

**Monday
6 July 2026**

**Volume 789
No. 27**



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Monday 6 July 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.

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

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

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

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

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. James Murray, MP

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

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS AND TRADE, AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

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

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY (CHIEF WHIP)—The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

ALSO ATTENDS CABINET

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY—The Rt Hon. Lucy Rigby, KC, MP

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Lord Hermer, KC

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP

MINISTER OF STATE, FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington

PAYMASTER GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business and Trade —

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §

Sir Chris Bryant, MP (Minister for Trade) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Blair McDougall, MP

Kate Dearden, MP

Chris McDonald, MP §

Lord Leong CBE

Cabinet Office—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

PAYMASTER GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP §

The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP (Minister without Portfolio)

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Chris Ward, MP

Satvir Kaur, MP

James Frith, MP §

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent

Culture, Media and Sport —

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

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Stephanie Peacock, MP

Baroness Twycross

Defence—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Luke Pollard, MP (Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry)

Lord Coaker

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Louise Sandher-Jones, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)

Calvin Bailey MBE, MP (Minister for Veterans and People)

Education—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Georgia Gould OBE, MP (Minister for School Standards)

The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills, and Minister for Women and Equalities) §

The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Social Security and Disability) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Olivia Bailey, MP

Josh MacAlister OBE, MP

Seema Malhotra, MP §

Energy Security and Net Zero—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Vallance of Balham KCB (Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear) §

Michael Shanks, MP (Minister for Energy)

Lord Whitehead CBE (Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Katie White OBE, MP

Martin McCluskey, MP

Chris McDonald, MP §

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

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

MINISTER OF STATE—Stephen Morgan, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Emma Hardy, MP

Mary Creagh CBE, MP

Baroness Hayman of Ullock

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office —

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington

Stephen Doughty, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Hamish Falconer, MP

Seema Malhotra, MP §

Chris Elmore, MP

Health and Social Care—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Karin Smyth, MP (Minister for Secondary Care)

Stephen Kinnock, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Merron

Sharon Hodgson, MP

Preet Kaur Gill, MP

Home Office—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP (Minister for Security) §

The Rt Hon. Lord Hanson of Flint

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Mike Tapp, MP
 Natalie Fleet, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Taylor of Stevenage
 Samantha Dixon MBE, MP
 Nesil Caliskan, MP
 Lord Lemos CMG CBE

Justice—

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Catherine Atkinson, MP
 Baroness Levitt, KC
 Jake Richards, MP §

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Lord Hermer, KC
 SOLICITOR GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Ellie Reeves, KC, MP
 ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Baroness Smith of Cluny, KC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

Leader of the House of Lords—

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon
 DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—Lord Collins of Highbury

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Matthew Patrick, MP

Science, Innovation and Technology—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP
 MINISTERS OF STATE—
 Lord Vallance of Balham KCB (Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear) §
 The Rt Hon. Ian Murray, MP (Minister for Digital Government and Data) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE
 Kanishka Narayan, MP
 James Frith, MP §

Scotland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Kirsty McNeill, MP

Transport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP
 MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill CBE (Minister for Rail)
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
 Simon Lightwood, MP
 Lilian Greenwood, MP §
 Keir Mather, MP

Treasury—

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP
 CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Lucy Rigby, KC, MP
 FINANCIAL SECRETARY—Lord Livermore
 EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Dan Tomlinson, MP
 ECONOMIC SECRETARY—Rachel Blake, MP
 MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

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

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

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

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

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

UK Export Finance—

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE—Sir Chris Bryant, MP §

Wales Office—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Anna McMorrin, MP
Claire Hughes, MP §

Work and Pensions—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Andrew Western, MP
Torsten Bell, MP §

His Majestys Household —

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon GCVO

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Rosslyn

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

TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Sir Mark Tami, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Sir Nicholas Dakin, MP

COMPTROLLER—Gen Kitchen, MP

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

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

LORDS IN WAITING—

Lord Wilson of Sedgfield
Lord Katz MBE

BARONESSSES IN WAITING—

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath
Baroness Curran
Baroness Blake of Leeds

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

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

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

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Nick Smith, MP

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



HOUSE OF COMMONS

THE SPEAKER—The Rt Hon. Sir Lindsay Hoyle, MP

CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Ms Nusrat Ghani, MP

FIRST DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—Judith Cummins, MP

SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP

PANEL OF CHAIRS—

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

SECRETARY—Lynn Gardner

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—

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

SECRETARY TO THE COMMISSION—Lloyd Owen

ASSISTANT SECRETARY—Edward Potton

COMMONS EXECUTIVE BOARD—

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

SECRETARY TO THE BOARD—Hannah Bryce

SPEAKER'S SECRETARY AND CHIEF OF STAFF—Helen Wood

SPEAKER'S COUNSEL—Saira Salimi

SPEAKER'S CHAPLAIN—The Venerable Andrew Hillier

PARLIAMENTARY COMMISSIONER FOR STANDARDS—Daniel Greenberg CB

HIS MAJESTY'S GOVERNMENT

MEMBERS OF THE CABINET

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

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE FOR JUSTICE—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP
CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Yvette Cooper, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR THE HOME DEPARTMENT—The Rt Hon. Shabana Mahmood, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR WORK AND PENSIONS—The Rt Hon. Pat McFadden, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

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

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE—The Rt Hon. James Murray, MP

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

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO—The Rt Hon. Ed Miliband, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR BUSINESS AND TRADE, AND PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR TRANSPORT—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS—The Rt Hon. Emma Reynolds, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—The Rt Hon. Lisa Nandy, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR NORTHERN IRELAND—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP

SECRETARY OF STATE FOR SCOTLAND—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP

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

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY (CHIEF WHIP)—The Rt Hon. Jonathan Reynolds, MP

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

ALSO ATTENDS CABINET

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE TREASURY—The Rt Hon. Lucy Rigby, KC, MP

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Lord Hermer, KC

MINISTER WITHOUT PORTFOLIO—The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP

MINISTER OF STATE, FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington

PAYMASTER GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

DEPARTMENTS OF STATE AND MINISTERS

Business and Trade —

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §

Sir Chris Bryant, MP (Minister for Trade) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Blair McDougall, MP

Kate Dearden, MP

Chris McDonald, MP §

Lord Leong CBE

Cabinet Office—

PRIME MINISTER, FIRST LORD OF THE TREASURY, MINISTER FOR THE CIVIL SERVICE AND MINISTER FOR THE UNION—
The Rt Hon. Sir Keir Starmer KCB, KC, MP

CHIEF SECRETARY TO THE PRIME MINISTER, CHANCELLOR OF THE DUCHY OF LANCASTER AND MINISTER FOR INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS—The Rt Hon. Darren Jones, MP

PAYMASTER GENERAL AND MINISTER FOR THE CABINET OFFICE—The Rt Hon. Nick Thomas-Symonds, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP §

The Rt Hon. Anna Turley, MP (Minister without Portfolio)

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

Chris Ward, MP

Satvir Kaur, MP

James Frith, MP §

Baroness Anderson of Stoke-on-Trent

Culture, Media and Sport —

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

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Stephanie Peacock, MP

Baroness Twycross

Defence—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Luke Pollard, MP (Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry)

Lord Coaker

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Louise Sandher-Jones, MP (Minister for the Armed Forces)

Calvin Bailey MBE, MP (Minister for Veterans and People)

Education—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Georgia Gould OBE, MP (Minister for School Standards)

The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Malvern (Minister for Skills, and Minister for Women and Equalities) §

The Rt Hon. Sir Stephen Timms, MP (Minister for Social Security and Disability) §

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Olivia Bailey, MP

Josh MacAlister OBE, MP

Seema Malhotra, MP §

Energy Security and Net Zero—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Lord Vallance of Balham KCB (Minister for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear) §

Michael Shanks, MP (Minister for Energy)

Lord Whitehead CBE (Minister for Energy Security and Net Zero)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Katie White OBE, MP

Martin McCluskey, MP

Chris McDonald, MP §

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—

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

MINISTER OF STATE—Stephen Morgan, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Emma Hardy, MP

Mary Creagh CBE, MP

Baroness Hayman of Ullock

Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office —

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

The Rt Hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington

Stephen Doughty, MP

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Hamish Falconer, MP

Seema Malhotra, MP §

Chris Elmore, MP

Health and Social Care—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Karin Smyth, MP (Minister for Secondary Care)

Stephen Kinnock, MP (Minister for Care)

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Merron

Sharon Hodgson, MP

Preet Kaur Gill, MP

Home Office—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

Dame Angela Eagle DBE, MP (Minister for Security) §

The Rt Hon. Lord Hanson of Flint

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Mike Tapp, MP
 Natalie Fleet, MP

Housing, Communities and Local Government—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Steve Reed OBE, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Taylor of Stevenage
 Samantha Dixon MBE, MP
 Nesil Caliskan, MP
 Lord Lemos CMG CBE

Justice—

DEPUTY PRIME MINISTER, LORD CHANCELLOR AND SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. David Lammy, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Catherine Atkinson, MP
 Baroness Levitt, KC
 Jake Richards, MP §

Law Officers—

ATTORNEY GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Lord Hermer, KC
 SOLICITOR GENERAL—The Rt Hon. Ellie Reeves, KC, MP
 ADVOCATE GENERAL FOR SCOTLAND—Baroness Smith of Cluny, KC

Leader of the House of Commons—

LORD PRESIDENT OF THE COUNCIL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF COMMONS—The Rt Hon. Sir Alan Campbell, MP

Leader of the House of Lords—

LORD PRIVY SEAL AND LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—The Rt Hon. Baroness Smith of Basildon
 DEPUTY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF LORDS—Lord Collins of Highbury

Northern Ireland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Hilary Benn, MP
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Matthew Patrick, MP

Science, Innovation and Technology—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Liz Kendall, MP

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Baroness Lloyd of Effra CBE
 Kanishka Narayan, MP
 James Frith, MP §

Scotland Office—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Douglas Alexander, MP
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARY OF STATE—Kirsty McNeill, MP

Transport—

SECRETARY OF STATE—The Rt Hon. Heidi Alexander, MP
 MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Hendy of Richmond Hill CBE (Minister for Rail)
 PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—
 Simon Lightwood, MP
 Lilian Greenwood, MP §
 Keir Mather, MP

Treasury—

CHANCELLOR OF THE EXCHEQUER—The Rt Hon. Rachel Reeves, MP
 CHIEF SECRETARY—The Rt Hon. Lucy Rigby, KC, MP
 FINANCIAL SECRETARY—Lord Livermore
 EXCHEQUER SECRETARY—Dan Tomlinson, MP
 ECONOMIC SECRETARY—Rachel Blake, MP
 MINISTER OF STATE—Lord Stockwood (Minister for Investment) §

PARLIAMENTARY SECRETARIES—

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

LORDS COMMISSIONERS—

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

ASSISTANT WHIPS—

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

UK Export Finance—

PRESIDENT OF THE BOARD OF TRADE—The Rt Hon. Peter Kyle, MP
MINISTER FOR TRADE—Sir Chris Bryant, MP §

Wales Office—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Anna McMorrin, MP
Claire Hughes, MP §

Work and Pensions—

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

MINISTERS OF STATE—

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

PARLIAMENTARY UNDER-SECRETARIES OF STATE—

Andrew Western, MP
Torsten Bell, MP §

His Majestys Household —

LORD CHAMBERLAIN—The Rt Hon. Lord Benyon GCVO

LORD STEWARD—The Earl of Rosslyn

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

TREASURER—The Rt Hon. Sir Mark Tami, MP

VICE-CHAMBERLAIN—Sir Nicholas Dakin, MP

COMPTROLLER—Gen Kitchen, MP

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

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

LORDS IN WAITING—

Lord Wilson of Sedgfield
Lord Katz MBE

BARONESSSES IN WAITING—

Baroness Ramsey of Wall Heath
Baroness Curran
Baroness Blake of Leeds

§ *Members of the Government listed under more than one Department*

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

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

REPRESENTING THE HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION—Nick Smith, MP

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



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SECOND DEPUTY CHAIRMAN OF WAYS AND MEANS—The Rt Hon. Caroline Nokes, MP

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THE PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

OFFICIAL REPORT

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

FOURTH YEAR OF THE REIGN OF HIS MAJESTY KING CHARLES III

SIXTH SERIES

VOLUME 789

FOURTH VOLUME OF SESSION 2026-2027

House of Commons

Monday 6 July 2026

The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we begin, I would like to pay tribute to Sir George Howarth, who died last week. Sir George was the Member of Parliament for Knowsley from 1986 to 2024. He held numerous posts on Select Committees in this House, was appointed a Minister in the late 1990s, and was later a distinguished and long-serving member of the Panel of Chairs. I knew George because his father-in-law was the MP for Chorley. George was committed to getting into the House, so we all had to work on his by-election. Tragically, he got a bad back, but we had a big majority by the end of the campaign. Of course, our thoughts and prayers are with his wife Julie, his wider family, and his friends. He was a great politician, and it is another sad loss for this House.

Oral Answers to Questions

DEFENCE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Russia: Level of Threat to UK

1. **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the level of threat from Russia. [900805]

9. **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the level of threat from Russia. [900814]

13. **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the level of threat from Russia. [900819]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dan Jarvis): Mr Speaker, may I associate myself, and I am sure all Members of this House, with your words of condolence for the late, great George Howarth? He was a hugely experienced parliamentarian, and he will be very much missed.

May I also congratulate the England men's team on one of the great nights, or perhaps mornings, in our nation's footballing history? It was a victory built on pride, passion and determination.

Russia poses a serious and persistent threat to UK and European security in every domain—underwater, on the water, on the land, and in the sky, space and cyber. Russia's reckless military actions involving NATO aircraft and airspace, including its multiple reckless overflights of our aircraft carrier just last week, risk miscalculation and escalation. This Government are ensuring that our response meets that threat, as we stand firm with Ukraine and with NATO.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I associate myself with the comments about George Howarth, whom I knew before I came to this place. He was a brilliant man.

As we saw only too clearly this weekend, the threat from Russia rears its head at all levels; it ranges from physical aggression, which we know about all too well, to mastering the art of operating in the grey zone through proxies, election interference and psychological warfare. I thank the Secretary of State for his important work leading the defending democracy taskforce, and I welcome the defence investment plan. Will he set out the role that the plan will play in our defending our country against threats that are not solely physical?

Dan Jarvis: I was proud to lead the DDTF as Security Minister, and as Defence Secretary I am focused on ensuring that we defend our nation against the threats that we face. The UK is under daily attack from adversaries who seek to harm our society and our prosperity, including through cyber-attacks. My Department is investing

£2.5 billion in cyber and intelligence, and we are working across Government, industry and society, and with our allies, to defend against and deter attacks across every domain.

Noah Law: As we have heard, we are in a new era of modern warfare, in which cheap drones, costing thousands of pounds, can knock out systems costing millions. The defence investment plan reflects that new reality, and I welcome the £5 billion set aside for drones, but what steps is the Minister taking to invest in the fightback against Russian aggression in the information warfare space?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise the hybrid nature of the threats that we face from Russia. Information operations seek to unpick the threads of our resilient democratic society, and we will defend against these threats. I have the privilege of working with military and civilian specialists in the Ministry of Defence, and I can assure him that I will always give our specialists what they need to detect, expose and respond to the full range of hybrid threats that Russia poses.

Alex Ballinger: I was concerned to see reports last week of drones launched from Russian shadow fleet vessels overflying critical infrastructure in the UK, including nuclear air bases and nuclear sites, as well as other concerning issues. I welcome the action taken by the Royal Marines to seize the shadow tanker vessels, but will the Secretary of State give more detail on how we will tackle the drones that are being launched? Do we have the capability to intercept them, and if not, when will we have it?

Dan Jarvis: I am sure that my hon. Friend, as a former Royal Marine, will join me in paying tribute to our forces who courageously interdicted the Russian shadow fleet vessel just last month. This Government take the security of our military bases and critical infrastructure incredibly seriously. Through the Armed Forces Bill, we are giving defence personnel greater powers to defeat drones that threaten our bases. Our defence investment plan sets out significant funding for radars, sensors and counter-drone systems, including more than £750 million to provide short-range drone protection for our forces in the UK and those deployed overseas.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): The Prime Minister agreed that he would use all his might to tackle the shadow fleet tankers that were coming through British territorial waters. Since then, one has been taken, and just under 200 shadow fleet tankers have passed through our waters with nothing happening. Are the Government serious about stopping these tankers? Are they so serious about it that they will revisit the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, which they seem to think prevents them from boarding the tankers?

Dan Jarvis: Yes, I can give the right hon. Gentleman the assurance he seeks. We are serious, absolutely. That is why, in my first couple of days as the Defence Secretary, we interdicted the Russian shadow vessel, and we will not hesitate to take further action in the future.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Much of the commentary on the defence investment plan is on the threat to the UK mainland, our interests and our assets. First, does the Secretary of State think that it is more useful to think about the Russian threat to NATO in general terms? Secondly, now we have the DIP, is the UK still 31st out of 32 NATO members, when it comes to our commitment to strengthen and modernise the armed forces?

Dan Jarvis: As I hope the hon. and gallant Member will acknowledge, we are the third-largest contributor in cash terms to NATO. This weekend, I visited our personnel deployed on NATO operations in the High North, and together with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary, I am going to the NATO summit in Ankara. Our allies look to us for leadership. We have provided that in the past, and I guarantee that we will provide it in the future.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Ministry of Defence said over the weekend that the action against HMS Prince of Wales was “unsafe and unprofessional”. Does the Secretary of State not agree that it is far more than that? It is provocative. Does he not further agree that Russia will take the next step, if this threat is not faced down? What action will we take to make it absolutely clear to the killer in the Kremlin that this sort of thing is simply not acceptable?

Dan Jarvis: I agree with the right hon. Gentleman; the threat that he has outlined is completely unacceptable. It is reckless, and I commend all those serving on the carrier strike group for the decisive action that they took in responding to it. The Ankara summit, which begins tomorrow, provides another important opportunity to restate our commitment, as an alliance, to standing against the threat that Russia undoubtedly poses, and we will ensure that we do not miss that opportunity.

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

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): My heartfelt congratulations to the England football team on reaching the quarter finals. I also share your condolences, Mr Speaker, with regard to my good friend, Sir George Howarth.

With the defence investment plan finally being published, I had hoped that as we head to the NATO summit in Ankara this week, the Government would have set out a clear path to 3.5%, but unfortunately, the Prime Minister will be arriving empty-handed, because we have not even set out a clear path to 3%. Given the widely reported Russian potential plot to launch an attack on Polish soil, targeting its critical infrastructure, and given that the US President has warned that NATO members must increase investment or face the consequences, can my right hon. Friend tell us that at the Ankara summit, the Prime Minister will reassure allies by setting out a clear pathway to 3.5%?

Dan Jarvis: I have huge respect for the Chair of the Select Committee. He will have heard my words the other day on the importance of ensuring that defence is the No. 1 spending priority at the next spending review. That is the moment at which we will need to set out a clear trajectory to honouring our commitment to spending 3.5% of GDP by 2035. I know that he will also understand

the leading role that the United Kingdom plays in NATO. Our allies expect us to lead and to step up, and that is what we will do.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Does the Secretary of State accept that long delays in publishing the defence investment plan and the instability at the top of his Department have sapped confidence from the industry and our allies, at the very moment when the Russian threat demands more certainty from us?

Dan Jarvis: With great respect to the hon. Gentleman, what I accept is that in two and a half weeks, we sorted the defence investment plan. That is a good base to build on. That is £15 billion of additional resource, which sits alongside a commitment to spend £298 billion over the next four years. Those are the kind of numbers that the Conservatives could only dream of.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): May I echo your sentiments, Mr Speaker, about Sir George Howarth, and pass on the Opposition's condolences to his family and friends? Also, for their first oral questions, I welcome the new Ministers to the Front-Bench team.

Today's reports of Russian provocation illustrate the scale of the threat from Putin, but they also show why Britain needed a defence investment plan that was fully funded, instead of one with a £5 billion IOU for the next Prime Minister. On that point, the Defence Readiness and Industry Minister, responsible for producing the DIP, admitted on the media round last week that he only found out about the missing £5 billion after the DIP was published. When did the Secretary of State find out?

