a requirement that employers must consult with their workers—if possible, via trade union or other elected workplace representatives—when developing or reviewing their written policy on tipping.

The Government ran a public consultation between 5 February and 1 April. We sought views from stakeholders about how best to implement the new requirements, to support worker participation in the distribution of tips, and enhance the voices of workers. We also sought views about any improvements to the existing statutory code of practice on fair and transparent distribution of tips, to ensure that it remains clear, helpful and effective for workers and employers.

The Government response sets out the feedback received during the consultation, and the changes to be made to the statutory code of practice. The new measures are expected to come into effect in October 2026.

Next steps for consultation

The Government continue to work in collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders to implement their reforms to workers' rights at pace. Continued engagement with employer and worker representatives is critical to shaping the practical implementation of these plans, helping the Government to deliver reforms that are both effective and inclusive. The Government will continue to keep Parliament updated on the implementation of the Employment Rights Act and the plan to make work pay.

A further package of consultations and Government responses, to follow over the coming weeks, is expected to include a consultation on a new code of practice for fire and rehire, as well as Government responses regarding fire and rehire regulations, trade union access, trade union recognition, and a duty to inform.

[HCWS158]

TREASURY

Defence Funding

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves):

The first job of any Government is to keep people safe. Since I have been Chancellor, I have been clear that national security is central to our economic security, and we have invested record sums into defence. The Government have today confirmed an additional £15 billion for the defence investment plan between 2026-27 and 2029-30. That will mean this Government will be spending over £60 billion more on defence over the next four years than if spending were maintained in line with plans set out by the last Government in spring Budget 2024. This will move the UK towards warfighting readiness, modernise military capability to fight the wars of the future, and drive economic growth. The DIP document sets out investments in detail, totalling £298 billion over the next four years.

From '27-28 onwards, the UK will spend 2.7% of GDP on core NATO defence spending, solidifying its position as the NATO alliance's third-largest cash spender, behind only the US and Germany. The Government have committed to increasing defence spending to 3% of GDP in the next Parliament, with funding and plans to be set out at the next spending review, where defence must be the No. 1 priority. Alongside NATO allies, the UK has committed to reach 3.5% of GDP on defence spending by 2035. The UK remains committed to meeting its obligations to the defence investment pledge. All allies will review the trajectory and spend in 2029, when NATO next reviews its capability plans. This is more money for UK defence, spent more effectively to ensure our service personnel have the capabilities they need to deter and fight now, while driving out waste and inefficiency.

This will support £5 billion investment in drones and autonomous systems, the UK's largest ever investment in drone warfare, and learning the lessons of Ukraine. It will fund strike and surveillance drones, a new hybrid Navy as well as uncrewed land vehicles. It will also support the next generation of RAF aircraft, with

£8.6 billion investment under the Global Combat Air Programme with Italy and Japan, and £300 million for the development of collaborative combat aircraft. It will also support an £11 billion investment for munitions and weapons to increase UK stockpiles, at least six new energetics factories, and £3.2 billion in space capabilities. And it will deliver the UK's renewal of the nuclear deterrent, with £64 billion of investment to build new submarines, develop a sovereign warhead and buy F-35A jets.

The defence investment plan will provide long-term certainty over Government procurement and innovation priorities, backing British business, and crowding in private investment and supporting high-value jobs and skills across the UK. By aligning defence spending with the Government's industrial strategy, it ensures that every pound invested strengthens national security, while driving growth in key sectors, boosting regional economies and positioning the UK at the forefront of advanced manufacturing and technology.

At the same time, additional funding will support improved procurement and productivity, allocating £400 million towards the UK's contribution to the multilateral defence mechanism, which will enable joint procurement with allies as well as supporting greater spending and our defence industrial base, and a £500 million transformation fund to enable transformation of the civilian workforce, reduce dependence on consultancies and deliver productivity improving investments in artificial intelligence. This is also supported by £115 million that the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology will spend to strengthen our defences against the risks of AI, and a new £50 billion defence export facility to support British defence businesses to compete and create jobs.

These choices are necessary to ensure our capabilities are fit for today, and to put defence on a sustainable footing. This includes moving towards more advanced, more effective technology. It also includes driving out waste and inefficiency, with a new commitment to deliver £250 million of fraud recovery by 2029-30. There will also be a fundamental reset in the Ministry of Defence's financial management, with defence decision-makers accountable to the MOD permanent secretary on budget management, and annual DIP delivery updates to Parliament each year.