Dan Jarvis: Let me gently respond by saying that we inherited a Ministry of Defence that was underfunded, over-programmed and completely unsuited to the threats that we face now and will face in the future. This Government have committed £298 billion. The hon. Gentleman mentions £5 billion; let me tell him that we are spending more than £5 billion on the largest ever drone investment for the UK, learning the lessons of Ukraine. We have been clear about the need to spend more on defence, and we will do that, but I will not be taking any lessons from the hon. Gentleman.

James Cartlidge: This is not good enough. The defence investment plan has completely unravelled because, despite it being many months late, the Government still have not worked out where they are going to get the money from. Either the Secretary of State knowingly signed off a defence investment plan with a £5 billion poison pill for the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), or the Defence Secretary was, like his procurement Minister, kept in the dark by the Chancellor. Which is it?

Dan Jarvis: I am sorry to say that that is performative nonsense from the shadow Secretary of State, who should know better. We inherited a Defence budget that was underfunded, overcommitted and simply not fit for the threats we face. This Government have committed £298 billion over the next four years, alongside £15 billion of additional resource for the DIP. Yes, we will need to do more, and the spending review will provide the

opportunity to do that, and I hope that perhaps we can establish political consensus on the importance of doing that.

Mr Speaker: I call Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): As our brave Ukrainian allies have halted the advance of the Russian army, Putin has resorted to expanding his air campaign against Kyiv and other Ukrainian civilian targets. His growing barbarism is matched only by his desperation. The UK is rightly proud to have led the world in supporting Ukraine and punishing Putin for his aggression, but we must now turn the screw further. I welcome the new sanctions announced today by the Foreign Secretary, but the lifeblood of Putin's war economy is the sale of oil, gas and coal to the world. The Liberal Democrats believe that there should be no legitimate routes to market for Russian fossil fuels, so, ahead of tomorrow's NATO summit, will the Secretary of State and colleagues in the Foreign Office ask the Prime Minister to work with our allies to ban the provision of all maritime services for the export of Russian oil, oil products, gas and coal?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the important issue of support for Ukraine, and while it does appear that we in this House are unable to agree on the defence investment plan, I hope that we can agree on the importance of supporting our allies in Ukraine. My first call as the new Defence Secretary was to my opposite number in Ukraine. In my first weekend in office, we interdicted the Russian shadow vessel, and in my first week, we provided £752 million of support for Ukraine. We need to keep going with that. The hon. Gentleman is right to raise the importance of the NATO summit; I will work with the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary to make sure that, as the hon. Gentleman says, we tighten the screw.

Operation Valour

2. **Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on Operation Valour. [900806]

11. **Jodie Gosling** (Nuneaton) (Lab): What progress his Department has made on Operation Valour. [900817]

Mr Speaker: Minister, welcome.

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): Thank you, Mr Speaker. As it might be in excess of 47 years since the last Labour RAF veteran stood at this Dispatch Box, I would like to acknowledge those who served in a squadron.

Valour will improve the co-ordination of services at national, regional and local level, ensuring that veterans from across the UK have easier access to the support that they deserve. We are making good progress. I opened the first Valour centre on Thursday, and round 2 of funding is now open for applications. The first Valour field officers are already in post, with more to follow in the Valour HQ, now fully resourced.

Phil Brickell: Westthoughton is home to a fantastic local veterans charity called the Darren Deady Foundation. Darren bravely served in the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment, but, sadly, died following injuries he sustained on the

frontline in Afghanistan. I had the privilege of visiting the foundation back in April. I met Christine, and Darren's mum Julie, to discuss the vital work that the foundation does. Will the Minister join me in paying tribute to the incredible work done by everyone at the Darren Deady Foundation, and will he see if he can find time to accompany me on a visit to the veterans community hub that the foundation is building at the Old Washacre family support centre?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for recognising the work of the Darren Deady Foundation. As an Afghan veteran, I take this issue incredibly seriously. The foundation is doing incredible work in the name of Kingsman Darren Deady, led by his family and in his memory, and I would take great pleasure in joining my hon. Friend in a visit to the foundation.

Jodie Gosling: May I associate myself with the words about Sir George Howarth, and about the England men's football team, and may I welcome the Minister for Veterans and People to his position? Our Veterans Contact Point, alongside a number of other dedicated organisations in my constituency of Nuneaton, is a prime example of Operation Valour in action and in practice. Will the Minister provide an update about how the scheme will build on those organisations' long-standing service and enhance the support for veterans in Nuneaton and our wider region?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising Veterans Contact Point; its work is really important. Through Operation Valour, we want to make that support even better, so that every veteran can access the support that they deserve, when they need it. The new Valour-recognised hub in Telford and Wrekin has just launched, alongside 13 other Valour-recognised centres across the UK. Expressions of interest for the second round of Valour development funding are currently being assessed.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I welcome the Minister for Veterans and People to his new role. He will be interested to know that my Gosport constituency has the highest proportion of veterans in the country. A lot of them are saying that Operation Valour has good intentions when it comes to improving visibility and triaging access to care services, but it does not invest in services like housing and healthcare. The new Conservative administration that has just taken over Gosport borough council has inherited a 541-strong waiting list for council houses, and the NHS waiting list for treatment has gone up by 17,000 across Hampshire, this year alone. What will stop Op Valour being more than just window-dressing? How will it invest in the services that our veterans rely on?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for her commitment to the veterans in her community, and for raising those important points. Operation Valour does not seek to usurp the wonderful third sector in this country; instead, we hope that Valour will empower that sector and share good experiences. She points out the shortage of council housing, which is a legacy of a past Conservative Government. I hope that her constituents, including the veterans, will benefit from the falling waiting list numbers.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Our military personnel risk life and limb every day to keep the country safe, and they deserve the best support that we can give them, so it is shocking that for many of our veterans, military compensation received counts as income when local means-tested benefits are assessed. Will the Minister commit to ending that practice, so that veterans can be properly rewarded for their sacrifice to this country?

Mr Bailey: The hon. Member makes a powerful point. I cajoled my two local councils into ceasing that practice by writing to them and lobbying on behalf of veterans. I would be happy to meet him to share practice, so that he can do the same.

Veterans: Homelessness

3. **Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab):** What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on veteran homelessness. [900807]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): One veteran rough sleeping is one too many. This Government will always ensure that support is available when needed. We have committed an additional £12 million to the reducing veteran homelessness programme. Alongside Op Fortitude, we will deliver three years of support services across the UK for veterans at risk or experiencing homelessness.

Paula Barker: I associate myself with the comments about the loss of Sir George Howarth. His loss will be felt deeply in this place. Organisations in Liverpool, such as Veterans HQ, do incredible work to support homeless veterans, and the Government have made tackling the issue a priority through their reducing veteran homelessness programme. The latest evaluation highlights a shortage of housing for veterans who need to move on from emergency accommodation. Royal British Veterans Enterprise, an amazing charity, is addressing that shortage through an innovative new scheme that would provide 100 new homes for the most disadvantaged veterans, but it has to be funded through public donations. Will the Government look at how they can work with the voluntary sector on projects like this, to provide desperately needed social housing for veterans, to whom we owe so much?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising such an important point. I am continuing my predecessor's close work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and with local authorities to ensure that veterans receive the support they deserve, and I will soon meet with MHCLG to discuss the matter further. A range of support is available to veterans. All veterans of the regular armed forces have been exempted from the requirement to have a local connection for social housing in England. The reducing veteran homelessness programme funds vital wraparound support for veterans, and Op Fortitude has helped more than 1,000 veterans into housing.

Royal Navy Surface Fleet

4. **Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con):** What steps he is taking to increase the availability of the Royal Navy surface fleet. [900808]

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): The defence investment plan sets out plans for a more lethal and larger Royal Navy, based on the hybrid model. Despite a lack of investment in docks and late ordering of ships under the previous Government, I can confirm that the Royal Navy continues to meet operational and NATO commitments. This Government are ordering more ships and securing British shipbuilding, and we are serious about delivering the world's first hybrid Navy of crewed, uncrewed and autonomous vessels.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: With the retirement of HMS Iron Duke, the number of deployable Type 23s is reducing. In government, we ordered a total of 13 Type 26s and Type 31s. With the Chagos deal now dead, does the Minister agree with our policy that the immediate saving of £400 million should be used to accelerate the commissioning and launching of the Type 26s and Type 31s?

Luke Pollard: As the Member of Parliament for Devonport, where we not only base-port but refit Type 23s, I know that many of those ships that have given decades of service are no longer able to provide the capabilities we need. That is why we are accelerating the out-of-service dates for a number of those platforms while still investing in accelerating shipbuilding on the Clyde, where we are building the Type 26s, and investing in the hybrid Navy. We are delivering more uncrewed vessels, which will be especially active in the anti-submarine warfare era. The right hon. Gentleman will understand that we have set out the defence investment plan, with an increase in defence spending, and we will be using that to support our Royal Navy to be more lethal and larger.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I welcome the move to commit to the procurement of six common combat vessels in the DIP. I hope that they will be based on the hull of the Type 31, which is being built by the very skilled workforce at Rosyth in my constituency. Will the Minister take immediate action and work with me to progress the CCV programme so that hopefully we do not see a gap between the end of the Type 31 programme and the start of CCV construction?

Luke Pollard: I say seriously to the House that my hon. Friend has been an incredible advocate for Rosyth. I have met him on a large number of occasions, and he has been absolutely determined to talk not just about the potential of Rosyth, but about the professionalism of the men and women who work there and the opportunity for young people to have a career in shipbuilding. The common combat vessel is a huge opportunity for us to expand the number of our hulls in the Royal Navy and build the latest capabilities not just in air defence, but as a mothership for our hybrid Navy opportunities. I would be happy to meet him to discuss the matter further.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): We learned from the defence investment plan that there will be no new Type 83s or Type 32s, but we will get some unspecified, undetermined and uncrewed—and currently unbelievable—replacement. That is precisely the same sort of budget-cutting, finger-crossing nonsense from the MOD that sees the geriatric Land Rover not replaced until 2030, Sandown and Hunt removed before they are replaced, and C-130 retired before low-level parachute drops can take place from the A400M. Those are just

three examples of the MOD missing its targets. Will the Secretary of State get a grip on the bean counters in the MOD, who apparently are not very good at counting beans? Will he commit to building all future complex warships on the Clyde or at Rosyth—preferably both?

Luke Pollard: It is unlike the SNP to be so positive about defence, isn't it? The Type 83 and Type 32 were PowerPoints—there was no budget attached to them. That is why in the defence investment plan we set out a plan for a common combat vessel and a hybrid Navy to fulfil the opportunities that the retirement of the Type 45 presents for us. I hope the hon. Gentleman will take back a message to the Scottish Government that we can work in partnership to commonly fund the two defence technical excellence colleges that will provide the skills to allow the work on the Clyde and at Rosyth to continue. I hope that he and I can be together on that, but let us keep going. We want to see more shipbuilding in Scotland, and that is what this DIP delivers.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal Navy fleet obviously sits alongside the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. Will the Minister confirm that he is committed to the RFA and its fleet expansion?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend really is the Member of Parliament for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary, as she is determined to champion it so frequently. She will have seen in the defence investment plan our commitment to the new generation of fleet solid support ships, and she will have seen the work that this Government have undertaken since 2024 to address concerns raised with us about the Royal Fleet Auxiliary. The workforce is making substantial improvements on rig, training and welfare. There is one more item that I want to get over the line, but she can see a shipbuilding pipeline and a bright future ahead for the Royal Fleet Auxiliary with this Labour Government.

Remotely Piloted Aircraft Systems

5. **Andrew George (St Ives) (LD):** What assessment he has made of the adequacy of the level of readiness of UK defences to respond to remotely piloted aircraft systems. [900809]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Louise Sandher-Jones): Defence continually assesses threats and risks in all areas, including aerial drones. The defence investment plan contains measures to accelerate transformation and equip forces for modern warfare, including £790 million for integrated air and missile defence. Defence has taken extensive steps to strengthen homeland counter-drone capability, including vulnerability assessments of defence sites, restricted flying areas over numerous bases, and enhanced counter-uncrewed aircraft systems capabilities delivered by the Ministry of Defence police.

Andrew George: The Government's plans for drones have been referred to a number of times already today, and I welcome the important emphasis on uncrewed systems. As the Minister is aware, the air station at Predannack—or Pradnick, as we call it locally—in west Cornwall is one of a number of important locations for research and development. In this case, it is the location of the national drone hub, and it has many advantages, including relatively clear airspace. If Ministers intend to take advantage of existing assets to scale up UK autonomous

capabilities, will they ensure that this happens at pace and that they take advantage of the opportunities in places such as Predannack?

Louise Sandher-Jones: The hon. Member is right to highlight the fantastic work being done at Predannack, and I agree wholeheartedly with him. The defence investment plan places significant emphasis on uncrewed capability and autonomy, and the hon. Member will be well aware of the other measures that we have taken to provide support, such as establishing the uncrewed systems centre.

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): In 1914 we were producing 12 Vickers machine guns a week; by 1918, we were producing 1,200. Warfighting depends not only on the bravery of our armed forces, but on the technical innovation of our manufacturers. In Suffolk we now have advanced drone manufacturers. Does the Minister agree that we must always be ready for the next war?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I wholeheartedly agree. That was a key message of this defence investment plan, which looks ahead to the technology that we will need in the future—for example, we have allotted £5 billion to uncrewed systems, exactly as my hon. Friend says.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): The money in the DIP is clearly not enough, but it is welcome that some money has been found for defence, and I particularly welcome the new drone facility that is coming to Swindon in Wiltshire. In a genuinely constructive spirit, can I ask the Minister whether she is content with the model of defence procurement we have in this country, and whether she thinks that with a new Secretary of State and a new Prime Minister coming, now is the time to do a lot more to expedite the sort of innovative defence procurement that we will need to make the weapons for the future?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I thank the hon. Member for raising a hugely important point—he is absolutely right. When I was serving, I saw some of the areas in which we need improvement. This Government are absolutely committed to changing and improving our procurement system so that it can deliver the vital kit and equipment that our brave troops deserve.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I add to the tributes to Sir George Howarth. All of us who served with him on the Labour party's national executive committee very much admired his courage in taking on and rooting out antisemitism.

I welcome the success of our forces in the middle east in counter-UAS work during the recent conflict there. What measures are being taken to increase the number of military personnel who have the required skills to do counter-UAS operations? It is not just about the kit; it is about the training of personnel to use it.

Louise Sandher-Jones: My hon. Friend is right that as well as ensuring that we purchase the right kit and equipment, we must ensure that we have personnel who are trained and ready to use it, adapting to the new way of warfare. As he knows, there will be considerable effort across our armed forces, and our new uncrewed taskforce will deliver exactly that.

Defence Investment Plan

6. **Sarah Dyke** (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): What discussions he has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer on the potential merits of increasing funding for the defence investment plan. [900810]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dan Jarvis): I worked closely with the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to secure more money for our armed forces—a £15 billion increase in my Department's spending power. That means we will invest £298 billion in defence over the next four years. Of course there is more to do, and I will continue to work closely with colleagues across Government to ensure that defence remains the No. 1 priority at the next spending review.

Sarah Dyke: I recently visited RNAS Yeovilton and saw the welcome improvements to single living accommodation for serving personnel at HMS Heron. However, funding to refurbish or replace 14,000 service homes across the country—such as those in nearby Ilchester—has now been pushed back to 2030-35 to help pay for the defence investment plan. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether personnel serving at bases such as RNAS Yeovilton will be affected by that delay, and what they should expect by 2030?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that important point, and I pay tribute to those who serve in her constituency. We well understand the importance of having the best possible standard of defence accommodation for those who give so much for our country. That is why the defence investment plan restated the commitment to spend £9 billion over the next 10 years on defence accommodation, and that is why nine out of 10 of those most in need of repair have already been fixed.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): We have seen a 30% increase in Russian subsurface and surface activity, Russian proxies rampant across Africa, £15 billion-worth of cyber-attacks across Europe, sabotage and drone incursions across the border. Can the Secretary of State confirm that if the Russians were to test us on NATO's eastern flank, they would look across that flank and see not a NATO brigade, but something that looks like a Ukrainian brigade?

Dan Jarvis: My hon. and gallant Friend raises an important point, and I know that he speaks with operational experience on these matters. I hope that he sees and understands the importance that we attach to these matters. I know he understands the importance of working closely with our allies, both in NATO and in the joint expeditionary force—he and I have discussed that on many occasions. He will also understand that the NATO summit tomorrow in Ankara provides another important opportunity for us as an alliance to state our opposition to the threat we face from Russia. We are making sure that we have the resources we need to equip our armed forces for the kind of threat that he knows all about.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): Earlier this year, when I served on the Armed Forces Bill Select Committee, the then Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), assured us that funding for service housing was “ringfenced” and: “Nothing in the DIP process will stop us getting on with the job”.

However, the defence investment plan cuts £300 million from the funding due to be spent in this Parliament, pushing that investment into the next. Can the Secretary of State tell the House exactly how many service family homes will now have their refurbishments or rebuild delayed into the 2030s because the Government have failed to honour that commitment? Can he confirm that that figure is 14,000 homes?

Dan Jarvis: I have a lot of time for the hon. and gallant Member, but I will take no lessons from Opposition Members on the state of defence housing. He will have heard the commitment I made earlier about the £9 billion of investment that was reiterated in the DIP. I can also tell him that we will be refurbishing another 2,000 homes across the UK in the next 12 months alone. I understand why he raises the point in the way that he does, but I hope he will accept the importance that we attach to ensuring that those who serve have the best standard of accommodation.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesman.

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): It is clear that the Government's defence investment plan is not fully funded. It adds little more than a sticking plaster to the gaping holes left in our armed forces by years of Conservative cuts. We need to rapidly regenerate our military and make it ready to deter and, if necessary, fight and win the wars of the future. That requires innovative thinking, both on the capabilities we need and the ways to raise the money to pay for them. As the Secretary of State well knows, the Liberal Democrats have proposed defence bonds. That idea has received support from Andy Haldane, the former chief economist to the Bank of England, who is now reportedly an adviser to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham). Have the Secretary of State or his colleagues spoken to Mr Haldane about a defence bonds scheme? If not, will he commit to doing so?

Dan Jarvis: I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman's analysis of the DIP, not least because it included £20 billion to rapidly increase the Army's lethality and nearly £64 billion of investment in the UK's nuclear enterprise. In addition, the defence investment plan will create up to 60,000 good, skilled jobs across the country. On his specific point about bonds, the United Kingdom is working with our allies to establish a mechanism to improve defence financing, joint procurement and industrial capacity. We will look closely at his suggestions for how we can do things differently, but I hope he will understand that there is a commitment from this Government to invest the resources we need over the longer term. We will of course look closely at how best we can do that.

MOD and NHS Collaboration: Richmondshire

7. **Rishi Sunak** (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to collaborate with the national health service in Richmondshire. [900811]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): I am pleased to say that the Catterick integrated care centre will open in Richmondshire later this year. This cutting-edge healthcare facility is a joint MOD and NHS initiative, the first of its kind, which will deliver transformative integrated health and care services to the military and civilian communities of Catterick, north Yorkshire and the wider Richmondshire area.

Rishi Sunak: May I add my welcome to the new Minister? I know that he will bring experience and dedication to the role, and I thank him for his answer.

The Minister is absolutely right that the new care centre will serve both serving personnel and the local community, and it will improve healthcare provision. May I ask that the MOD continues to liaise with the local authority as it develops its Catterick town regeneration plan, to ensure that things are joined up? May I also raise a broader point, on which I know the Minister will agree with me? As he said, this is the first collaboration of its kind between the NHS and the MOD, and I hope that it can serve as a template for other areas across the country. Will he join me in thanking all those who have been involved in the project, which has taken many years to bring to fruition?

Mr Speaker: It looks like you need it early.

Mr Bailey: Thank you, Mr Speaker. I entirely agree with the right hon. Gentleman, and it is an incredible honour to respond to a question from him. The work that he has done shows just how important the work of Back Benchers is: it is truly transformative, and something from which the rest of us can all learn. I would love to visit the facility with him so that we can highlight it as an exemplar that could be transferred to other parts of the country.

Support for Veterans

8. **Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): What steps he is taking to support veterans. [900813]

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dan Jarvis): This Government will always stand up for those who have served our country. We are determined to honour our veterans' service and celebrate the vital role that they play in our society. Last year the Government published a strategy for veterans, which includes celebrating their contributions, helping them into good jobs, and supporting them through the transition to civilian life. Our £50 million Valour programme will give veterans easier access to the care and support that they deserve.

Katie Lam: Twiggy Roberts, who is a veteran himself and runs HX Motors in my constituency, training other veterans to maintain and customise Land Rovers, says that he hears a lot from veterans of his generation about their frustrations as they try to gain access to the mental health services that they need and deserve, especially when dealing with post-traumatic stress disorder. It would be good to hear about what conversations the Secretary of State is having with Cabinet colleagues, particularly those in the Department of Health and Social Care, about how veterans can be given access to those services. They give one another great support, but it is clearly not the same as support from professionals.

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for raising that important issue, and I pay tribute to her constituent and the work that he is doing in the constituency. She has made an entirely fair challenge, and of course we will have conversations with colleagues across Government to ensure that services are in place to provide that support for those who need it. There is an important role for the NHS, which is why we are working with

colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care, but I am sure that the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), will be happy to discuss the matter further with the hon. Lady.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): This weekend we had the pleasure of hosting the Nepal cup in Aldershot—a celebration of the Brigade of Gurkhas. Talking to some of the Gurkha veterans there, and hearing of their experiences, again underlined the urgent need for a resolution of long-standing issues such as Gurkha pensions. I pay tribute to the new Minister for Veterans and People for the progress that has been made, and I thank him for working with me to engage directly with Gurkha veterans and ensure that they feel heard. Will the Secretary of State explain how he will build on that work so that those veterans receive the support and recognition they deserve?

Dan Jarvis: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for the work that she does to champion the service of our Gurkhas, who I am sure the whole House holds in the very highest regard. I was pleased to have the opportunity to meet her in her constituency a few days ago, when we discussed the importance of this matter in detail. I hope she will understand that we are working through the details of an engagement plan with the right stakeholders, including the G10. I am confident that my colleague the Minister for Veterans and People is on the case and providing the assurances that are sought, and I know that he would be happy to discuss the matter with her further.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): May I endorse your tribute to the late Sir George Howarth, Mr Speaker? May I also take this opportunity to welcome the incoming Minister for Veterans and People, the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), to his new position? In the two years that he has been in the House, he has already established a reputation for independence of mind and for fearlessly speaking truth to power, regardless of the consequences. I am sure that will stand him in very good stead now.

May I ask a specific question about Northern Ireland veterans? When the former Armed Forces Minister, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), resigned on principle, partly over the legacy issue, he famously described Labour's Northern Ireland Troubles Bill as "unfit for purpose". What does the Secretary of State think he meant by that?

Dan Jarvis: I should begin by declaring an interest as a veteran who served in Northern Ireland. This Government are absolutely committed to the troubles Bill, but we are also determined to ensure that everyone involved, including families and veterans, is treated with fairness, dignity and respect. The Government will introduce a substantial package of amendments to strengthen protections for veterans and to provide greater confidence that those who served our country are afforded the appropriate safeguards. We are engaging with stakeholders to ensure that the measures reflect the interests of our defence community, and to deliver a balanced and fair approach to addressing the legacy of the troubles.

Mr Francois: We have been waiting for those amendments almost as long as we have been waiting for the DIP. Where is the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) on the legacy issue? Many regiments that hail from the north-west—such as the Duke of Lancaster's Regiment, which has already mentioned once today, and, before it, the King's Regiment, which traditionally recruited from both Liverpool and Manchester—did multiple tours in Northern Ireland on Op Banner. Has the Secretary of State had any indications that our likely new Prime Minister is going to do right by those former soldiers from his own region, scrap the benighted Bill, which helps Sinn Féin pursue our veterans via lawfare, and get rid of the whole nonsense altogether?

Dan Jarvis: I genuinely want to find a way forward on this that can attract cross-party support, but I remind the shadow Minister and some other Conservative Members that the previous Government's Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 left our veterans with no certainty and no protection, and left victims and families with no justice. No veteran ever received immunity through the law, and it risked giving immunity to terrorists. This Government will bring forward new primary legislation that is legally compliant and recognises our veterans' interests in order to deal properly with the legacy of the troubles.

High North

10. **Katrina Murray** (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): What steps he is taking to protect British interests in the High North. [900816]

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Louise Sandher-Jones): The UK is committed to security in the High North. As well as the Royal Marines' cold weather training in Norway, ranger exercises in Sweden and Finland, and air policing operations, the UK plays a key role in NATO's Arctic Sentry initiative and deployed our carrier strike group to the High North this year. The Secretary of State was able to witness that at first hand on a visit this weekend.

Katrina Murray: Protecting our interests in the High North depends not only on our armed forces, but on a resilient defence industrial base. Constituencies such as mine are home to highly skilled defence and engineering businesses that play an important role in supporting our national security. How is the Department ensuring that UK industry has the investment and skilled workforce needed to sustain these capabilities into the future?

Louise Sandher-Jones: My hon. Friend is quite right to highlight the High North, and the defence investment plan positions our armed forces to focus on its protection, alongside our allies in NATO and the JEF. Through the Scotland defence growth deal and our intention to launch two defence technical excellence colleges, which we have invited the Scottish Government to match fund, we are continuing to support Scotland's defence industry and provide it with the highly skilled workforce that it requires.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Protecting British interests in the High North requires a strong Royal Navy. Under the current DIP, the Type 45s will go out of service

in 2035 and be replaced by some CCVs and other uncrewed systems that currently exist only on PowerPoint. The idea that it will be nine years from PowerPoint to power projection stretches credibility somewhat, so will the Minister stake her personal credibility on confirming that these systems will be delivered on time and that we will not have a gap in our air defences in the High North?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I am sure the hon. and gallant Member will agree that the changing nature of warfare means that we must change to meet it. Having a focus on uncrewed systems and AI is critical, and I welcome the vision set out by the First Sea Lord.

Cadets

12. **David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): What steps he is taking to support cadets. [900818]

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): My time as an air cadet is one of the reasons why I am stood here today. We are committed to expanding and modernising the five MOD-sponsored cadet forces and to investing to improve opportunities for young people, which supports social mobility, confidence and resilience. The 30% growth target in the strategic defence review will now be met by 2035, with the next action plan to be published during National Cadets Week in October.

David Simmonds: Cadet centres such as the TS Pelican in Ruislip in my constituency are a vital part of our armed forces community, but given that the Government have decided to cut the funding that supports our cadet groups, can the Minister tell us what progress is being made with the private sector investment that the Government have said will backfill the consequences of those cuts?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for raising this issue, but I do not recognise the idea that we have cut the funding. We still intend to expand the cadet forces by 40,000 cadets, and that target will be met by 2035. The details he mentions are in the cadet action plan.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I recently visited the sea cadets in Stafford, and it was brilliant. They are somehow thriving, despite being about 70 miles from the nearest coastline. What they lack in coastline, they very much make up for in enthusiasm. Unlike some of the Army and air cadet units, sea cadets are run as a charity and miss out on the cadet expansion programme funding. Will the Minister tell me what support is available for sites such as Stafford, so that even those of us missing out on sea access do not miss out on fair funding access?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those issues, and for highlighting the absence of water in Staffordshire—[*Laughter.*] Sea water, that is. I would direct her to the cadet action plan, and I will meet her to discuss these issues.

Topical Questions

T1. [900830] **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Defence (Dan Jarvis): Last week, I made good on my promise to publish the defence investment plan and do right by our people. Yesterday, I met some of those people deployed on our aircraft carrier HMS Prince of Wales in the High North. They are deterring our adversaries and keeping the UK and our NATO allies safe. I know that the whole House will join me in offering our gratitude for their dedicated service and sacrifice. Tomorrow, I will join the Prime Minister and the Foreign Secretary in Ankara for the NATO summit, where 32 nations, with the might of our armed forces and defence industry behind us, will be building a stronger, more secure Europe.

Dr Evans: I welcome the new Defence Secretary to Question Time, and simply pose a quick question to him, because we need some clarity about the Chagos deal. Will he confirm that it has been cancelled and that the money—the billions—that was going to Mauritius has now been transferred to defence spending?

Dan Jarvis: It is a fair question. I am looking very closely at the detail, and I will discuss it with our American allies.

T2. [900832] **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): My constituent Clint is a veteran who suffered blast-related traumatic brain injuries during his service. Clint and his partner, Carol, are campaigning to get the MOD to recognise such injuries and provide more support to veterans. What is the Minister doing to address this issue, and will he please meet me to discuss how services across Government can be more joined up to support constituents such as Clint and veterans up and down the country?

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): I thank the hon. Member for raising such an important issue, and I thank Clint and Carol for their service. Our blast injury support is world leading. We have invested £3.65 million in cutting-edge scanning technology, and we collaborate internationally to drive forward research on blast-induced and traumatic brain injuries. Our work on traumatic brain injuries complements wider efforts to ensure that no veteran falls through the cracks. We have invested more than £25 million in Op Courage since the election so that veterans in England can continue to access specialist mental health and wellbeing services.

T4. [900834] **Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): I was pleased to see co-operation with the Netherlands on a new amphibious fleet in the defence investment plan. I spent two years of my career working alongside the Dutch marines, and the Royal Marines have a long history of co-operation with them—mostly not fighting each other—but since our amphibious ships HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark are out of service, when can we expect amphibious ships to be operational in this new Anglo-Dutch fleet?

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): After the last Government tied up HMS Albion and HMS Bulwark, never planning to send them to sea again, this Labour Government are bringing back amphibious ships. We are working with the Netherlands to develop a joint capability, and our ambition—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Three Opposition Front Benchers at once is a bit much. Mark, you were a shining example earlier; do not start going wrong now.

Luke Pollard: Mr Speaker, if it takes three of them to take on one of me, keep it coming. We are working with the Netherlands to develop a joint capability, and our ambition is for the first ship to enter service in the 2030s.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): On the day of its publication in June 2025, the headline promise of Labour's strategic defence review was a commitment to buy "up to 12 attack submarines".

At the time, the Labour Government could not answer the question of exactly how many submarines that meant in practice, but they assured us that the detail of all their SDR promises would be set out in the defence investment plan, so exactly how many attack submarines are they going to buy?

Luke Pollard: The defence investment plan clearly sets out our intention to buy up to 12 SSN-AUKUS submarines. Their delivery is conditional on the improvements in productivity that we are working with BAE Systems to deliver at Barrow, not just in workforce but in production shipyard facilities. We plan to buy up to 12 SSN-AUKUS submarines.

T5. [900836] **Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab):** Hartlepool, like the rest of the north-east, has always been critical to our defence industry, including brilliant Hartlepool companies such as Merlin Flex. Will the Minister outline how the record investment secured by this Labour Government will benefit jobs in the economy in Hartlepool and the wider north-east?

Luke Pollard: We inherited a situation where the north-east was the region with the lowest Ministry of Defence spend in the country and we have made it a mission to increase defence spending in the north-east. We have an incredible talent pool in the north-east, with brilliant defence companies both large and small doing brilliant work. We are determined, now that we have an uplift in defence spending, that more of it will be spent with British firms, and I want to see more of that spend in the north-east as well.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): My salary is "up to" £1 billion a year, but sadly that does not make me a billionaire. *[Laughter.]* Does the Secretary of State accept that when checking how much money a country is spending on defence, the accepted way of doing it is by percentage of GDP?

Luke Pollard: If the right hon. Gentleman is talking about a salary of up to £1 billion, he is cosplaying as the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), isn't he? Seriously, we are the third-largest cash spender in NATO. At the spending review next year, we will be setting out an increase in defence spending. That is what every Defence Minister wants to see and, I imagine, what those on all sides of the House want to see. It is not just what we spend on defence that is important; it is how we spend it and on what capabilities. As can be seen from the DIP, we are transforming our armed forces to be more capable, more lethal and better able to defend the UK and our allies.

T6. [900837] **Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab):** Two weeks ago, alongside colleagues, I met a network of families and parents from all three armed forces. I heard from serving personnel about the real strain of starting a family while serving our country. A recent snapshot survey by the Dad Shift of over 450 serving forces members found that 90% believed that two weeks of paternity leave is not enough. Does the Minister agree that increasing paternity leave for those who serve in the armed forces would boost retention, strengthen resilience and give our children a better start in life? Does he agree that our armed forces deserve better?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising such an important question. She is a doughty champion of our servicepeople and we are very grateful for her support. As someone who has four children who were all raised in the service, I understand the pressures of service life. While service personnel are not covered by statutory paternity entitlements, the armed forces occupational paternity leave scheme provides equivalent arrangements. I am happy to engage with my hon. Friend on this matter to continue exploring further support, raising awareness across defence of the available options and working with the families federations to inform future policy decisions.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): A high proportion of my constituents proudly serve in our armed forces or are veterans. They want to know that the investment in the DIP is being spent cost-effectively. Given that more than half the capital budget is to be spent on the Defence Nuclear Enterprise—more than on every other bit of technology, equipment and kit for the entire armed forces put together—can the Secretary of State assure me that value for money analysis has been undertaken in line with the Treasury Green Book, and will he improve parliamentary scrutiny?

Luke Pollard: The hon. Member will know that the Labour Government were elected on a manifesto containing a triple lock for our nuclear deterrent—not only maintaining the continuous at-sea deterrent and the new submarines, but providing all the upgrades that are required. We will make sure that the Defence Nuclear Enterprise provides value for money, increased deterrence against threats, and more job creation for people up and down the country.

T7. [900838] **Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op):** May I welcome my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) to his rightful place on the Front Bench? I also welcome the publishing of

the defence investment plan last week. Will the Minister outline how the additional £15 billion of Ministry of Defence spending will benefit towns like Harlow?

Luke Pollard: Harlow was centre of my thinking when it came to increasing defence spending. My hon. Friend and I have recently spent time talking about the brilliant defence companies that are based in his constituency. Having growth in defence spending and a clear focus on British companies is an opportunity for graduates and apprentices to have a career in defence.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): On Armed Forces Day, I had the huge honour of unveiling a veterans' buddy bench in Sunbury Park in my Spelthorne constituency. The idea is that the bench is dedicated to veterans; veterans go there, and members of the public are encouraged to go and sit with them. As the Front Benchers go around the country, will they encourage other constituencies to get a veterans' buddy bench?

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. and gallant Member for that excellent idea. While we were away with the Defence Committee, he will have seen similar shows of support for our veteran communities by Ministers. I will look to take on those ideas and the one that he has raised.

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): On the issue of nuclear testing veterans, the Minister's predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones), confirmed in March this year that in 2014 both the MOD and Government legal advisers were made aware of a previously undisclosed fallout report, showing radiation across inhabited areas of Christmas Island—crucially, in the main camp where British personnel lived and worked. Can the Minister confirm what work has been done to establish why that evidence was not disclosed in legal proceedings, and whether Ministers were informed at the time?

Mr Bailey: Let me first say how deeply grateful we are to those who participated in the UK nuclear testing programme—and to my hon. Friend for championing them for so long. We recognise their service and the huge contribution they have made to the UK's security. Since taking office, I have worked hard to listen to and meet the veterans. I am aiming to disclose the document to which my hon. Friend referred as soon as possible, with the principle, set out by my predecessor, that officials should look into this as a matter of urgency.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): In a written answer to me last month, the Government revealed that the Army is conducting a review of its reserve basic training. I believe that this was the first time that was disclosed to this House. Will the Secretary of State commit to putting the terms of reference for that review in the Library of the House, and will he commit to not closing Prince William of Gloucester barracks until the review is complete?

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Louise Sandher-Jones): The hon. Member has been a doughty champion for his constituency, and he and I have had many exchanges on this subject. I confirm that all decisions taken about reserves will look at what will best support that force. Those decisions are yet to be made, but we will of course ensure that we are supporting the reserves.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The barbaric and deliberate targeting and killing of Palestinian children by the Israel Defence Forces has received little media coverage or outrage. A report by the United Nations Human Rights Council estimates that the IDF have killed over 20,000 children and injured more than 44,000. Will the Minister say what assurance she can give that arms transferred through UK military bases are not used to facilitate war crimes? When will she facilitate a full arms embargo?

Louise Sandher-Jones: There has been an abhorrent loss of life; children must never be the victims of war. We have already suspended licences for Israel where the items might be used in military operations in Gaza. Licences are kept under continuous review. For operational security reasons, we do not offer comment on or information relating to foreign nations' routine military movements.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Local residents, including service personnel living in my constituency, are deeply concerned by the proposal to create a new asylum centre at MOD Bicester. The Minister for Border Security and Asylum, who is currently in his place on the Front Bench, promised me last week that there would be absolute transparency for the affected communities. Will the Minister clarify when MOD officials first began speaking to the Home Office about the proposal; whether any—and if so, how many—contracts have been issued by the MOD to assess the site; and whether any serving personnel, MOD staff or MOD contractors are under non-disclosure agreements in respect of the proposal?

Luke Pollard: The Prime Minister asked all Departments to step up to support the cross-Government mission to close asylum hotels. The Ministry of Defence has done so, making available a number of sites that we no longer use for military purposes. I am very happy to arrange a meeting with my colleague, the Minister for Asylum, to discuss this further.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): It is nearly two years since the International Court of Justice ruled that Israel's presence in the Occupied Palestinian Territories is unlawful. Does the Minister believe that it is morally or legally justifiable for British bases to continue to be used to transfer weapons to Israel as part of this ongoing conflict?

Louise Sandher-Jones: I hope that my hon. Friend heard my previous answer, in which I expressed my deep sadness over the innocent victims of war. To confirm, we have already suspended licences for Israel where the items might be used in military operations in Gaza, noting the F-35 components going to the global programme. Licences are kept under continuous review.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The defence investment plan is split into two parts: the near-term investment plan, which covers the four remaining years of this Parliament, and the long-term investment plan, which covers the following five years, up to 2035. This is a 10-year plan, but that clearly only adds up to nine years—the plan should also cover up to the 2035-36 financial year. Will the Minister confirm that it is a 10-year plan and, if it is, whether the final part of the plan assumes that we are already spending 3.5% on defence?

Luke Pollard: I can confirm that it is a 10-year plan. One reason that we set out the first four years in detail is that we can see the technologies that we are purchasing in those years. We know that we will be making spends in drone technologies and a number of other areas, but we do not know precisely which platform due to the fast iteration of these technologies. We will continue to increase defence spending, delivering 3.5% of GDP by 2035.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): In South Dorset, the Lantern Trust and the Veterans Hub have recently applied for Valour funding, which would make a huge difference to both organisations as they grow the services they offer to veterans—in particular the hub, which is the first port of call for many local veterans. Will the Minister look closely at those applications for funding, and look to support the fantastic work of the Veterans Hub in Weymouth?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for raising the Veterans Hub in his constituency. I very much look forward to visiting it in due course.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Can the Secretary of State explain to this House, the British people and our NATO allies how it is that our welfare bill is increasing by roughly £19 billion this year, we spent £13 billion on foreign aid last year and £15 billion has been committed to net zero schemes, and yet the defence investment plan still has a funding gap of £4.7 billion?

Luke Pollard: We are increasing defence spending—that is what the Labour party is doing in government. Look at what Reform has been doing: one of its politicians was accepting bribes from Russia. I do not accept what the hon. Lady is saying. We are increasing defence spending.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State set out how the defence investment plan and the record investment of nearly £300 billion over the next four years will help to strengthen local supply chains in my constituency and create good, unionised, well-paid jobs as well as to stimulate economic growth?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend's constituency is going to receive not just support via the £50 million Wales defence growth deal or the deep space advanced radar capability programmes at Cawdor barracks, but help for small and medium-sized enterprises in places like Castlemartin in his constituency. It is a good deal for Wales.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Civil compensation is disregarded from pension credit entitlement calculations, but military compensation is not. I know that the new Minister for Veterans is sympathetic to addressing this injustice, so I wonder whether he would meet me and the family of Pauline Cole—a veteran who was fighting to address this matter—in order to put it right.