Funding

This package has been funded by reprioritising public spending and acting within our fiscal rules, and without taking resources away from day-to-day spending on frontline services. It is funded primarily by reallocating budget from across Government Departments, with £10.3 billion identified now. A further £4.7 billion over four years will be confirmed at Budget 2026, in a fair and balanced way.

We will ensure that we focus this on finding efficiencies, cancelling or delaying lower-priority programmes, and remaining ruthlessly focused on value for money for the taxpayer. Departments will also monetise assets, including underused land and buildings, so that we are securing the maximum value from the £1.9 trillion of assets the Government holds. Departments will bring forward details in due course.

As Departments with larger capital budgets, the Government have decided to ask the Department for Transport and the Department for Energy Security and

Net Zero to make further contributions. DFT will provide up to £700 million of savings from roads funding. DESNZ will find an additional £2 billion of savings—including £400 million in financial transactions—while maintaining the fastest growing capital budget out of any Department across this spending review period. DESNZ will reshape its capital budget in a way that continues to protect the clean power mission, drive renewable and nuclear build-out and insulate us from future gas price spikes on the path to energy independence. More detailed plans will be shared by autumn.

A further £3.4 billion of spending power has been generated through removing burdens on defence. This unlocks new investment in the DIP. It includes £0.4 billion income from rationalising the MOD estate, and £0.6 billion from reprioritising MOD spending. His Majesty's Treasury is also freeing up £2.4 billion by taking on responsibility for the cost of further support for ongoing international objectives, which include Ukraine security guarantees in the case of a ceasefire, and unlocking additional savings from improved procurement. That frees up cash from MOD's budget, which it can invest elsewhere in the DIP. This will bring total additional funding to £15 billion—including £11.6 billion in additional cash. This is new investment, on top of existing budgets.

Departmental control totals will be adjusted to reflect these choices in the usual way at supplementary estimates.

We are committed to fiscal sustainability. We are acting within our iron-clad fiscal rules to protect households and businesses from higher inflation and higher interest rates, while readying UK defence against emerging global threats.

#	£billion, including Barnett consequential.	2026-27	2027-28	2028-29	2029-30	Total
Positive numbers = increases in spending; Negative numbers = savings or reductions						
Spending						
1	Defence Investment Plan	3.4	3.7	3.9	4.0	15.0
2	<i>Total increase in Ministry of Defence budget by this Government¹</i>	12.5	16.1	16.7	17.3	62.6
3	<i>Total Ministry of Defence budget</i>	68.3	73.8	76.5	79.1	297.7
4	<i>NATO spending as a percentage of Gross Domestic Product</i>	2.6%	2.7%	2.7%	2.7%	
Funding						
5	Reduce departmental capital budgets by one per cent ²	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0	-1.0	-4.0
6	Asset sales ²	0.0	-0.3	-0.3	-0.5	-1.1
7	Treasury support for ongoing international objectives and more efficient defence procurement ²	-0.5	-0.5	-0.7	-0.7	-2.4
8	Further Department for Transport savings	-0.1	-0.2	-0.2	-0.3	-0.8
9	Further Department for Energy Security and Net Zero savings	-0.1	-0.6	-0.7	-0.6	-2.0
10	To be funded at Budget 2026	-1.8	-1.1	-1.0	-0.9	-4.7
11	Total funding package	-3.4	-3.7	-3.9	-4.0	-15.0

1. Compared to a baseline assumption of Ministry of Defence planned Total Departmental Expenditure Limit in 2024-25, as of Spring Budget 2024, maintained as a share of Gross Domestic Product. 2. Included within these lines is funding which increases MoD's spending power by £3.4bn over four years, consisting of £400m of MoD asset sales, £2.4bn of Treasury support for international objectives and procurement, and £600m from MoD reprioritisation.

Horizon Family Members Redress Scheme

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

The Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for East Renfrewshire (Blair McDougall), announced the Horizon family members redress scheme on 19 March 2026. The scheme offers redress to close family members of postmasters whose lives were significantly affected by failures in the Horizon IT system.

The Government are committed to ensuring that family members of postmasters receive their compensation with minimal administrative burden and will legislate to formalise tax exemptions shortly, ensuring that no income tax or capital gains tax will be payable for redress received related to this scheme. The legislation will also relieve these payments from inheritance tax. Existing legislation ensures that national insurance contributions will not be due.