Mr Bailey: I will meet with the hon. Gentleman and the family.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Last week in the statement on the defence investment plan, I raised with the Secretary of State the unacceptable truth that the north-east sends the highest proportion of its young people into the armed forces, yet receives the lowest proportion of investment spending, and he said that was a “reasonable challenge”. Will he meet me and colleagues from the region to see how we can ensure that the bravery in battle of sons and daughters of the north-east is at the very least reflected in the defence investment spend?

Luke Pollard: My hon. Friend knows that this south-west lad is a big fan of supporting the north-east industry to grow and create more opportunities. I will be very happy to meet with her and other north-east colleagues to look at what opportunities are available in the defence investment plan with its £298 billion spend over the next four years.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Last month the former Defence Secretary said that he believed he was misled by his own Department while he was Defence Secretary. Former Scotland Secretary Baroness Liddell, who sat on the Philip review panel, said that she was misled. Given that, surely the Secretary of State must support the Chinook Justice Campaign families' long-standing pleas for a fresh inquiry into why their family members were put on that particular flight?

Mr Bailey: I should declare that I am very close to some of the families who lost family members on that Chinook, as the hon. Lady well knows. I am sympathetic to the point that she makes. We are looking at this matter at the moment. I have to be very careful about my involvement, but I will make sure that the questions she raised are answered, and I agree to meet her.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): All the military hardware we can buy will not serve its purpose if our nation goes hungry, should our reliance on food imports be turned against us. What reassurances can Ministers give that they are leading conversations across Government to ensure that if push comes to shove, the UK has the necessary food security to stand on its own two feet?

Luke Pollard: Food security is national security. Although farmers do not wear the uniforms of our men and women in the armed forces, they are equally as vital in making sure that we can protect our national security. One of the reasons that we are investing so much in the hybrid Navy to keep the strait of Hormuz open is because we know that importing, be it food or energy, is vital to our security. That is why we are investing in new capabilities.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Today the Department confirmed to me in a written answer that over the years 2018 and 2019, the Ministry of Defence paid almost £12,000 to Jeffrey Donaldson in respect of a peacekeeping consultancy for the Cameroons. How common is it that sitting Members of Parliament are paid consultancy fees, and who else has been paid?

Dan Jarvis: I am not aware of the detail that the hon. and learned Member raises, but if he would like to write to me, I will look very carefully at it.

Damien Egan (Bristol North East) (Lab): I would like to ask about the recruitment freeze on civil service roles in the military. Will it change as a result of the publication of the DIP, and how are skills gaps to be addressed to limit pressure on military personnel?

Luke Pollard: I know that my hon. Friend represents a large number of constituents who work at Defence Equipment and Support at Abbey Wood, and who do so really well. In the DIP, we have set out our support for the whole team effort between civilians and military personnel, and we are looking at creating more efficiencies and using new technologies to do so. I value the work of our civil servants, and I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to further discuss Abbey Wood.

Rochdale Grooming Gang: Offender Deportation

3.43 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department if she will make a statement on whether the Government are planning to change the law to deport Rochdale grooming gang leader, Shabir Ahmed.

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): I will start where any discussion of this nature must always start: with the victims. Over the years, they were subjected to unspeakable crimes, exploited and abused by vile predators and woefully let down by the agencies charged with protecting them. I know that the House will join me in saying that they are in our thoughts today and always.

The grooming gangs scandal was and will forever be one of the darkest moments in our nation's history. I know that for those affected, it will have been unbelievably painful to learn that one of the perpetrators was due for release from prison. Having been convicted in 2012, Shabir Ahmed has served the custodial element of his sentence. He is on the sex offenders register for life, ordered to stay away from his victims, and banned from contacting any child or young person. As well as strict curfews and restriction zones on him, his every movement will be tracked, and he will be required to wear an electronic tag. Should he breach those conditions, he can be immediately returned to prison.

Shabir Ahmed held British citizenship at the time of these offences, and action was taken to deprive him of that right, reflecting the seriousness of his offences. Having arrived in the UK before 1971, he is exempt from deportation due to section 7 of the Immigration Act 1971, which preserved the rights of Commonwealth and Irish citizens who were already in the UK when the Act took effect on 1 January 1973. That is not a loophole; the provisions of section 7 were put in place to protect the existing rights of an identified cadre of Commonwealth citizens, most notably the Windrush generation. However, when a foreign national breaks the laws of this land, our first priority will always be to get them out of the UK.

Under this Government, removals of foreign national offenders are up 36%, with nearly 10,000 returned since we entered office. The fact that that has not so far been possible for an individual responsible for such heinous crimes as Shabir Ahmed's is unacceptable. I can assure the House that we have not given up, and we will not. While the original intentions of the legislation in question mean that we ought to proceed with care, the nature of the offending in this case demands that we explore all options, and that is what we are doing. In the meantime, we will of course do everything in our power to keep the public safe.

Katie Lam: Shabir Ahmed has committed some of the most despicable crimes imaginable. As the ringleader of the Rochdale grooming gang, he was responsible for grooming, trafficking and raping children as young as 12 years old. He was jailed in 2012 for 30 counts of child rape. His victims were promised that when he got out of prison, he would be deported back to Pakistan.

He has been released from prison, but now we are told that he will not be deported because of a provision in the 1971 Immigration Act. The idea that he might be allowed to stay in this country because of a clause in a decades-old law designed for a completely different time and context is not just absurd, but sickening. As recently as 2023, parole officers concluded that Ahmed posed a

"very high risk of serious harm"

to children. How can he possibly be allowed to walk the streets again?

When the law produces an outcome that is clearly so wrong, the law must be changed. The Government must now change this law to make sure that we can remove Ahmed. Conservative Members, including the Leader of the Opposition, have made it clear that, if the Home Secretary puts forward changes to the law that would allow us to deport Shabir Ahmed, we will support them. The shadow Home Secretary has already drafted an amendment that the Government could adopt. The argument for deporting Ahmed is clear, and the mechanism has already been created. All that remains in question is whether the Government have the will to act. If so, we will be happy to support them. If they do not, people across this country will rightly ask, as they are already asking, whether this is a Government that can really keep the British people safe.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the hon. Lady's question and subsequent follow-up. I share her anger, and I share her concern at the anger of the British people, who rightly expect that, when foreign offenders break our laws, they should be removed from our country. That is why we have made removals to the degree that we have. I will look closely, as we always do, at all amendments and new clauses to legislation put forward by the Opposition and by all hon. and right hon. colleagues, or at other ideas as they come forward. As I say, in this context I could not be clearer that all options are on the table at this stage.

I might gently say that there was a significant period of time between that conviction and the change of Government in which those changes were not brought forward, including by some individuals I expect to be co-signatories to the amendment. Nevertheless, we are where we are, and the spirit in which the hon. Lady offers support is welcome. The public will want to see Parliament come together to ensure that, in cases where people commit really serious crimes, we are able to remove them from the country.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): Shabir Ahmed and his co-offenders committed grave crimes that shook and angered the country. His victims and survivors are foremost in our minds today and they deserve justice. There are two aspects to deportation: first, getting our own legal house in order, and secondly, securing an agreement with Pakistan. On the first, once Shabir Ahmed was deprived of his British citizenship, it would have become apparent that the provisions of the Immigration Act 1971 would create a barrier to deportation. Given where we are now, can the Minister ensure that all options will be on the table, including on Monday when the Immigration and Asylum Bill comes before the House? Secondly, can he update the House on what conversations are taking place with Pakistan?

Alex Norris: I have known my hon. Friend for a very long time. He is resolute on this issue and fights day by day to protect his constituents in Oldham, and his contribution was in that spirit. I can confirm that all options are on the table. I share his anger and the anger of his community.

I have personally engaged with the Government of Pakistan in recent months; we engage with them frequently. It is in all our interests for us to have excellent, functional returns agreements with as many countries as possible. All the work that we do is in that spirit.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): My thoughts are with the victims and survivors, who have already suffered unbelievable harm and trauma. They have been failed at every stage, and they deserve better. It is completely unacceptable that someone who has been convicted of such vile offences, and who has rightly been stripped of his British citizenship, cannot be deported because of what I believe is a loophole in the law. It was not intended back in 1971 that the law should protect people like this, and the law must be rectified as a matter of urgency. Will the Minister tell the House when the Government will bring forward the necessary changes, and whether they have set a deadline for doing so? What progress has been made in discussions with Pakistan to ensure that this offender is deported?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the spirit in which the hon. Gentleman puts his question. I can only rely on what I have said so far: we are highly motivated in this case, and all options are on the table. I appreciate that pace is important, particularly for public confidence—we understand that totally.

As I said to my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton (Jim McMahon), we engage frequently with Pakistan. That is an important relationship for us, and we will continue to engage with Pakistan in the normal way.

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): The past week has been profoundly difficult for constituents in the communities I represent—communities that still bear the scars that Shabir Ahmed inflicted from takeaways in Heywood. Over the past week, I have spoken with the family members of one of his victims; they are understandably fearful and deeply let down by his release. For my constituents, any right that he had to walk our streets was forfeited when he committed those vile crimes. What reassurances can the Minister give to my constituents that nothing is off the table when it comes to the consequences faced by Shabir Ahmed and those who abuse children?

Alex Norris: A great many people across Lancashire and Greater Manchester will have the same feelings as my hon. Friend's constituents. I give a clear assurance that very, very stringent conditions have been placed on this individual. If he breaches them, that would be very serious and would mean he would be eligible to return to prison. That is taken exceptionally seriously. I hear the spirit in which she asks the question, and that is the spirit in which the Government are working.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I cannot quite believe the words that I am hearing from the Minister. He says that all options are on the table, but the only option that the Government should be considering is deportation. He has the ability to bring through emergency legislation, which I am sure would get the backing of both sides of the House, to ensure that Shabir Ahmed is deported. When will he bring forward such legislation, so that we in this House can vote on it and ensure that this individual, who has committed heinous crimes across Rochdale, is deported?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman is an esteemed member of the Home Affairs Committee, so he knows that deportations are multifactorial; they involve barriers in our own domestic laws, perhaps barriers in other laws, and our returns agreements around the world. He has heard, from me, the spirit in which we are operating. I can only say again that all those options are on the table. He raises important ways of proceeding, but it is never quite as easy as he suggests. I know his motivations, which I share, and I am sure that at the right moment he will be keen to support us in our work.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Shabir Ahmed is a dangerous, manipulative paedophile whose sickening crimes are a damning indictment of the public authorities' failure to adequately protect the victims of Rochdale grooming gang. Does the Minister agree that, now that we have a new Immigration and Asylum Bill, this House has the power to change the law so that child rapists like Ahmed are deported back to Pakistan? Does he also agree that, as he hinted, that is just the first step towards pulling every legal, diplomatic and economic lever to ensure that Pakistan takes back those who have committed gross abuse in our country?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that contribution from my hon. Friend. He has raised this issue since his first day in this place, with myself, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and many others. He makes an important point about possible legislative vehicles. We are looking at all those options, as I have said to him. Similarly, he raises the important issue of how we work with countries that we remove individuals to. Again, I give him my total assurance that we work with returning countries day in, day out to ensure that they take back their foreign offenders.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Is it true that the diplomats in the Foreign Office who deal with Pakistan are part of the obstacle to getting rid of this loathsome individual? Does the Minister agree that it is long overdue that the moral courage—indeed, heroism—of former Labour MP Ann Cryer, who first exposed this horrendous abuse, is properly and officially recognised?

Alex Norris: I would not normally comment on the specific details of conversations across Government, but I must simply say that that is not true; the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation of diplomats in the Foreign Office is not my experience to any degree. The point about recognition is, of course, for others with more exalted office than myself, but I think he makes a very good suggestion.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): We cannot call ourselves a civilised society while Shabir Ahmed is walking the streets of this country. I agree with the thrust of the question by the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), but surely there is another approach to get him off the streets of our country: to put him back in prison and change the law that reduces the tariff for uncivilised wretches like him, so he can be put straight back in prison?

Alex Norris: In this case, the sentence that this heinous individual received had an auto release at two thirds, which means that legally he cannot be detained any more. But, as I say, the licence conditions are exceptionally strong, and therefore there is a route to recall if they are not properly followed. I point to the changes that this Parliament has made in recent months with the Sentencing Act 2026: we have made grooming an aggravating factor, so that vile criminals face being locked up for longer for this type of offence, in exactly the spirit in which my hon. Friend speaks.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Will the Minister commit to reviewing every case where an individual has been stripped of his British citizenship on public protection grounds but remains in Britain because deportation has failed, and will he tell the House how many such people there are?

Alex Norris: In this situation, there are no other people. I say to the hon. Lady that we are resolute in pursuing the removal of foreign offenders. Where there are hurdles, either legally or with the country of return, we work every day to overcome them, so of course we will work in that spirit.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): Shabir Ahmed's crimes are the worst imaginable, and we are all just horrified to learn that he has now been released. As the Government look at every option to remove this vile individual, can the Minister confirm when he expects to bring forward those options and legal solutions to this situation?

Alex Norris: I appreciate that my hon. Friend, and indeed all hon. colleagues, are keen for a defined timeline. What matters and is hugely important in this case is that, whatever option is taken forward, it resolves the situation and it sticks. It is right, therefore, that we take the time to get it right—but, as I say, we are working at pace, because we totally understand the seriousness of this case.

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I have a great deal of respect for the Minister, and he has adopted the tone of the House, which is united on tackling this issue; but there is clearly a lacuna in the law as it stands. It will take time, however fast the Government work, to get that change on the statute books. In the interim, is the Minister prepared to use sanctions against Pakistan to ensure the deportation of this grievous individual?

Alex Norris: It is important to say that in this case, the barrier to removal—the initial and currently unmoved barrier to removal—is section 7 of the 1971 Act. That has to be resolved, so I would not run to the second part of that question. Our returns agreement with Pakistan

last year returned 1,300 people who had no right to be here, including sex offenders. We want to work closely with the Government of Pakistan to remove people with no right to be here, and that is what we are doing.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Shabir Ahmed is a vile criminal, and the British public rightly want to see him deported. Does the Minister agree that where the law does not allow us to do so, we should change it, and that we should redouble efforts to secure returns agreements with countries like Pakistan?

Alex Norris: On the second part, I absolutely agree. I want returns agreements with everybody and, critically, I want them to be functioning. Where they are not, we should have conversations with those countries to ensure that they do function and that they follow up on the things they said they would do.

On the first part, I share the spirit of my hon. Friend's question. It is important that people understand that there are legal hurdles in many cases in all walks of life, and legal protections are important, but it should be understood that Parliament is sovereign and that when we think that things are wrong, we can make changes—sometimes, very healthily in a democracy, on points of significant disagreement and division, or often in cases where we agree too. We have the ability to do that, and that is one of the options on the table.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Earlier this year I asked the Home Secretary at the Dispatch Box about the case of Fabian Henry, a child rapist who was removed from a deportation flight in 2021 after the Home Secretary herself, then in opposition, signed a letter calling for the removal of people from that flight. Last October, I also asked the Minister for an update on Fabian Henry and whether he was still in the country, and he refused to tell me based on the fact that the Home Office does not comment on individual cases. Given that Fabian Henry could be removed from the country under current legislation in the UK Borders Act 2007, what confidence should any of us or any of the victims of Shabir Ahmed have that the Government are going to change the law in order to facilitate his deportation?

Alex Norris: Fundamentally, when it comes to options that we take forward, it will be for the public to assess whether or not they think we are doing the right thing and for us to demonstrate that we are. On that specific case, as I think the hon. Gentleman would understand, there are important safeguards around the information that we would share, particularly around victims first, but we can, with constituency MP and victim consent, share some of that information. Let me pursue that with the hon. Gentleman outside these proceedings, because I want him to have the fullest information impossible so he can see, as would be my contention to all colleagues, just how vigorously we pursue removals of foreign criminals.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): Some crimes are so despicable and some individuals so evil that they forfeit their rights and their protections, and we must change the law to ensure that they are never afforded them. Is not the law change required here to ensure that no individual can ever again be released unless the very next day they are being deported from this country?

Alex Norris: I hear the spirit and strength with which my hon. Friend, who represents Hartlepool, speaks. I think we have demonstrated the strength of the Government's ability to remove people and remove them in significant numbers. As I say, this case clearly has legislative hurdles. All options are on the table, and I ask him and colleagues to give us a little bit of time to consider them and to come forward with plans.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) on securing this urgent question and thank you, Mr Speaker, for granting it, because Shabir Ahmed is a vile individual and his continued presence at liberty on our streets is an affront to every single value that we hold dear. The Minister has come here and said that all options are on the table, but he has also said he needs to tread carefully. The people of Spelthorne, who have been talking to me about this all weekend, do not want him to tread carefully; they want him to pull on his hobnail boots and frogmarch Shabir Ahmed to the airport today.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for that question and know that the people of Spelthorne, like the people of Nottingham, are very sensible people. What I would say is that the hon. Gentleman has heard about the interaction of section 7 of the Immigration Act 1971 with the rights of a wide range of Commonwealth citizens, and we know where that can end if done badly. In that context, he will want us to do things right, because when anything could happen in this space, he would want to know that the action taken has been legally considered properly and, as I have said to colleagues, is robust. That is why all options are on the table, and I ask just for that little bit of time in order for us to come forward with plans.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): It is my view that Shabir Ahmed, a vile paedophile, signed up for a one-way ticket out of this country on the very day that he started committing his vile crimes. I thank the Minister for his statement setting out that he will stop at nothing to see him deported, but is it not also the case that this situation demonstrates the importance of the Government's ability to deprive individuals of British citizenship, notwithstanding that that must always be done with the utmost care and with proper scrutiny?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend raises a characteristically thoughtful point. The ability to deprive individuals of British citizenship—the ultimate foundational right shared

collectively by people across the country—is a significant step and a crucial tool in our armoury to ensure people who come to this country and commit crimes here are removable. That is really important and something that we take exceptionally seriously.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): My thoughts are with the victims and survivors of Shabir Ahmed and the Rochdale grooming gang. The Minister has always been clear that removing foreign national offenders is a priority for him, the Home Secretary and this Government. Will he update the House on what more the Home Office is doing to speed up these removals?

Alex Norris: We have made significant progress, removing nearly 10,000 foreign offenders since we took office. As we said in our asylum policy statement in November, and as reflected in the legislation that we brought forward last week, there are hurdles that are used to frustrate removal, be they abusing crucial protections from the Modern Slavery Act 2015 or the gaming of article 8 of the ECHR that goes far wider than Strasbourg case law. That is why we have brought forward legislation to ensure we are able to remove people who forfeit their right to be in the country.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for framing his comments around the victims of these terrible crimes, who should always be in our thoughts during such debates. I know that he is committed to doing everything that he can to ensure that foreign nationals who come to our country and break our laws, particularly in such vile and disgusting ways, are made to leave. Will he repeat that commitment from the Dispatch Box and reassure residents in Harlow that this Government will keep them safe?

Alex Norris: I know the wisdom of the people of Harlow: they are tolerant and respect people from all over the world and from all backgrounds, whether they are 500th-generation Harlow, like my hon. Friend, or have arrived more recently. They know that when people commit crimes and abuse that status then, of course, they should be removed. We have made significant progress during our time in office and there will be more progress made through our recent legislation so that we can go further. I look forward to his support and the support of colleagues.

Foreign Interference in UK Politics

4.7 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Samantha Dixon): With permission, Mr Speaker, I shall make a statement about foreign interference in UK politics.

Genuinely free and fair elections are the bedrock of our sovereignty. They are how our people in this country choose their Government and hold power to account. But we have seen our democracy under attack, whether it is foreign actors trying to find ways to divide us from each other and rip communities apart, funding divisive political actors here in the UK or through misinformation and disinformation online, or public figures refusing to play by the rules and eroding trust by being either unwilling or incapable of being honest and transparent about the support they receive.