[HCWS164]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Paramount-WBD Merger: Public Interest Considerations

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport

(Lisa Nandy): On 27 February 2026 Paramount announced it would acquire Warner Bros Discovery for \$110 billion—£83 billion.

Under the Enterprise Act 2002, I can intervene if I have reasonable grounds to suspect that arrangements are in contemplation which, if carried into effect, will result in the creation of a relevant merger situation and I believe that one or more public interest considerations under the Act may be relevant.

Following engagement with the parties and independent research, my Department has today written to the current and proposed owners of Warner Bros Discovery on my behalf to inform them that I am minded to intervene on the following public interest grounds:

The need for, to the extent that it is reasonable and practicable, a sufficient plurality of views in news media in each market for news media in the United Kingdom or a part of the United Kingdom.

The need, in relation to every different audience in the United Kingdom, or in a particular area or locality of the United Kingdom, for there to be a sufficient plurality of persons with control of the media enterprises, or the enterprises providing on-demand programme services or both, serving that audience.

I am conscious that the proposed acquisition is global in nature. In reaching this decision, my focus has been, and will remain, on the UK public interest and the range of services available to UK audiences, including Channel 5, TNT Sports, Cartoon Network, Nickelodeon, and CNN International, as well as Paramount+ and HBO Max.

The public interest consideration regarding plurality of persons with control of media enterprises, or enterprises providing on-demand programme services, is not currently specified in section 58 of the Act. However, under section 42 of the Act, I may specify a new public interest consideration for Ofcom to consider in relation to the merger, if I consider it ought to be specified in section 58. As the legislation was drafted at a time when

viewing was largely via broadcast linear channels, it does not cover the effect of a merger on streaming or video-on-demand services. I believe this ought to be able to be considered in relation to this and all future media mergers given the role on-demand viewing now plays in the market. If I decide to intervene in this merger on that basis, I will bring forward secondary legislation to finalise this public interest consideration as the Enterprise Act requires me to do.

The letters to the parties, and other relevant updates, will be published on gov.uk.

It is important to note that I have not taken a final decision on intervention at this stage. The “minded to” letter invites further representations in writing from the parties and gives them until 6 July to respond.

If I decide to issue an intervention notice, the next stage would be for Ofcom to assess and report to me on the public interest considerations, and for the Competition and Markets Authority to assess and report to me on whether a relevant merger situation has been created, and any impact this may have on competition.

Following these reports, I would need to decide whether to refer the matter for a more detailed investigation by the CMA under section 45 of the Act. I am mindful of the need to reach a final decision in a timely manner, and I will endeavour to do so as appropriate.

I will update Parliament on my final decision at the earliest opportunity.

[HCWS162]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Sustainable Farming Incentive 2026

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Stephen Morgan): Farming is at the heart of our food security, the rural economy and the environment.

Through the farming road map that we published earlier this month, this Government have set out a clear long-term vision for a more profitable, productive and resilient farming sector, backed by practical support to help farmers invest in their businesses and plan for the future. A fair and accessible sustainable farming incentive is a key part of delivering that vision, rewarding farmers for sustainable food production and environmental improvement while supporting farm profitability.

Today, I am pleased to confirm that the first application window for the sustainable farming incentive 2026 is now open:

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sustainable-farming-incentive-2026-sfi26>

Window 1 is open to two groups:

small farms; and
farms without an existing environmental land management revenue agreement.

These groups have been less likely to enter SFI in the past, so this Government are giving them priority access to SFI26, with the aim of expanding coverage and spreading available funding across more farms.

SFI pays farmers for practical, on-farm actions that support sustainable food production while benefiting the environment, from improving soil health and keeping waterways clean to creating space for wildlife and reducing reliance on synthetic fertilisers.

Previously, a quarter of SFI money went to just 4% of farms. To address this, we have restructured the scheme so that it is simpler, and we are making sure the budget can be distributed fairly across more farms. For example, we have introduced an annual agreement value limit of £100,000 per farm, and a rule that each farm business will only be able to have one SFI26 agreement.

We have also streamlined the number of actions to reduce complexity while still leaving plenty of choice for farmers.

SFI26 is backed by £240 million for new SFI agreements, building on more than £560 million already committed, and forms part of the Government’s record £11.8 billion investment in sustainable farming and food production over this Parliament.

A budget of £60 million has been set aside for window 1, with any unspent funding carried forward to window 2, which will open in September 2026 for all farmers and land managers in England.