No Labour Government will allow our democratic process to be distorted by foreign interference, hostile states or malign actors here in the UK seeking to distort our politics. That is why, to complement the stringent steps that we are already taking to protect our democracy in the Representation of the People Bill, the Secretary of State commissioned Philip Rycroft to conduct an independent review of risks posed by foreign financial influence in UK politics. In March, we welcomed Mr Rycroft's comprehensive assessment. Today, I am pleased to be publishing the Government's full response, accepting all of Mr Rycroft's recommendations.

The UK already has a strong framework to detect, deter and disrupt foreign interference, but hostile actors adapt and so must we. We will now take forward a programme of reform to strengthen our defences and restore public confidence. In response to Mr Rycroft's recommendations, we will strengthen our political finance rules through amendments to the Representation of the People Bill. As the House was told previously, we will introduce an annual £100,000 cap on donations and regulated transactions from overseas electors. A cap recognises legitimate participation while ending the risk of unlimited overseas money entering our politics.

Recognising that risk continues when British citizens return to the UK, I am announcing that we will also introduce a minimum residency period. An overseas elector returning to the UK must be here for a full calendar year before that cap is lifted. To ensure that there is no opportunity for individuals to circumvent the new regime, once the measures come into force, the minimum residency period will apply retrospectively from the date of our original announcement on 25 March.

We recognise that similar risks exist with other electors who have recently lived abroad but were not registered as overseas electors. We will apply the same cap and minimum residency period to anyone who moves to the UK after today and was not previously an overseas elector. To ensure that these individuals cannot circumvent the rules before a commencement, a modified cap will apply retrospectively. An annual cap of £100,000 per recipient will apply to donations that they make between today and the date of commencement of the measures, including any regulated transactions that they enter into from today. On commencement, the cap and the minimum residency period will apply in the same way as for those who were formerly overseas electors.

As previously announced, we will introduce a moratorium on all political donations of any amount made via cryptocurrency. Until the regulatory environment is robust enough, donations in cryptocurrency should not be a route for money to be channelled into British politics.

Mr Rycroft outlined clearly the ways in which he believes the corporate donations provisions in the Representation of the People Bill can be tightened. Having carefully considered his reasoning, we will amend the corporate donation test so that it is based on post-tax profits, rather than revenue measured over five years. No corporate donor should be able to put more into UK politics than it has made in post-tax profits. That makes it clear that corporate political donations must be rooted in genuine UK-based economic activity, closing a potential loophole that our adversaries might exploit.

To ensure that our reforms to the political finance framework are robust and enforceable, we will introduce a new donor declaration to be made by anyone donating above a specified threshold. We will engage with the Electoral Commission and political parties as we develop the declaration, including an appropriate threshold.

Mr Rycroft sets out the positive impact that the new "know your donor" rules will have in helping to ensure that parties act in the public interest. He also sets out his concerns about the rigour of those rules. We will strengthen the "know your donor" requirements in the Bill, adding location as a risk factor in parties' due diligence around donations.

We will also strengthen rules and transparency on donations to candidates. Mr Rycroft highlights significant risks in the current rules around these donations, as well as a lack of

"transparency around what is spent, or around the donations being used to fund this spending".

We will therefore require candidates to declare that donations used to fund campaigning prior to formally becoming a candidate are from permissible sources. Donations made during that period above £2,230 will need to be declared.

We will give the Electoral Commission stronger tools to do its job. Mr Rycroft reports that

"basic transparency requirements are essential to sustaining public trust",

and that there is currently

"unnecessary inhibition on the enforcement powers of the Commission."

We agree. We will therefore provide a clear statutory basis for standardised political finance reporting that will make the data easier to compare, scrutinise and enforce. We will create a broad, reciprocal information-sharing gateway, allowing the commission to work more effectively with relevant public authorities. We will extend the commission's powers to require information outside a formal investigation, which means earlier scrutiny, faster action and stronger enforcement where risks emerge. These reforms will give the regulator the powers needed to protect the integrity of political finance.

We will strengthen enforcement. The most serious breaches of electoral law, especially involving foreign interference, must be met with the right expertise and capacity. Mr Rycroft concludes that the "robustness" of the current enforcement arrangements require

"the police apparatus...to hold the requisite expertise and to be adequately resourced...to deal with the complex instances of criminal breach of electoral law".

We will therefore work across Government and with policing partners to strengthen and formalise national capability in this area. We also accept that criminal thresholds and sentencing must provide a credible deterrent. We will work at pace with law enforcement, the Electoral Commission, prosecuting authorities, devolved Governments and political parties to develop proposals.

We will also strengthen our response to the wider influencing environment, including hostile state activity online. Mr Rycroft makes important points concerning the dramatic change in recent years to the context in which our democratic process functions, and how this has

“created new opportunities for malign foreign influence”,

regardless of whether money is changing hands in the UK. We will never stop working to counter interference in our democracy. As information threats continue to evolve, we are taking robust action to tackle misinformation and disinformation, improving transparency in online political campaigning, building resilience to information manipulation, and supporting those at the very heart of our democratic system to identify and respond to emerging threats. We will also consider further reforms relating to online political advertising, digital imprints, lobbying transparency, and other routes through which foreign money may seek to influence our politics. That will include looking at the adequacy of the current regulated period, and taking forward work on artificial intelligence and algorithms.

Finally, we accept the need for clear leadership and stronger co-ordination across Whitehall. Following Mr Rycroft’s recommendation, the Cabinet Secretary has given the permanent secretary of the Home Office lead responsibility for sustaining our democracy.

This is a serious and substantial package of reforms that will bring more transparency to political finance, tighten donation rules and strengthen enforcement. This response shows the Government acting now where action is needed. This is a Government who are prepared to do the long-term work to keep our system secure. I thank Philip Rycroft for his important work. The Government will now move swiftly to implement his recommendations. The people of the UK must know that their elections are free, fair, and protected from foreign interference. I commend this statement to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

4.17 pm

Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement, and Philip Rycroft for his review. On Second Reading of the Representation of the People Bill, we Conservatives reaffirmed our support for measures to tackle foreign interference, in the light of growing threats from China and other hostile actors. However, we have expressed our concerns about the lack of proper consultation on the detail of the proposed measures, and the lack of engagement with political parties on changes to the law affecting political parties. The Bill should have been introduced after the Government’s response to the Rycroft report, rather than being hastily amended halfway through.

The integrity of our democratic system is fundamental to public trust in politics. Every political party represented in this place has a shared interest in ensuring that

foreign interference, illicit finance and attempts to undermine our democratic processes are prevented—well, almost every political party. *[Laughter.]* I thought Labour Members would like that. However, while we support the objective of protecting British democracy from foreign interference, we have significant concerns about both the process that the Government have adopted and several of the proposals emerging from the review.

First, the Government immediately accepted—with retrospective effect—a moratorium on cryptocurrency donations and a £100,000 annual cap on donations from overseas electors, yet those decisions were announced without any meaningful consultation or engagement with political parties. That is particularly disappointing because questions of party funding have traditionally been approached through dialogue and cross-party discussion. Such conventions exist for good reason: rules governing political competition should command broad confidence, and should not be changed unilaterally by whatever party happens to be in government. The breakdown of these long-standing conventions should concern all parties, regardless of their political perspective. If Governments begin introducing retrospective and highly partisan changes to the rules of political finance without consultation, we risk creating a precedent that future Administrations may follow.

Parliamentary questions have shown that there has been no engagement with the House of Commons—with the Committee on Standards, the registrar, or the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards—despite changes directly relating to the registration of donations by Members, and despite this House’s code of conduct. Yet again, the Government are making announcements, such as changing the policy on a cap on donations and changing the rules on candidate donations, with zero consultation. Without stepping into matters that are the remit of the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, I note that it is already the case that newly elected MPs are supposed to declare gifts and donations that they received in the past 12 months.

There also appears to be uncertainty about the scope of the new requirements relating to candidate donations. It is not yet clear which categories of elected officials the provisions will cover, and I would be grateful if the Minister could clarify that. What assessment has been made of the impact of the new profit test on the ability of all political parties to undertake sponsorship and advertising at their party conferences? Have the Government properly considered with the Electoral Commission the interaction of the new requirements with the proposed draft guidance on sponsorship? Does the Minister think that a company sponsoring a lounge or a lanyard is foreign interference? Had the Government engaged fully with political parties, electoral administrators, compliance professionals and other stakeholders before announcing their response, many of these practical difficulties and unintended consequences could have been identified and addressed at an earlier stage.

To be clear, we support measures that genuinely strengthen the resilience of our democratic system. We recognise the risks associated with cryptocurrency donations and agree that safeguards are necessary. We also support tighter rules governing donations in the period immediately before elections. However, good policy requires more than good intentions; it requires engagement and a willingness to listen to those responsible for implementing the rules. The protection of our democracy is too important

[Paul Holmes]

to be pursued through retrospective legislation and measures whose practical consequences have not been fully thought through.

Unfortunately, this is a Government who talk about defending democracy while trying to cancel local elections for two years in a row; who amended the electoral system for mayors for partisan advantage; and who changed the laws on election pilots in complete secrecy. They are now gerrymandering local government boundaries. The official Opposition will work constructively with the Government to defend the national interest from foreign interference, but Ministers would be wise to step back from US-style, hyper-partisan legislation, and actually learn to consult.

Samantha Dixon: I thank the shadow Minister for his offer to work constructively with the Government on these issues. He and I have worked constructively to date, and we have met on a number of occasions to discuss these issues. The political parties committee at the Electoral Commission is also sighted on the changes. As we go forward, I will meet other parties' representatives, too. I would have met them today, had we not tabled this statement, but I hope to do so as soon as possible. I underline that the existing standards arrangements are unaffected by these proposals. I look forward to meeting and working with the shadow Minister in the future.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for this statement, and I join her in paying tribute to Philip Rycroft for his tireless efforts in producing this review. I agree with the shadow Minister that we need to make sure that all political parties sign up to the changes. It is important, because if the public do not expect to fund political parties, we have to be honest about how political parties are funded. I would agree with him more if the last Government had not tried to interfere in the work of the Electoral Commission. This Labour Government then cancelled what was happening. The public rightly expect us to ensure that foreign money does not interfere with or taint our democratic system in any way, and it is good to hear that the Minister is accepting all the recommendations in this review. It is important that we look at where cryptocurrency is coming from.

I just want clarity from the Minister on some things. First, there is the requirement for candidates to prove the source of campaign funding prior to their becoming an official candidate. Can she explain the scope of that requirement? For example, would it be possible for someone to use illegitimate funds to buy or rent a house in a constituency for a prospective candidate, with the aim of helping them to get elected? On the final recommendation—for a stand-alone permanent secretary with responsibility for leading on the security of our democracy—can the Minister confirm that discussions have been ongoing with different Departments? We have to get this right. This is cross-cutting, cross-departmental work, and it will be effective only if there is one person in Cabinet leading on it.

Samantha Dixon: The Chair of the Select Committee has raised some important points. I will not be drawn into discussing the specifics of individual hypothetical

cases—we legislate in principle, and I will continue to do so—but I will give her further details of the arrangements in writing. She is correct in saying that we work across Government on this issue. I am joined on the Front Bench by the chair of the defending democracy taskforce—the Minister of State, Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle)—which deals with partners across the Government, including the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Home Office, the Cabinet Office and the Foreign Office, as well as the Electoral Commission. We work closely with our partners across the Government, and will continue to do so.

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

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of her statement.

Just over five months ago, I stood here and asked the Secretary of State to strengthen the Representation of the People Bill by ensuring that post-tax profits, not overall revenue, were used when assessing the eligibility of company donations. He rejected that plea, as did the Minister in Committee, but I am delighted that this Minister has now agreed to accept that. It was a recommendation from Philip Rycroft and from those working in the democracy sector, and it is a welcome change.

We Liberal Democrats champion a fair and free society, so we also welcome the announcement that candidates will have to declare gifts of over £2,320 in the year prior to their election. That, hopefully, will provide further useful clarity for those who may thus far have been confused about what they do and do not have to declare. We welcome steps towards cracking down on any foreign interference in our democracy, but we still have some way to go, and we urge the Minister to consider banning anyone who has served in a foreign Administration from donating to UK political parties, think-tanks or campaign groups, as well as banning donations from those convicted of political violence; that would include those funding the likes of Stephen Yaxley-Lennon. People who hold British values in contempt and act as a mouthpiece for those who want to undermine our democratic institutions should have no place in our democracy.

We need a much more transparent system to ensure that the British people have faith in politicians. What the Minister has announced today will close loopholes, but too many will remain. Will she consider exploring the benefits of a cap on donations from UK donors, and year-round spending caps by political parties and candidates? That is the way in which loopholes are truly closed.

Finally, can the Minister give us some insights into how this important work will be handled across the multiple ministerial Departments and agencies? It involves the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, the Home Office, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and the Cabinet Office. The Minister is very able, but she is the Minister for Building Safety, Fire and Democracy. Does she agree that a more streamlined portfolio is what our democracy deserves?

Samantha Dixon: The hon. Lady is asking me to consider my job description, but given the sensitivity at the moment, I do not think I will go there.

I hear what the hon. Lady has said about caps. I think that there is a role for political donations in our system: it leads to a thriving and healthy democracy that is funded properly and fairly. The Government's aim was to legislate through the Representation of the People Bill, but in order to be absolutely sure that we had not left any loopholes, the Secretary of State took the decision to commission Philip Rycroft's review. He did identify loopholes, we have accepted their existence, and we will be working to close them next week. This is an ongoing issue, and we do indeed work across the Government. I have explained about the defending democracy taskforce, and it is a busy and hectic arena, but I try to keep abreast of my entire portfolio.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Stepney) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend for the work that she has done, and for accepting the recommendations of the Rycroft review. Can she clarify whether consideration was given to an outright ban on crypto donations, as opposed to a moratorium? Given the reports in the press, can she also tell us what additional steps will be taken to strengthen legal duties in the Representation of the People Bill, and impose restrictions on major online social platforms that are spreading hate and disinformation and interfering during our election periods?

Samantha Dixon: The Government's view is that the anonymity inherent in cryptocurrency transactions creates a route for foreign or illegal actors to channel money through our politics, so we are introducing a moratorium on the use of cryptocurrencies to safeguard the integrity of our political finance system. We intend for a moratorium to end once the regulatory environment around cryptocurrencies is robust enough to protect that integrity. Further legislation would be required at that point, and until we get there, the moratorium will stand. I am quite happy to write to my hon. Friend on her other points.

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I agree with the Minister that there is a great deal to welcome in Philip Rycroft's conclusions. She talked about corporate donations. May I ask her to confirm that she is conscious of the vulnerability around unincorporated associations, which the Electoral Commission has identified for some time, and that she is focused on ensuring that that vulnerability is addressed?

Samantha Dixon: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is absolutely correct. Through the Representation of the People Bill, we will take forward measures to address that.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I welcome much of the Minister's statement, but I am disappointed that there is not an outright ban on cryptocurrency donations. I cannot foresee us ever arriving at a place where the regulation is robust enough that it would be safe for cryptocurrency donations to proceed, so I would like to understand why the Minister is not proceeding with an outright ban. The point about having safeguards on the algorithmic amplification of hate during election campaigns is crucial. That affords certain candidates and certain parties millions of pounds in free publicity, and it affords them an income stream from social media platforms. Why are we not banning that now?

Samantha Dixon: I think the bar will be set very high before the moratorium ends—I can give my right hon. Friend that reassurance. We would need to be sure that no foreign or malign actor could use cryptocurrency to influence our political system before we would even consider lifting that moratorium. I can give my right hon. Friend an assurance that the bar will be very high before that happens—if it happens. We have more work to do on algorithms. We will be working hard with partners across Government to address this, and I hear what my right hon. Friend says. It is a serious issue that we will address.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Government are right to pursue this. Foreign interference in UK politics is a blight that needs to be dealt with, and the Government are right to commission Philip Rycroft to do the work. However, does the Minister not understand that the optics of failing to consult political parties across the House are not good? Whatever emerges has to command the respect of everyone, and although I am no apologist for the Reform party, this looks very much like something of a stitch-up, which does none of us any good.

Samantha Dixon: I do not accept the right hon. Gentleman's characterisation of this. The political parties have been consulted through the Electoral Commission panel, and we will continue to work with them as we move forward.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): We know that Russia orchestrated not only an arson attack on the Prime Minister's family, but then the spreading on social media of misinformation about the attack, so I welcome the Rycroft review's recommendations on strengthening enforcement. Does the Minister agree that this has to target not only foreign actors who spread misinformation and the countries behind them, but the social media companies that are allowing misinformation to spread on their platforms?

Samantha Dixon: I agree with my hon. Friend that the priority is to protect our political system from interference by foreign powers, including Russia. We will always continue to hold Russia to account and to counter the threat posed by Putin's regime, and we will work at pace across Government to support that work—and not just in the Representation of the People Bill or as a response to the review, but continuously.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): May I take this opportunity to congratulate the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, who last week took the decision to take her Department and herself off Twitter—or X, or whatever it is called these days? We talk about online misinformation and malign foreign influence, so it is worth remembering that Twitter is a platform owned by an individual who is hostile to British values and has openly fomented violence on our streets. At a march last year, he said:

"Whether you choose violence or not, violence is coming to you. You either fight back or you die".

Does the Minister have any thoughts on removing her Department, or any further advice for Ministers or Members of this place on whether staying on that platform is in the interests of our democracy? What

[*Luke Taylor*]

steps are the Government and the defending democracy taskforce taking to protect our democracy from foreign influence currently, before the measures in the Representation of the People Bill can be introduced?

Samantha Dixon *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Minister responds, let me say that one question is enough.

Samantha Dixon: Madam Deputy Speaker, I wonder which question the hon. Member would like me to answer most pressingly. On working across Government, yes, we do take this extremely seriously, and the work will not stop just because we have successfully completed stages of the Bill. The work is ongoing, and with our partners across Government we will continually monitor interference in our political system and act against it. On that particular platform, I am sure this is being considered, but I am not going to make a commitment at the Dispatch Box.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): As a contributor to the Rycroft review—I just asked to go and see him—I very much welcome the reforms that have been announced. Just as we do not want companies to take the mickey and be vehicles either for dishonestly obtained funds or for foreign money into our democracy, we also have to be careful about individuals, and my question is about individuals returning to the UK. Will they be properly here—in other words, will they be here in the sense that they pay taxes? Surely any crypto billionaire coming from, say, Thailand to a farmhouse in Hampshire, who has developed a deep interest in our country, would also want to help pay for our schools, our roads and our hospitals. My predecessor in 1848 presented to this place the huge Chartist petition calling for more democracy, and with the cry, “No taxation without representation!” I say this: “No outsize representation without paying your blinking taxes!”

Samantha Dixon: I hear what my right hon. Friend has said. I think the important thing is to close the loopholes for individuals returning from overseas. If they are not registered as an overseas elector, from today their contribution will be capped at £100,000 per annum, and I think that we would all support closing that loophole.

Chris Law (Dundee Central) (SNP): I welcome the modest measures announced today. However, Thai-based billionaire and Reform party donor Christopher Harborne has already insisted that these new rules will not stop him donating. Billionaires, oligarchs and all those who wish to subvert our democracy believe that they are untouchable, so these measures must be rigorously enforced with severe punishments for anyone found breaking them. Given that the ex-leader of Reform in Wales is serving 10 and a half years in prison for taking Russian money during his time as an MEP, will the Minister ensure that anyone found guilty of undermining the integrity of our democracy is dealt with with the same severity?

Samantha Dixon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, because he raises an important point about enforcement. We are clear that the framework governing political finance must provide a strong, credible and effective deterrent against wrongdoing. It is important to make sure that evidential thresholds and sentencing provisions support, rather than hinder, the effective investigation and prosecution of serious offences, particularly when such offences may undermine public confidence in the democratic process. We therefore accept the underlying intent of Rycroft’s recommendation 12. However, the Government also consider that changes to the knowledge test and sentencing limits raise complex issues of proportionality, fairness and coherence across the wider criminal and electoral law framework. So we will be working closely with Ministers across the whole Government to ensure that this is addressed properly.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): I welcome the Minister’s statement. It is integral that the public out there are confident that their politicians are not for sale. It is a shame that a small number of individuals make such actions necessary. I wonder whether the Minister shares my concern that money and corruption always find a way. Would it not be better to have an overall cap for all donations, foreign or domestic?

Samantha Dixon: The Government’s view is that there is a place for legitimate donations in political financing in the UK. However, the Representation of the People Bill, with the extra insight that Philip Rycroft has produced, will provide us with one of the most, if not the most, strenuous sets of legislation on political financing that the country has ever seen. That does not mean to say that we are complacent and that we will not continue to monitor and act when necessary, but this is truly groundbreaking.

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): Will the Minister confirm that the Government will match this action against foreign financial influence by restoring the principle that voting in British parliamentary elections should be reserved for British citizens?

Samantha Dixon: There are a number of arrangements for different citizens—reciprocal arrangements—in different parts of the country and for different countries. I will set out for the hon. Lady the arrangements as they stand at the moment. We are not proposing to change those arrangements.

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I commend the Minister for all the work that she has done on this matter and the Rycroft review. Sadly, there are others who think differently. “Where there is a will, there is a way” is how multimillionaire Christopher Harborne reacted to the idea of a proposed cap of £100,000 on donations by overseas donors because of the concern that such donations might appear to be motivating outcomes in this place. The Minister will recognise that all of us in this House are damaged by the perception that politicians are open to motivation by donation rather than democracy, and that, frankly, it is less about the location and more about the lump sum. If it is “Where there is a will, there is a way”, will she commit to doing what many of us would like to see:

close the loophole and also cap UK donations at £100,000, putting us beyond doubt and all our reputations back on the line?

Samantha Dixon: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution. As I said previously, it is the Government's view that there is a place in UK political finance for legitimate donations and we do not intend to introduce a cap.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Can the Minister advise the House on how earnings from foreign sources not made directly as political donations, such as hosting or appearing on TV channels supporting foreign adversaries, will be treated? They enable the significant indirect self-funding of candidates, future candidates, MPs and political parties by those who seek to influence political campaigning. Therefore, an overall cap on donations from British people, including those who are candidates and MPs, is really necessary. Will she comment on that source?

Samantha Dixon: As I have set out, the Government believe that there is a legitimate role for political donations that are made correctly and effectively, in accordance with the rules. However, I will write to the hon. Lady about the specific issue she raises.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and I pay tribute to Philip Rycroft, who, as I am sure colleagues across the House will agree, is an exceptional public servant. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on anti-corruption and responsible tax, it was a pleasure for me to provide evidence to his review, and I know his diligent work was conducted in a considered manner.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I have notified the relevant Member I am going to name. Given that the weekend's newspapers were awash with stories about the financial interests of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), what assurances can the Minister provide to me that the measures the Government are introducing will prevent people—such as George Cottrell, convicted in the US of wire fraud, who we know has provided thousands of pounds-worth of benefits; or Ben Delo, who has been convicted for flouting American anti-money laundering rules, yet has donated £4 million to Reform—from being able to pump tens of millions of pounds into British politics?

Samantha Dixon: The reporting in *The Sunday Times* was clearly concerning for all of us in the House. What I would say is that, as I set out in my statement earlier, there are a number of agencies that deal with the regulation, enforcement and potential legal action that may be necessary in cases that involve illegal behaviour. I will go no further than that, although my hon. Friend tempts me, but I will just say that I am sure those organisations will be paying very close attention to the media reports over the weekend.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Well, well, this desperate Labour Government will stop at nothing to stop the rise of Reform UK—from trying to cancel elections, to donations, to changing the voting system in Manchester. If the Government are truly concerned about undue influence, has the Minister discussed

the proposals with the Cayman Islands hedge fund Quadrature, which was the largest donor to the Labour Government, giving £4 million in 2024, or with the eight companies that have donated half a million pounds? Sure enough, those companies have had almost £150 million of Government contracts since.

Samantha Dixon: Any political party that abides by the rules the Government are introducing will be able to flourish in our political system. Those that do not can expect to be held firmly to account.

Sean Woodcock (Banbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. I have notified the relevant Member that I am about to name them. Over the weekend, *The Telegraph* ran a study about the Iranian-born property magnate Sasan Ghandehari pledging to donate millions of pounds to Reform UK. He described the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) as an “honest politician”. Does the Minister agree?

Samantha Dixon: I am not going to comment on individual Members without having notified them in advance, but I note my hon. Friend's comments.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I welcome that the Government have accepted all of the Rycroft review's recommendations, but as Rycroft himself noted, his terms of reference did not enable him to look at all sources of distortion in our democracy. It does not just come from abroad. In a democracy, every voter's voice should count equally, but it is clear that billionaires are buying influence. Why will the Minister not set a cap on all donations, so that we can eliminate the corrosive and corrupting influence of big money in our politics?

Samantha Dixon: As I have set out, the Government's position is that there is a role for financial political donations that have been given in accordance with the rules, to enable British politics to flourish.

Joe Powell (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): People want politicians to serve their interests, not those of billionaires or millionaires based overseas, whether they are in the US, Russia, Thailand or, indeed, Montenegro. The revelations of the last few days have shown how important it is to update our rules. Can the Minister confirm that corporate political donations through shell arrangements or foreign-linked entities, with no link to or interest in Britain's prosperity, will no longer be possible under the proposals?

Samantha Dixon: Yes, I can.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I welcome the Minister's statement. Has she considered the merits of establishing an office of the whistleblower, which would create new legal protections for those who declare wrongdoing and promote greater public awareness of whistleblowers' rights? Will the Government ensure that there are criminal sanctions on officeholders who fail to whistle blow when they know or become aware of political interference or wrongdoing?

Samantha Dixon: The hon. Lady raises an important point. As the independent regulator for our democracy, the Electoral Commission is always willing to hear from members of the public, political parties and other sources

[Samantha Dixon]

about anything that people believe may have been done incorrectly, whether inadvertently or deliberately. I refer the hon. Lady to the Electoral Commission, but I take her point.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and Philip Rycroft for his work. This issue is something that my constituents care about, because they want to know that their vote is their own and is not for sale to the highest bidder from overseas, whether it is for £5, £500 or even £5 million. Will the Minister tell the House when we will see the changes in law?

Samantha Dixon: The Government's intention is to table amendments to the Representation of the People Bill following today's statement. Report and Third Reading will take place next week, so we will be moving forward at pace.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): I thank the Minister for her statement on the actions the Government will take to try to restore the public's faith in our democracy. She mentioned that the "know your donor" rules will be strengthened, in particular with regard to the location of potential donors. Has there been any consideration of adding a prospective donor's criminal history to the list of due diligence factors that a political party must consider when processing a potential donation?

Samantha Dixon: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the "know your donor" arrangements that will come in through the Representation of the People Bill and the way those rules will be tightened through the Rycroft review recommendations. It is an important point, and I may come back to him in writing.

Lloyd Hatton (South Dorset) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her considered statement. We recently learned that shortly after receiving £5 million from a crypto billionaire halfway across the world, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) used a private audience with the Governor of the Bank of England to lobby against a policy that could cost that same billionaire dearly. It should not be this easy to pump money into British politics from the other side of the planet. While I welcome the measures announced today regarding the overseas donation cap, I would like some reassurance from the Minister—for me and for my constituents—that foreign-based donors will not be able to dart in and out of the country as they choose to avoid the new cap on foreign donations.

Samantha Dixon: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments. The measures that I have set out today on overseas electors and residents returning to Britain from overseas should provide some of the certainty he is looking for so that his constituents can feel confident that our system is safe.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): I welcome these measures, which are a fantastic step forward. These actions are about not just tackling foreign donations and dirty money, but putting faith back into our politics and ensuring that people can feel that their vote matters locally. Can the Minister assure me that the enforcement agencies will have teeth to ensure that these sanctions are applied appropriately and that people can have confidence in the integrity of our whole political system?

Samantha Dixon: My hon. Friend raises a particularly important point: it is essential that enforcement follows on from the legislation that we enact here. We are working with colleagues in the Home Office on policing and with the Electoral Commission to ensure that that enforcement is robust and well resourced.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Several of my constituents have raised concerns about Russian-linked interference in British politics that have been echoed by the all-party parliamentary group for fair elections, of which I, like many Members present, am a member. Its cross-party report "Free But Not Fair" highlighted cases of shell companies and proxy donors with links to Russian-connected individuals being able to funnel money into our politics. Will the Minister confirm that today's measures will close those routes for good?

Samantha Dixon: Any company that wants to donate into British politics will have to substantially prove that it is able to do so by being headquartered in the UK and having persons of interest from the UK. We will end the way in which shell companies have been used to channel illegitimate funds into our political system.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I very much welcome the Minister's statement today and the incorporation of the Rycroft review recommendations. I also welcome the changes to the "know your donor" rules, particularly in respect of location; political parties must be forced to include location in their considerations before accepting a donation. I was going to submit that as an amendment to the Representation of the People Bill, so job done on that. Does the Minister agree that political parties should also be forced to consider politically exposed people and the source of the wealth being donated before accepting donations?

Samantha Dixon: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We will be working across the Benches to develop a donor declaration that will set out where exactly money has come from. We need to proceed on that with care and collaboration to ensure that when a donation is given, it is clear where exactly it is coming from. I agree with him entirely.

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her engagement with me on this issue. I want to praise both the work of the Electoral Commission in addressing the many threats that we face and the Rycroft review, which I had the pleasure of speaking to Philip Rycroft about. In the review, he focuses not just on money, which many Members have spoken about, but on the ongoing threats in the online world. Does the Minister agree that this is a once-in-a-generation moment to take a tough line on disinformation that is deliberately created in the UK and then amplified by foreign bots? Such disinformation has a bad influence on our right to choose based on real, true information.

Samantha Dixon: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her tenacity in this field. She has worked really hard to highlight and bring to the surface these issues, and she has taken the time to meet with the Electoral Commission, Philip Rycroft and me. I am very grateful to her for sharing her experience and for contributing to this debate. I agree that this is work that must continue. It will not stop because we are legislating now. We are working across Government, and we continue to work relentlessly to keep our democracy safe.

Police Leadership Commission Report

4.56 pm

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will make a statement on leadership in policing.

The police perform a unique and vital role in our society. They enforce our laws, tackle those who break them, and keep the public safe. These are awesome responsibilities. The officers and staff who uphold them every day, at all levels, are owed our respect, admiration and thanks. At the same time, if forces are to serve their communities effectively, they must secure and retain the trust of those communities. But in recent years, that trust has come under strain. Creaking systems, outdated structures and a lack of central grip from previous Governments have meant that the police have struggled to consistently hit the high levels of performance that we rightly expect of them.

Things have to change. That is why earlier this year, the Home Secretary announced the most significant police reforms in 200 years. Our plans will ensure that the right policing happens in the right place, building on the progress that we have already made on restoring neighbourhood policing and driving down serious threats such as knife crime, and creating a new model in which local policing protects our communities and national policing protects us all.

The reform programme provides us with a generational opportunity to address the long-standing challenges that have hampered the police's ability to provide a consistently world-class service to the public. One such challenge centres on the question of how we ensure that our forces have the strong, effective leadership that they need to meet the significant demands that are placed on them. It is a question that is rightly the subject of considerable parliamentary and public scrutiny, especially when things go wrong, as they have in the recent past.

Equally, I want to emphasise that there are a great many outstanding officers and staff across the police service, including those in the highest ranks. When failings occur and the public are let down, they feel it more keenly than anyone. The reality is that leadership is about more than just individuals. It is about culture and standards, and about giving every member of the police workforce the support and skills that they need to flourish and become leaders themselves.

We are not the first Government to grapple with this topic. Various tweaks have been made to the system over the years, yet the same concerns keep arising, whether they relate to culture, conduct or the retention and promotion of talent. As we roll out our reform programme, this is clearly an issue requiring close examination. That examination has now taken place in the form of an independent review commissioned by the Home Secretary last year.

The police leadership commission was established last October and is co-chaired by two former Members of this House with extensive knowledge of policing: my noble Friend Lord Blunkett and the noble Lord Herbert of South Downs. Together with the other members of the commission, they have carried out the most significant review of police leadership in recent times. Its findings and recommendations are published today. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Lord Blunkett and

Lord Herbert for the care and skill with which they have approached their task. I am grateful, too, to the other commission members, and all who have participated. There has been a particular emphasis on giving voice to those on the frontline, which is welcome and essential.

The review's report sets out a comprehensive and, in places, candid assessment of police leadership in England and Wales. While the commission found examples of excellent leadership and delivery, it also identified concerns around consistency, capability and culture, and the impact that shortcomings in those areas have on the service received by the public. To quote from the report,

"the policing profession has not consistently had the excellent leadership it needs".

It was also clear that those on the frontline are not getting the consistent support they deserve, amid wide variations in approaches to leadership development.

The commission highlights the critical importance of leadership to ensuring that policing is prepared for the challenges of the future while upholding the sacred principle of policing by consent, without fear or favour. It is also important to emphasise, as the report rightly does, that leadership must not be confined to the senior officer ranks. It can and does exist in all parts of the service. It should be nurtured at every stage of a policing career—for both officers and staff. The review's findings are rightly unsparing, and I welcome its willingness to engage with difficult issues, because, as the report's foreword states:

"Fundamentally, this is about ensuring that the public receives the quality of policing to which they are entitled."

I will turn now to the review's recommendations, of which there are 27 in total. They are ambitious in breadth and scale and, taken together, they make a compelling case for change. While it is right that we now take the time to consider them in full, we welcome the commission's proposals and the intent behind them. In particular, we are actively looking at the recommendation to create a formal senior constable rank and at how this could be done.

The commission also recommends a new professional digital passport for every individual in policing, and other measures to put stronger supporting structures in place around professional development and performance. These could in the future help to build a route to a licence to practise, which is a proposal we included in our police reform White Paper, as one way of raising standards and promoting a stronger culture of professional development. Other recommendations from the review include: a new police leadership fast stream; a new targeted direct entry scheme to fill specific gaps in policing, with a focus on leaders from professions with transferable skills; and a role for the forthcoming national police service in promoting ethical policing at national level.

As I have said, we will consider all the report's findings and recommendations carefully. I am certain that they will be of great assistance as we advance our police reform agenda. A full Government response will follow in due course. In the meantime, we are making progress on leadership-related measures designed to improve public confidence and police performance, such as a new senior appointments panel and reforms to promotion processes, alongside the wider work we are doing on restructuring, including the creation of the

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national police service, which will provide a single source of strategic leadership and a stronger set of national standards.

I will finish where I started: by paying tribute to the thousands of men and women who work tirelessly every day to protect our communities from harm. From the officers and staff on the frontline and their colleagues performing essential roles behind the scenes to the chief constables they ultimately report to, I am grateful to them all. While the threats they must tackle are evolving all the time, what will never change is our commitment to the founding principles of British policing, which dictate that in this country we police by consent, and assert that the police are the public and the public are the police.

To uphold these traditions while meeting the demands of modern crimefighting, we must ensure that our police forces are fair, open and meritocratic workplaces that are able to meet the high standards we rightly expect of those entrusted with keeping their fellow citizens safe and driven forward by strong, effective leadership at all levels. Reform on the scale required is no easy task, but working in partnership with policing and aided by the findings of this important report, I believe that we can and will succeed in making our police service stronger and our society safer. I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.4 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of her statement and pay tribute to the noble Lords Herbert and Blunkett for producing such a timely and thoughtful report.

The last year has done real damage to public confidence in police leadership. Of course, the report rightly recognises that there are many outstanding officers leading forces across the country, but the headlines that people remember tell a different story. From the shameful scenes surrounding the Maccabi Tel Aviv match to the heartbreaking murder of Henry Nowak, alongside too many other incidents, the public have been left asking a simple question: who is in charge?

Leadership is not about managing decline or issuing guidance; it is about setting a culture and making it unmistakably clear that the first duty of every police officer is to protect the public and uphold the law without fear, without favour and without distraction. The report gets to the heart of that when it says that police leaders must refuse to take sides and remain focused entirely on preventing crime, catching criminals and bringing offenders to justice. Culture starts at the top. If we want frontline policing to change, leadership must change first.

What struck me most about the report was not simply its recommendations but the evidence behind them. This is not the work of critics looking in from the outside; it reflects what police officers themselves are saying. As the authors acknowledged in their letter to stakeholders, much of the evidence made for uncomfortable reading. Perhaps the most alarming finding is that only

13% of constables and just 17% of sergeants surveyed believed that they worked in a well-led and well-managed organisation. Think about that: more than four in five officers who put themselves in harm's way to keep our streets safe do not believe that they work in a well-led organisation. If that does not ring alarm bells, I do not know what will.

Time does not permit me to go through all 27 recommendations, but there is much that deserves support. In particular, I welcome the emphasis on merit. Our best officers should be recognised, developed and promoted because they are the best, not because they have ticked the right boxes. But we also have to be honest about the context. The report sits alongside a programme of wider police reform announced by the Government, although reports suggest that the incoming Prime Minister is already getting cold feet about those reforms. That matters, because many of the recommendations assume larger forces and more centralised models. If those reforms do not happen, Ministers need to explain how the recommendations will work in practice rather than simply in principle.

There is another contradiction that cannot be ignored. If we want stronger leadership, we need to give police leaders the tools they need to succeed. That means enough officers on the streets and the technology to help them do their jobs effectively. Instead, officer numbers have fallen by about 1,300 across the country. At the same time, in London, the Labour mayor chose to pick a public fight with his own commissioner over the use of technology, with the commissioner making it clear that the mayor's decision would leave the force able to achieve less. How can we demand better leadership while cutting officer numbers and denying forces the technology they say they need?

There is much in the report that hon. Members on both sides of the House can support. Better leadership is not a partisan cause—it is a public necessity—but if we are serious about restoring confidence in policing, we cannot stop at identifying what police leaders should do differently; we also have to stop making political decisions that make their jobs harder. The public deserve better, our best officers deserve better, and the future of policing depends on us getting both police leadership and political leadership correct.

Sarah Jones: I thank the hon. Member for welcoming the report. I agree with some of what he said. He is right that it is not the work of critics looking in from the outside. The evidence base was developed through nine months of forensic work, talking to police across all levels within the force, meaning that this is a very honest assessment of the realities in which we find ourselves.

As I said in my statement, police leadership has been a problem for some time. Inspections of police forces by His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services from 2023 to 2025 showed that not a single force had outstanding leadership. There are different leadership challenges across all our forces. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that the public need to believe in the police and be confident in policing. The statistics on public confidence in policing have been worrying for some years now, and we must all look at them.

The hon. Gentleman made the usual point about officer numbers, and I will make the usual point back: as he knows, the Conservative party cut 20,000 police

and then recruited 20,000 police, but then put 12,000 of them behind desks. We are taking them away from desks and putting them on the frontline. We are also investing in technology. For example, the £75 million that I put into PoliceAI will transform the bureaucracy on which our police officers have to spend lots of their time, so that they can focus on the frontline.

Overall, I welcome the hon. Gentleman's nice comments on the leadership review. The review has been incredibly important, and it is important that we have cross-party agreement about the need to improve leadership in policing.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement. I welcome the focus on police leadership, and look forward to reading the report in detail. I thank her for acknowledging that this Government are not the first to grapple with this issue. Those of us who have been around policing for a little while have seen lots of changes, whether police and crime commissioners, independent misconduct chairs, or the different entry routes that the Conservatives brought in and then went back on, and there is a real weariness about changes to these processes. Frontline officers want to know whether it will get easier to deliver on the priorities that they know the public have but that they do not really feel backed to deliver. Can she reassure the House that that will be at the centre—no matter what changes, well-intentioned though they might be, are made on the back of this report?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is right. We have to be laser-focused on what will improve outcomes for the public and what will enable the police to do the job that we ask them to do. I do recommend that he reads the report—it is a very good read. At its heart, it says that we want our police to have sound judgment and common sense in their policing. We want them to be freed up to make the decisions that are commonsensical and the right thing to do. To do that, we have not only to strip away the bureaucracy and all the forms they have to fill in, but to ensure that they are trained to be the police officers we want them to be. How do we match that training with freeing up our police to get on and do the job that we all ask them to do in the first place?