Window 1 is demand-led and will remain open for around two months, although it may close sooner if the £60 million budget is fully allocated. The Government will provide regular updates on the allocation of the window 1 budget, giving farmers clear visibility of how quickly funding is being taken up.

We have also taken action to help farmers with soon-to-expire environmental land management revenue agreements. Normally, they would not be able to access the full SFI26 offer until their existing agreement ended. To help them, we are developing functionality in the SFI26 application service to allow them to apply early for SFI26, before their existing agreements expire.

This new functionality will be available for window 2 from September. It will apply to farmers with soon-to-expire ELM revenue agreements such as SFI23 or countryside stewardship mid tier due to expire by the end of February 2027.

Some small farms eligible for window 1 may wish to consider waiting for window 2 to take advantage of this feature, given that they will be allowed only one SFI26 agreement.

More detail is set out in this morning’s post on Defra’s farming blog:

<https://defrafarming.blog.gov.uk/2026/06/30/sfi26-window-1-now-open>

Farming is the backbone of our countryside and food security, and we are proud that today we are delivering on our promise and opening the first window of SFI26 for small farms and those without an agreement.

[HCWS161]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

National Maternity and Neonatal Investigation

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (James Murray): I refer hon. Members to the oral statement I made in the House today, 30 June 2026, on the publication of the national maternity and neonatal investigation.

[HCWS166]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Digital Proof of Age: Alcohol Sales

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones):

Today I am pleased to inform the House that those members of the public who are fortunate enough to look younger than their age, but are always having to carry their passport or driving licence to prove that they are 18 or over to buy a pint in a pub, will soon no longer have this dilemma. In future, digital ID will be a quick and secure way to prove age without revealing any additional personal details to bar staff, and will mean that passports can be left safely at home by those who choose this option.

I am therefore laying a statutory instrument to deliver on our commitment to update the Licensing Act 2003 (Mandatory Licensing Conditions) Order 2010 made under the Licensing Act 2003. This change will permit the use of certified and registered digital verification services for the sale and supply of alcohol in England and Wales, where certain conditions are met.

Currently, the order requires physical documents bearing a photograph, date of birth and security features to verify age. However, with the increasing adoption of secure digital technologies, the Government recognise the need to align legislation with today's consumer habits and modern technology. Those who prefer to prove their age using physical documents can still do so.

This change will allow alcohol retailers and clubs to accept digital proof of age, provided it is presented from a DVS that is certified against the UK DVS trust framework, appears on the statutory DVS register on www.gov.uk, and meets certain conditions as specified in the mandatory licensing conditions. Certified and registered digital verification services allow individuals to choose from a range of identity evidence when setting up a digital proof of age, including physical documents, information held by public authorities and digital credentials issued by the Government, like the upcoming digital driving licence. To prove age when purchasing alcohol, there will not be any requirement to use a specific source of identity evidence if using a DVS, and physical forms of identification will still be accepted.

The updated mandatory condition will:

Permit the use of registered DVS for age verification in alcohol sales and supply where specific conditions are met.

Help to ensure that those DVS meet strict standards for security, privacy, and reliability, as set out in the trust framework.

Maintain the core licensing objectives, including the protection of children from harm, by ensuring that digital age checks are as robust as checks using physical documents.

Subject to Parliamentary procedure, the Government intend the statutory instrument to come into effect in autumn 2026. An Economic Note will be published on legislation www.gov.uk alongside the instrument.

[HCWS160]

Right to Work Scheme: Tackling Illegal Working

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): The Government are today laying regulations to strengthen the right to work and the right to rent schemes, alongside updated statutory codes of practice for employers and landlords. These measures implement

provisions in the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025 and will come into force in October 2026, in line with the common commencement date for businesses.

Clamping down on illegal working continues to be a critical part of this Government's work to restore fairness, order and control within the immigration and asylum system. The ability to work illegally is a driver of illegal migration and exploitation. Illegal working undermines honest businesses and exposes vulnerable individuals to exploitation. This Government are clear that such activity will not be tolerated.

The reforms introduce, for the first time, an extension of the right to work scheme and the associated civil penalties for non-compliance, to cover companies that contract workers or individual subcontractors to provide services under their company name, such as agency workers or workers in the gig economy. These changes close gaps in the current framework and ensure that responsibility for the prevention of illegal working sits appropriately across modern labour market structures.