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

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): I thank the noble Lords Blunkett and Herbert for the report, which is a welcome shining light on the challenges facing leadership in our police forces. I know at first hand from my constituency that police forces deal day in, day out with highly sensitive, dangerous and traumatic incidents. They keep us safe. It is deeply challenging work, and we are greatly indebted to them. That is why the findings of the report are so concerning.

The report shows that officers are too often hampered by scarce resources, excessive bureaucracy and conduct processes, which leave them unable to focus on delivering for the public. The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for a return to the proper community and neighbourhood policing that our constituents want. For that to happen, officers must be properly supported and equipped to tackle the many issues facing our communities. Will the Minister set out what plans the Government have to increase the numbers of bobbies on the beat?

Even more concerning are the report's findings on the inconsistent leadership standards across our police forces. The numerous instances of leaders falling short of the standards of integrity, honesty and professionalism expected of them—including in cases of cronyism, nepotism and abuses of power for sexual purpose—are appalling. It is clear that we need root-and-branch reform of the policing system, as the report calls for, to stamp out that bad behaviour, improve leadership and hold senior officers to the highest standard. Will the Minister confirm that that recommendation and others in the report will directly inform the forthcoming police reform Bill?

Finally, the Police Federation has highlighted poor leadership in the police and an increase in officer suicides, but we do not have the data. Will the Minister commit to requiring police forces to gather that data?

Sarah Jones: Taking those points in turn and working backwards, we are working with the Police Federation on data on police suicide. It is an area where there are some contested figures, and we are trying to rectify that so we have the right picture, as well as putting in place more comprehensive wellbeing support for officers and staff so that they can get support in the difficult jobs they are faced with.

The hon. Member asked whether the review will directly inform our reform agenda and the legislation we pass—absolutely it will. It is a very important part of the learnings that we will take forward.

The hon. Member points to nepotism and other challenges we have in policing. Hon. Members might have seen Lord Blunkett on the television yesterday talking about that. It is absolutely true, and many the reforms pointed to in the report that we will carefully consider are aimed at taking that away, whether through having a targeted direct entry scheme or the new rank of senior constable. A leadership fast stream has been recommended, which would be interesting to look at. I recommend that he looks at all those recommendations.

On bobbies on the beat, we have already increased the number of police on our streets by well over 3,000. As the hon. Member might know, we have a target of 13,000 police by the end of this Parliament.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Middleton South) (Lab): I am fully supportive of Stephen Watson, the chief constable of Greater Manchester. It is the first time I can say that about a chief constable since the 1970s. We have had chief constables who were mad—James Anderton, who carried out his prejudice against the gay community because he had a line to God—and who were bad—Peter Fahy, who refused to take action on Pakistani and Kashmiri rape gangs because he was frightened of damaging relationships, and Ian Hopkins, who made it more dangerous for police officers to go to crime scenes and into houses, because the computer system did not work and they did not know whether they were going into a dangerous situation. Over those years I have come to believe that the most important decision is getting the right person in the position of chief constable. I hope that the report the Minister has referred to, which I have not read, will lead to that; the chief constable is the most important person by far.

Sarah Jones: I completely agree with my hon. Friend and congratulate him on his honesty in his description of his previous chiefs. There are on average fewer than

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three applicants for each chief constable job, which is frankly woeful, and many are filled by internal applicants. We do not have the pool of people going for these jobs that we want to see. We had already said that through the police reform programme we would set up a national body to help with recruitment, as well as giving the Home Secretary new powers to remove chief constables in extreme circumstances. There is a lot in this report about how we can improve the pipeline up to the chief constable level, but also how we can achieve a better system of promotion within the chief constable ranks and ensure that we get diversity of talent, so that we have—as we would want—a good cohort of people applying for every single job.

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

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for the £100 million grant she has given to Lincolnshire police and the transformative extra £12 million a year. We have been campaigning for that for years and have averted 400 job losses. When the Government do something right, it is right that we should say thank you. However, she may want to say a word about our problem. We are losing our excellent police and crime commissioner, Marc Jones—she could perhaps say a nice word about him—and those powers will be transferred to the mayor, but we have the Lincolnshire police and Humberside Police, and Humberside Police, of course, straddles two mayoralties, so she has a problem. May I urge her, in any local reorganisation, not to do away with small police forces such as Lincolnshire, to concentrate on old-fashioned policing—not woke, not courses, not staff—and to try to avoid throwing too many chairs up in the air with boundary reorganisation?

Sarah Jones: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his words about the funding for Lincolnshire and join him in praising his PCC—and indeed all PCCs. We never had a problem with the model in terms of the individuals who held those posts; it is more the elected model that we do not think is right. As he will know, Lord Bernard Hogan-Howe is currently reviewing for us what the structures should be in a reformed police force that would sit between a national police service and local police areas; the local police areas will be absolutely key, and he will have some very interesting things to say about them.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman asked for policing not to be woke, not to have courses and so on. There is a lot to unpick in what we want our police to do. We want them to have the skills to make common-sense, good, practical decisions to catch criminals and keep us all safe. In order to achieve that, we must make sure that there is good training, but that has been lacking. There has been very little leadership training at any level in policing. In the Army, 15 years after leaving Sandhurst a colonel in charge of 1,500 people would have had on average 72 weeks of leadership development, whereas in that same time a chief super in the Met would have had two or three weeks tops. That cannot be right. We have to teach people to be the leaders that we need them to be.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank those in the police service for their work; their job is not easy and indeed can be very challenging. I also welcome the Minister's response to the report published by the police leadership commission. However, it grieves me to say that it remains a shocking and disturbing fact that many children of my ethnic descent experience being over-policed and under-protected. A report released earlier this year by the Children's Commissioner showed that black children are more likely than white children to be strip-searched. I do not want any child in my constituency or this country to experience unnecessary strip-searches, and I do not want black children to experience strip-searches disproportionately. We need only mention Child Q to be reminded of that awful situation. I recognise that the police data on that, and on those issues, is poor and that improved police leadership is very much needed, so how will the Government strategy address that?

Sarah Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and her constant championing of this issue. She is right. We said in our manifesto that we would look at the powers on children and strip-searching. We have that job still to do, and we will do it in this Parliament; I would be very happy to work with her on it. She is also right that in some areas we have seen some improvements; on stop and search, for example, we have seen significant improvements, but there is a lack of data and an inconsistency in some of the data; we are looking at whether we can improve that so that we have the right picture before us.

The work the police leadership commission undertook involved a substantial amount of evidence from women and people from different ethnic minorities, who talked about their struggles within policing. We know that more people from different ethnic minority backgrounds leave at different stages, so there is a job to be done there, and that is highlighted in this report.

Sir Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): As the hon. Lady has said, the House owes considerable gratitude to their noble Lordships Blunkett and Herbert, but surely the problem is very well rehearsed: a lack of consistent, high-quality leadership within the police. Will she explore further the benefits of having within the police the structure of a professional officer corps? That has been regularly advocated, and we know that in the military it delivers outstanding leadership and leadership structures. Will she therefore bear in mind that there are many brilliant, very senior officers in the British military who would bring undoubted leadership skills to bear at the most senior levels within the police, including in future for the role of Metropolitan Police Commissioner?

Sarah Jones: I suspect that we are some way away from not having a warranted police officer as the Metropolitan Police Commissioner—but maybe we are not. We are open to looking at how to get some of our police leaders out on secondment in other, similar sectors, so that they can get some experience and then come back, and to looking at direct entry to the police force for people from similar roles. Many people in policing have different views about the correlation with the Army; as part of the review, there was some interesting work looking at what the Army does, and I recommend it to the right hon. Gentleman. The new rank of senior constable is interesting, as are the suggestions about very senior police roles. I urge

him to read the report; although, as he says, some of these things are well known, there is a huge amount of nuance and detail that makes it well worth reading.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her statement and my local police officers for their work. Trust in policing is essential, but that trust and confidence has been tested too many times in recent years. Does the Minister agree that strong ethical leadership is fundamental to rebuilding public confidence in policing? Does she also agree that the police leadership commission report provides an important opportunity to ensure that officers at every level are better supported to deliver the high standards that the public rightly expect?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The report is really strong on the importance of good ethical policing so that we can reset our police leadership culture around high performance, cutting crime, keeping people safe and, on top of that, preparing for the challenges that lie ahead. As we know, the force has not been forward-looking enough in the equipment and training provided to tackle new forms of crime. In addition, we have a very young force: as of March last year, a third of our whole police cohort had been in the police for less than five years, so building experience through an ethical framework is important.

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): The report finds structural issues within police forces, with fragmented and inconsistent systems that do not make the most of our police talent. If an officer sees cronyism, nepotism and abuse of power around them, they will not have their future career at the top of their mind or trying to break through that system. Given the impending Government reorganisation, how will whichever Home Office Ministers are in place under the new Prime Minister ensure that the proposed police reorganisation puts strong systems in place, so that there is effective police leadership and development and we break out of the situation that has developed?

Sarah Jones: The reform that we have set out more broadly, not just in today's report, is uncontested in many ways—some aspects are contested, but others are not. There is cross-party and cross-policing agreement about setting up a national police service and on having a more hyper-local focus, ensuring that the public can expect that acquisitive crimes that go unsolved are responded to in the way that they expect. Lord Bernard Hogan-Howe's current work—as the hon. Gentleman says, it will straddle the periods of two Prime Ministers—is looking at the layers between police forces. There are different ways to approach that issue and we are working through all of them, but I do not think that anyone would disagree with the fundamental premise that, if we do not reform policing, we will not end up with a force that can face the future in the way that we need it to.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I welcome the report and I put on record my respect for the senior leadership of Warwickshire police, with whom I have engaged. In the spirit of the comments by the Father of the House, I will say that the Conservative police and crime commissioner is a good man, with whom I have a good

relationship regarding policing. Every senior police officer—indeed, every officer of any rank—that I have dealt with wants to be scrutinised and to work to the very highest of standards. Does the Minister agree that, since they want to serve the public in the best way possible, no police officer of any rank should fear the leadership improvements that are set out in the report?

Sarah Jones: My hon. Friend has hit the nail on the head, because no police officer should fear that. The reforms suggested in the report are there to support officers and staff to move through the force in a way that gives them the skills and training that they need to do the job that we have asked them to do. That is at the core of what we are trying to do. In relation to his remarks about his Conservative police and crime commissioner, we made the difficult decision to remove police and crime commissioners—that was a hard thing for them to hear, for obvious reasons. They have consistently continued to work with me and the Home Office, to help with the reforms and to keep giving their ideas and time, and I am very grateful to them for that.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Does the Minister agree that a big part of the leadership malaise outlined in this report can be attributed to the lack of clarity from this place and the Government about what we expect of the police? While this report is welcome, the definition of police leadership in paragraph 90 runs to almost two pages.

Does the Minister agree that, in essence, this is about two things? First, this is about cutting crime. Too often, the leadership of the police is focused on being all-purpose social workers trying to solve every problem in society, leading to the extraordinary situation in which social media is policed more aggressively than shoplifting or burglary. Secondly, this is about having officers' backs. Too often, police officers fear acting, because they will be hung out to dry if they make the wrong call. I am afraid we saw exactly that this weekend in the extraordinary scenes at the Pride march, where there was explicit antisemitism and people directly attacking Jews while the police stood back and watched. We have to achieve a cultural change. Does the Minister agree with those objectives?

Sarah Jones: I agree. The police have a duty to police without fear or favour, and that needs to be absolute. Everybody is equal under the law. I suspect that over the years, political decisions might have been made that may have made that job harder for the police. However, I do not agree with the right hon. Member's analysis of what good leadership is. There are many different ways to cut crime and have officers' backs, so I would not say that he has hit the nail on the head.

We expect our officers to cut crime and to keep people safe. We can all agree on that, because that is what we need people to do, but the question is about how we do that. How has leadership been so poor over the years that we are not achieving that outcome? It may be that decisions made in this place are partially to blame, but it cannot be right that, for example, out of 140,000 officers and many thousands more staff, only about 500 officers and staff will start a centrally delivered national leadership programme this year. We cannot be designing good leadership when we are not training people how to do it.

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): Page 39 of the report says that the college is hampered in its quest for reform by the constant attempts to try to reach consensus. In the light of that, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the governance of the national police service will be fit for purpose?

Sarah Jones: The national police service will set consistent standards and ensure that we have a national workforce strategy setting out exactly how many different people we need and in what roles. The report shows multiple areas where forces have a compliance culture and risk aversion—people do not want to speak out for fear of consequences, and there is a resistance to new ideas. All those things suggest a culture in which people are not being trained, supported or allowed to do the fundamental job that we ask them to do, which is to cut crime and keep people safe. The national police service will be able to set those standards at a national level and ensure that there is consistency across all the forces, rather than the current inconsistent approach.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): A white man on a night out in Birmingham is assaulted by two black men. The police intervene and arrest the white man—the victim—and allow the two black lads to flee the scene. They then call the victim a “dick” and hit his head against a police car while they are sticking him in it. They then misrepresent what happened at the event, saying that it was a fight, when it was actually an assault. They say that absolutely nothing is wrong. The footage then goes viral, as ever, and the police are forced to change their tune—footage that the police actually tried to suppress.

I have three simple questions for the Policing Minister. One, does she consider this to be another appalling incident of two-tier policing? Two, will she haul the acting chief constable of—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Jenrick, one question is normally enough, and I have given you the privilege of two. I call the Minister.

Robert Jenrick: I was the only person to raise it. Millions of—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Mr Jenrick, you know better.

Sarah Jones: There is no room in policing for anything other than for the police to do their job without fear or favour, and that involves treating everybody equally under the law. Where the police are trained, have good leadership and are given good support, we believe we can ensure better outcomes for the citizens we are all here to serve. That is the point of the leadership work that has been done over many months, and it is the point of our reform programme. Where things go wrong, of course we must shine a light on that, and a huge amount of work has been done over the past few years—for example, police wearing body-worn cameras, publishing that evidence so that people can see it for themselves, and being quicker to speak publicly about what has happened in certain incidents. Those are all important, transparent changes that we are making to our police, but ultimately we need to make sure we are trying to bring people together through reforms that give them the policing we all need.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op) *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Vince, you have moved. No wonder it is so quiet in your usual part of the Chamber.

Chris Vince: This is the closest I am ever going to get to the Front Bench. [*Laughter.*]

Having spoken to police officers across my constituency of Harlow, I know that the two things they want to do are keep my constituency safe and—to paraphrase a new Labour manifesto pledge—tackle crime and the causes of crime. Can the Minister outline what she is going to do on the back of this review to ensure we take away the barriers, so that police officers can do their job of protecting my community and keeping the country safe?

Sarah Jones: I think my hon. Friend would look very fine at this Dispatch Box. I hope he gets to be here and has the privilege I have had of being in this role.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we need to strip out all the bureaucracy and nonsense that the police have to deal with. All of us who have been out on response with police or been out with our neighbourhood police, or who have spent time with sergeants, know just how much bureaucracy, form-filling and time-wasting they face. We are trying to rip all of that away through reforms and technology so that the police can focus on cutting crime and keeping people safe, which is what they go into the force to do and what we all expect them to do. That is what I want to see, for the people of Harlow and people across the whole of this country.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Lords Blunkett and Herbert have done a good job, but I would counsel against introducing a new police rank when most large organisations are stripping ranks out and trying to compress their hierarchies.

Does the Minister agree that the No. 1 thing that needs to be done is to improve the quality of top leadership? Their lordships made that point very clearly. In 1839, Captain Samuel Meredith of the Royal Navy was appointed as the first chief constable of Wiltshire. Will the Minister give some consideration to the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Sir Andrew Mitchell) about allowing people from the armed forces and other uniformed services to aspire to top ranks within our police force? It would break down groupthink, and I think it would add a great deal—middle-grade senior people within the armed forces, in particular, would have a great deal to offer.

Sarah Jones: On the right hon. Gentleman’s last point, there is a suggestion of targeted direct entry schemes at those levels, so there is an opportunity for that. The Government have not yet properly reviewed this idea, but there is a compelling case for the new rank of senior constable. The vast majority of our police—about 113,000—are constables. It is often said that there are people who naturally step into leadership roles and perhaps never become sergeants. They fulfil that function, but are not sergeants. That gap has been recognised in the work that has been done, and we should look at it. There are far fewer people in the top rungs, and then we have this big cohort where there is no role other than constable. That is worth looking at.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Dorset is about to get its fourth chief constable in just eight years. While I wish Amanda Pearson well in her retirement, those I spoke to who were involved in the recruitment panel said that the only potential candidates were the deputy chief constables or the assistant chief constables. In a place like Dorset, we tend to get someone who is either internal or about to retire. In almost every case, there is only one candidate. Given that situation, how will the Minister look to introduce fresh ideas and a culture free from nepotism, bias and toxicity in such a small cohort, so that we can get the leadership that we need?

Sarah Jones: The hon. Lady speaks to one of the problems that I highlighted earlier, which is that in the main, fewer than three applicants apply for a chief constable role, and many such positions end up being filled by an internal candidate. It cannot be right, as she said, that in a force such as hers that position will only be filled by somebody internal or thinking about retiring. It is a brilliant job—challenging, yes, but brilliant, definitely—and we should have many people aspiring to it. I again thank all those who have contributed to this piece of work, including many people who have given much of their time to help, to support and to think these things through. There is much in this work that will help us get to a point where, as we would all want, multiple people want to apply when a chief officer role comes up.

Civil Service Pensions

5.42 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I want to provide the House with an important update on the administration of the civil service pension scheme. Capita was awarded this contract in November 2023. It had two years of transition to prepare, and its senior leadership gave me explicit personal assurances ahead of the handover that they were fully capable of managing the workload and that they were ready for a successful transition. Indeed, the chief executive promised that technological improvements would create a flagship use case for the largest AI-enabled pension scheme in the country. It is clear that non-delivery of technology has been a fundamental part of Capita's inability to deliver. The reality is that it was completely unprepared and its system was overwhelmed, which resulted in a backlog that skyrocketed to a staggering 120,000 unresolved cases.

In response, I intervened immediately and established the Cabinet Office pensions recovery taskforce. Capita committed to two critical recovery targets: an end of April milestone to clear the inherited arrears, and an end of June milestone by which point it promised a complete return to standard contractually required levels. Capita missed its own April milestone. The end of June deadline has arrived, and I regret to inform the House that Capita has failed to meet that milestone, too. Seven months on from taking over operations, too many pension scheme members still face unacceptable delays after years of dedicated public service.

Since my last statement on this matter, thousands of quotations have been issued and pensions put into payment. Capita had committed to clearing the quotes backlog by today, but I am afraid that the reality remains very different. As of the end of June, there are still more than 6,700 quotations outstanding for past retirement dates, and more than 4,100 bereavement cases on which Capita could take action. These are the most harrowing stories, affecting devastated scheme members and grieving families. My officials have forcefully escalated those systemic back-office failures directly to Capita's senior leadership, demanding an immediate investigation and resolution.

I have to be frank with the House: what progress has been achieved is due to the significant additional capability provided by the Cabinet Office pensions recovery taskforce, and a team of more than 140 officials whom I have "surged" into the process. Let me also say that public money will not fund Capita's failings. We will recover every single penny of these surge costs directly from Capita, and I will not remove a single member of the team until the service is permanently fixed and fully restored.

Across core areas of pension payments, quotations and complaints, the operational reality remains deeply concerning, and although the speed of quote issuance has accelerated over the past month, it still leaves more than 6,700 outstanding quotes to be processed, as of the end of June, for past retirement dates.

Let me turn to the subject of parliamentary correspondence. The volume of MP complaints remains too high—there are more than 1,900 outstanding constituent cases. I understand that Capita resolved nearly 700 last week, but another 500 or so complaints

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

were raised, so this remains all too current an issue. When I last reported to the House, the figure stood at 1,500. The growth of the backlog is completely unacceptable. Capita has clearly failed to manage the correspondence effectively, to the extent that I have had to ask the pensions recovery taskforce to step in. Indeed, the situation has been so faltering that the Parliamentary Secretary at the Cabinet Office, my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Test (Satvir Kaur), has written to Mr Speaker about it.