The regulations also strengthen the framework for digital identity verification. They introduce updated requirements for the use of digital verification service providers, mandating that when choosing to use digital verification for a right to work or right to rent check, it must be carried out using Government-registered providers. Digital verification services are central to delivering secure, efficient and reliable checks under both schemes.

In addition, powers in the Data Use and Access Act 2025 will enable a broader use of document verification through digital means to support candidate onboarding, strengthen assurance and give individuals greater choice over how they share their personal information.

Taken together, these measures respond to changes in the labour market, including the growth of flexible and platform-based work, and ensure that the framework for preventing illegal working remains effective and proportionate.

Enforcement of the new measures will commence from October 2026, when the regulations come into force.

[HCWS159]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Youth Jobs Grant

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Pat McFadden): Over a million young people are now not in education, employment or training. This Government are acting and determined not to leave an entire generation of young people behind. The youth guarantee is our commitment to ensure that every young person across Great Britain can access support to earn or learn. We are investing an additional £2.5 billion over the next three years in the youth guarantee and the growth and skills levy, supporting almost a million young people and creating up to 500,000 opportunities to earn and learn.

Today, I am pleased to announce the launch of the youth jobs grant, a key component of the youth guarantee. The grant opens for applications today, offering £3,000 to employers across Great Britain for each eligible young person they recruit. It is targeted at 18 to 24-year-olds

who have been unemployed and in receipt of universal credit for six months or more, giving talented and motivated young people a chance at meaningful work.

Grants will be paid in two instalments—£1,800 in month two and £1,200 in month five—to encourage recruitment and sustained employment. Roles must be at least 25 hours per week and are expected to last a minimum of four months. The scheme is open to employers in all sectors and regions.

Employers will be able to apply through a simple application process from today found on the youth jobs grant site
<https://www.find-government-grants.service.gov.uk/grants/youth-jobs-grant-1>

with further details on eligibility and requirements available on the “Build Your Future Workforce” site
<https://www.business.gov.uk/campaign/recruit-with-jobcentreplus/build-your-future-workforce/>

By supporting employers with the up-front costs of recruitment and training, the youth jobs grant will help more young people to secure a meaningful job, build confidence, and gain valuable workplace experience. The youth jobs grant is a vital step in delivering our commitment to support young people into work while helping employers to access the talent they need to grow.

[HCWS163]

Petition

Tuesday 30 June 2026

OBSERVATIONS

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Bridlington Care Unit

The petition of residents of East Yorkshire,

Declares that the proposed closure of the Bridlington Care Unit is deeply concerning and must not go ahead; further declares that Bridlington Hospital has successfully achieved accreditation as an elective surgical hub and has potential to increase the number of operations delivered on site, as it did during Covid; further declares that York and Scarborough are already at capacity with patients; and further declares that redeploying staff from Bridlington to other NHS facilities in Scarborough and York will extra incur costs to the trust.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to urgently instruct both NHS Humber and North Yorkshire Integrated Care Board and York and Scarborough Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust not to close the Bridlington Care Unit; and further to urge the Government to work with the various health providers and the Bridlington Health Forum to in fact actively expand the range of services available at Bridlington.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[*Presented by Charlie Dewhirst, Official Report, 20 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 667.*]

[P003202]

Observations from the Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth):

The Government congratulate Bridlington hospital staff on the hospital achieving successful accreditation as an elective surgical hub and acknowledge the work that has gone into this. The Government note that York and Scarborough teaching hospitals NHS foundation trust and system partners are actively working to increase the services that are available at Bridlington hospital, particularly in planned surgery.

The Government understand that, following recommendations from East Riding council's health, care and wellbeing overview and scrutiny sub-committee, the trust will review the planned closure of the Bridlington care unit while it undertakes further work with Humber and North Yorkshire integrated care board and system partners. This work will include a period of structured engagement with patients, staff, residents and stakeholders.

More broadly, the NHS and partners are working to improve access to social and community care services to support patients returning to their homes as soon as possible and to avoid longer hospital stays. This will include increasing access to community services such as the Bee at Home care services provided by City Health Care Partnership, the social care improvement plan in East Riding, and improving access to local care homes.

The Government encourage interested parties to actively participate in the further engagement planned by York and Scarborough teaching hospitals NHS foundation trust and Humber and North Yorkshire ICB. Local NHS bodies are best placed to consider and respond to concerns about plans for local NHS services and how they can best meet the needs of their communities.

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