Because of Capita's persistent failures, alongside a wider, completely unacceptable failure in its overall MP engagement, demonstrated—as was reported to me by Members from across the House—by a poorly co-ordinated MP drop-in session at the end of May, I had to intervene again. I ordered the pensions recovery taskforce to take direct operational control and establish virtual surgeries for MPs and caseworkers running every weekday. I hope that has provided at least a direct route for parliamentary offices to try to secure updates. Since I launched that initiative in May, we have delivered more than 250 virtual surgeries, supporting more than 150 Members from across the House.

Let me now turn to the steps that I am taking to protect scheme members. I have no doubt that all Members will agree with me that the service that Capita has provided has been dreadful. We need to take further robust measures. First, I will continue to apply the most stringent commercial levers. We are executing robust, continuous action with immediate financial consequences. We have already hit Capita's bottom line by withholding £9.9 million in payments, because the Government will only ever pay for what is successfully delivered.

I find this failure remarkable in the light of the personal assurances given to me by the chief executive ahead of the transfer. Those assurances have not been met. Core outputs are deficient, and Capita is failing even to make basic functionality work. I know that many Members are calling for the immediate termination of the contract and the insourcing of the service, but if I were to terminate the contract straightaway, that would clearly cause severe disruption to the payroll. I have to manage this so that the payroll is operated effectively; what I cannot do is create an immediate, catastrophic operational vacuum. I cannot replace a complex pension operation overnight. However, I have instructed my officials to bring together a broad range of stakeholders and experts to consider, in line with the Government's strategy, how scheme members can best be served by a long-term, durable delivery of the scheme. Let no one think that I or the Government are accepting the status quo.

This episode highlights the severe limitations of outsourcing the civil service pension scheme. I say openly to the House that if I could insource this operation today, I would do so. None the less, it is Government policy to insource, in line with our manifesto commitment to deliver

“the biggest wave of insourcing of public services in a generation”, and this pension scheme could be a prime candidate for insourcing in the future.

That future is being actively shaped by the Government's announcement on 17 June of a new public interest test that will end outsourcing by default. From April 2027,

all contracts over £1 million in value must be assessed for in-house viability before renewal, and Departments exceeding £100 million in annual spend must develop five-year insourcing strategies. This framework builds the exact long-term capability that we need, shifting our focus from short-term pricing to service quality and operational resilience. To ensure full accountability, we are executing our contractual right to deploy independent auditors immediately to conduct a technical review of systems, data integrity and compliance with statutory duties. We are also beginning the process to appoint a remedial adviser, at Capita's expense, to force rectification directly on the ground.

I am not ruling out further interventions, but we need to build the unvarnished evidence base that will serve as a strict prerequisite for further formal escalation, including potential litigation or step-in remedies, should performance fail to improve. In October, the House will receive a further update on the findings of the independent audit, the performance of the remedial adviser and the longer-term structural options being considered, including meeting our manifesto commitment by bringing the scheme in-house.

Let me finish by saying this. Public servants who dedicated their working lives to this country deserve absolute financial security and unwavering dignity in retirement, not corporate failure, empty promises and severe administrative failure. I hope the House will see the uncompromising line in the sand that I am drawing today. I will continue to apply commercial pressure and ensure full accountability, and we will find a way forward that delivers for the people who deliver for this country. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

5.51 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I thank the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Nobody in this House should be in any doubt about the anxiety and hardship being felt by retired public servants and the grieving families left stranded by this operational collapse. We are talking about more than 6,700 outstanding pension quotations and more than 4,100 unresolved bereavement cases. These are not mere statistics; they represent vulnerable individuals who have been left facing severe financial distress.

Let us be completely clear about where responsibility for this ongoing execution failure lies. The Minister can look backwards to November 2023 all he likes, but the critical transition phase, the data quality integration and the system go-live occurred on this Government's watch and, more specifically, on his watch. The timeline of unheeded warnings is damning. Throughout 2025, both the National Audit Office and the Public Accounts Committee explicitly flagged that Capita was missing critical transition milestones and IT delivery targets, yet despite these clear red flags, the Cabinet Office chose to override the warnings, accepted flawed assurances and pressed ahead with the December go-live. The contract management failure belongs entirely to those on the Government Front Bench.

Alarming, despite the establishment of the Minister's flagship pensions recovery taskforce, the situation is deteriorating in key areas. The Minister has just admitted that the backlog of MP complaints has grown significantly

under his watch, going from 1,500 to more than 1,900 outstanding constituent cases since the end of April—barely nine weeks ago—and it is getting worse. Worse still, instead of focusing purely on immediate operational rectification, the Minister is using this crisis as an ideological springboard to flip to default insourcing. I am agnostic on whether the scheme is provided in-house or externally, but there is little in the Government's record to suggest that they are capable of running this scheme any less incompetently than the current operators. Retired civil servants do not need a lecture on procurement ideology; they need their pensions sorted today.

The Minister must answer four specific questions. First, given that the Public Accounts Committee explicitly warned of the Capita IT system's unreadiness last October, what independent technical verification did the Cabinet Office conduct before Ministers allowed the December go-live to proceed?

Secondly, the Minister noted that the 140-strong Government surge team are costing significant resource. Although he intends to recover the costs from the £9.9 million withheld from Capita, will he guarantee that any remaining funds will be legally diverted into an immediate compensation scheme for those affected and for grieving families who have suffered real financial detriment?

Thirdly, the Minister expressed deep frustration at Capita's wider public sector footprint. The Procurement Act 2023 is fully active, and it established a centralised debarment list specifically to stop failing legacy suppliers winning further public work. Will the Minister commit at the Dispatch Box to formally referring Capita to the Debarment Review Service for investigation, or will he allow it to continue bidding for other contracts while he waits until 2027 to implement his insourcing reviews? If the threshold is not met in this case, where will the Minister consider it appropriate to use the powers that he has?

Finally, given the Minister's conclusion that Capita has always been an unsuitable operator of the scheme, can he tell the House why the current Government chose to award Capita the new Department for Work and Pensions contract—not in 2023, but this February?

Public servants who have dedicated their working lives to this country deserve financial security and dignity. They have been let down by corporate failure, as the Minister says, but they are also being let down by this Government's failure to manage the contract when it matters the most. It is time for the Minister to stop blaming the past, stop pitching future ideological tests, and finally fix the operational reality on the ground.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am quite astonished by the shadow Minister's contribution. The House should be in no doubt that the previous Government signed a 10-year contract in November 2023. That is the situation we were left with, and I have been grappling with it throughout my time in office. The idea that I have put ideology above operational urgency is utter and total nonsense. I have intervened strongly at every single opportunity, and I have held Capita to account on its milestones time and again, to the tune of £9.9 million, in a way that the previous Government never did.

I have a lot more sympathy with the shadow Minister on his point about compensation. We have introduced a process to pay interest in respect of pensions paid by

Capita from 1 December 2025, whereby full benefits are paid more than one month after retirement. The interest rate applied will be based on the Bank of England base rate plus 1% for the period of the delay between retirement and payment. That information has formally been published on a civil service pension website, and members will have the opportunity to ask for other losses to be covered as part of the complaints process. As for the rest of the shadow Minister's comments, I think he will struggle to find anyone who has been as robust as I have been in holding Capita to account.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Public Accounts Committee and Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown, its Chair—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. We refer to colleagues not by their names, but by their constituencies. You have already named the Chair of that Committee, so dive into the question.

Mr Betts: I will dive very deeply into the question, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Chair of the Committee sends his apologies for his absence; he is presently in a Committee meeting. We have looked at this situation on a number of occasions, and we will have a joint session with the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee and the Minister on Wednesday. The individual cases that we have heard are absolutely appalling, and we will relate them to Capita and the Minister. We have heard from two widows who have been waiting since last year to get their pensions sorted out, which is not acceptable.

I have two issues for the Minister to reflect upon. When the previous Government let the contract, we were in a situation in which procurement could not properly take account of the past record of companies, and I understand that the Government have now changed that. Looking at Capita's past record on both the teachers' pension scheme and the civil service pension scheme, we see that it has not run one scheme properly. That should have been taken into account before the contract was let.

The other issue, and this is where the Opposition spokesperson did say something relevant, is that this scheme was falling apart last year. The National Audit Office looked at it, and clearly it was going wrong then. So I ask the Minister: did he start to look at alternatives then and did he at that point start to put together in-house provision that could eventually take over?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that these cases are harrowing. He is also right to say that there were huge issues—I am sure we will cover this on Wednesday—with MyCSP, the previous provider. As I have said, the previous Government decided to sign this contract in November 2023. That is not, of course, to say that I was just seeking specific reassurances last autumn; we were also looking at contingencies. I am sure that he, and indeed the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), will cover that in the two Committees' joint evidence session on Wednesday.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. The failure of Capita to meet the 30 June deadline is deeply

[Lisa Smart]

disappointing, but, sadly, not surprising. Behind it sit 1.7 million current and former civil servants who simply want peace of mind that the pension they have earned through decades of public service will be handled competently, fairly and with dignity. Capita's repeated failures are causing distress and uncertainty for people who deserve better, including several of my constituents, such as Sue from Romiley, Tracy from Offerton and Christopher from Marple.

The Public Accounts Committee did indeed warn that Capita risked not being ready to take over full administration back in December, and it raised serious concerns about weak contract management and poor oversight. Those warnings have now come to fruition as thousands of retired civil servants have experienced delays or complete failures in pension payments since Capita took over. How will the Government restore confidence for the 1 million-plus current and former civil servants who simply want reassurance that their pensions will be administered competently? What assessment has been made of the systemic failures in the administration of this scheme, and what lessons have been learned for future contracts of this kind? How can the Minister ensure that this failure is given sufficient weight should Capita have the brass neck to bid for any future Government contracts in this are or wholly unrelated ones?

The Minister has rightly called the thousands of unresolved bereavement cases harrowing. These grieving families are being denied closure. Will he commit today to ordering Capita to prioritise all bereavement cases as a matter of particular urgency, and will he guarantee that this specific backlog will be zero by a certain date?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To take the hon. Lady's final point first, yes, bereavement cases are being prioritised. Capita's current working assumption is that the remaining backlog of over 6,700 quotations for past retirement dates and the 4,100 actionable bereavement cases will be systemically cleared through the rest of July and August, and I hope this House will hold it to that timetable.

More broadly, the hon. Lady is absolutely right about learning the lessons from this situation and robustly holding Capita to account. That is why, as the House will be aware, I took the decision to end, for example, its contract for the Royal Mail pension scheme. The House can be assured that I will not hesitate to take robust action.

On the hon. Lady's other point, which I think is a central one, I am always very conscious—contrary to what the shadow Minister says—of the operational position week to week in order to ensure that I am still driving the improvement of this pension scheme to the level it should be at.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): This is a real mess, and I am pleased the Minister has acknowledged that, but there are a few practical things that could be delivered. There is no MP hotline, and there is a long and complicated process for MPs and their staff to go through the other hotline. Could that perhaps be resolved, because it would make things a lot quicker? When emails are sent, the same AI-generated generic responses are sent back repeatedly,

which means that no progress is made. The to-ing and fro-ing is just wasting time. There could be clearer guidance about what MPs can pass on to our constituents who have challenges. Finally, postal delays are a real issue in my constituency and others, particularly in London—I see that Members from around the country are nodding—so could there be more use of email to, at the very least, get out the statement, even if there is eventually paperwork to be signed? Most organisations now manage to do paperwork via email, so could Capita not sort that out?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am more than happy to take on board what my hon. Friend has said about streamlining MPs' interaction with the service. The Parliamentary Secretary has passed on many of these points directly to Capita, and indeed has raised its behaviour directly with the Speaker's Office. More broadly, I am more than willing to look at what my hon. Friend has said.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I thank the Minister for his statement and, through him, his officials, and particularly the surge team, who are trying to clear up this mess of Capita's creation.

I am sure the Minister will share my bemusement at Capita's stance. It seems to have no emotional intelligence whatsoever in relation to understanding the very demonstrable harm that is being done to constituents the length and breadth of this country. It does seem cognisant that His Majesty's Government happen to be customer No. 1 as far as Capita's balance sheet is concerned. Is it unwilling or unable to face into the situation as it currently presents itself, and really put its shoulder to the wheel and sort this out, or does he fear it has just given this up as a bad job, is just waiting for the contract to be taken from it and will just soft-pedal between now and when that time comes?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As ever, the Chair of the Public Administration and Constitutional Affairs Committee makes very sensible points. I make it very clear from this Dispatch Box that Capita certainly should not in any sense be soft-peddalling. It has specific contractual duties to which I have been holding it and to which I will continue to hold it. Aside from the commercial and money aspect of this, hugely important though that obviously is for public money, he is right to highlight the emotional impact. These people—the Liberal Democrat spokesperson talked about bereavement—are in a very vulnerable position in their lives and are seeking to access the money that they themselves paid in.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. To help more Members get in, questions need to be short and limited to just one question.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): Like other Members across the House, I have constituents who have faced unacceptably long delays, including a terminally ill lady who has been left waiting for months; a man in severe financial hardship who was due his first payment in December 2025, but, shockingly, is being forced to wait until 2027; and a lady, whose brother died in service in 2024, who is unable to settle his estate due to the delay.

The Minister has talked about the missed deadlines, yet in February Capita was awarded more contracts across four Departments. Frankly, it is shocking that the Government are unable to pay the pensions of their own civil servants, who have spent their lives serving the public. When will the Government finally take the civil service pension scheme back in-house rather than rewarding failure? Will he assure the House that no further Government contracts will be awarded to Capita?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: First, in line with the Government's policy of looking across contracts of high value, as I set out in my statement, I think this contract is a prime candidate for outsourcing. Indeed, this Government have introduced the public interest test, which I hope will most certainly give a different dimension to procurement and a different approach to insourcing, in line with the manifesto commitment on which my hon. Friend and I campaigned.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): One of my constituents, Caroline from Rickmansworth, has been waiting over six months to receive the documentation required to retire. Capita publicly stated that all outstanding retirement quotes would be issued by the end of June 2026. However, this deadline has passed and Caroline is still waiting. What advice can the Minister offer Caroline about what she should do to receive this essential documentation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very sorry to hear about Caroline's case. If the hon. Member is willing to write to me directly with the details, the Parliamentary Secretary will gladly look into that case.

Catherine McKinnell (Newcastle upon Tyne North) (Lab): The family of a terminally ill constituent contacted me in desperation last month after trying to resolve the pension issues of their family member since January. She died yesterday, with her pension still unresolved. Can the Minister be more specific for that family about what will be done to resolve this issue? It is too late for my constituent, but her family have been through enough.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very sorry to hear about my hon. Friend's constituent; it is a tragedy that she passed away only yesterday. I would be glad if she wrote to me about that particular case. The Parliamentary Secretary will look into it personally, because of the nature of what has happened. For that family, and for every other family with an interest in this scheme, we absolutely must restore the level of service that they rightly expect.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): Sadly, it is not just Capita that is missing deadlines; it is the Government, too. I raised a constituent's case in ministerial correspondence in mid-February and received a response from the Parliamentary Secretary only on 30 June, four-and-a-half months later. My constituents want a swift solution. Given that the April deadline has been missed and the June deadline has been missed, what confidence can they or this House have that the August deadline will be hit?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the right hon. Gentleman's first point, we will look specifically at why that was the case. It should not have taken four-and-a-half months for him to receive a reply. The Parliamentary Secretary

and I will look at the correspondence to see why that has happened. Secondly, on his point about confidence in the new July and August deadlines, what is critical—this is specifically why I am now looking at a range of options—is that we must be in a position where the service is being delivered properly.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. New cases are still coming into my office, with tales of failure to get through on the telephone or a lack of online access. They remain common, but most common is the financial distress. My case team keep hearing about people who are about to lose their house. The interim interest-free loans made available in January were welcome, but for those who are still awaiting settlements, will the Government consider further payments?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes. First of all, the interest-free loans introduced earlier in the year are important, but I know they are not suitable or the choice for every beneficiary under the scheme. Secondly, as I indicated in my answer to the shadow Minister a moment ago, compensation is also very important. I reiterate to the House that I have surged significant resources into this scheme, but I am absolutely determined that it will not be the taxpayer who picks up the bill.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I welcome the statement, and whenever we have come to the Government, they have reacted quickly. Capita appeared to be moving quickly, but this week a woman I have been representing since March, and who has been pursuing Capita for more than a year over her husband's death in service benefits, told me this week that—this is a doozy—it is refusing to accept a Scottish extract of divorce and is demanding that she get an decree absolute, according to the English and Welsh courts. She is prepared to do that, but it would take so long that it will take her past the deadline after which her children will have to pay tax on the death in service benefits. Can the Government give her some reassurance that she will not be pursued for tax, and that something will be done to tell Capita that a Scottish extract of divorce is actually valid?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Well, quite. I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who I believe has had a few virtual surgeries. She has been in contact with my office and has a number of ongoing cases—I counted seven before I came in to deliver the statement. I think she has met the Parliamentary Secretary previously, but the Parliamentary Secretary would be more than willing to meet her again on this issue and to highlight to Capita the particular issue around Scottish divorce law.

Mary Kelly Foy (City of Durham) (Lab): I have heard from dozens of my constituents across the City of Durham who have been impacted by either delayed or missing pension payments, and the number grows every day. A recent disturbing case centres around a chap who, sadly, has been diagnosed with early-onset Alzheimer's at just 46 years old. Ill health retirees should never be left without the vital support they need at the most difficult moment of their lives. Will the Minister please reassure the House that Capita will clear the existing

[Mary Kelly Foy]

backlog as a matter of urgency, prioritising those with ill health, bereaved families and those facing financial hardship?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, it should absolutely be prioritising bereavement cases and people in the position my hon. Friend's constituent finds himself in at the age of just 46. As I have said, Capita has set out the working assumption of clearing the backlog in July and August. She can rest assured that it will be held robustly to that.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I currently have 11 unresolved cases in my constituency and the numbers are going up. My constituents deserve certainty about these unacceptable delays. During Cabinet Office questions on 25 June, I raised these failures with the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Southampton Test (Satvir Kaur), who assured the House that “all...levers” were being used to ensure that Capita met its end of June deadline. Can the Minister tell us what those levers were, given the fact that they appear to be attached to nothing—Capita has still failed to meet that deadline—and what levers he will pull when the August deadline is, inevitably, not met either?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman will be aware from my statement that £9.9 million has been withheld from Capita. I will continue, where milestones are—[*Interruption.*] He makes a valid point; that is precisely why I am now looking at a range of options, while continuing to prioritise operational performance in the short term. He is right that this is where we have been driven to under this contract—to look at this range of options. We have had deadlines that, I am afraid, have repeatedly not been met.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): I am sure it will come as no surprise to anyone in this House that the deadline was missed today, on top of the previous deadlines. I do not think that anyone has faith in the ability of Capita to deliver. In my constituency and across Blackpool, the Fylde coast and in the neighbouring constituency of Blackpool North and Fleetwood, we see such cases come to our surgeries week after week. Will the Minister outline when, and how quickly, the Government can bring this provision back in-house to ensure we have a transition? Enough is enough. Too many of our constituents—in my constituency and across the country—are suffering and this issue needs to be resolved.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Looking forward, the Government have already announced their new public interest test to end outsourcing by default. From April next year, all contracts over £1 million have to be assessed for in-house viability before renewal. Departments exceeding £100 million in annual spend must also develop five-year insourcing strategies. We are moving swiftly to deliver our manifesto commitment.

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): My constituents Scott and Pamela McBride from Peterhead are victims of this shambolic bûrach.

They retired in April 2020 and are still waiting on a resolution. They came to me in February. I will keep it simple: if I write to the Minister with the details, can his surge team help me with a surgery appointment to sort this out?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The simple answer is yes, and I am sorry to hear about what has happened with Scott and Pamela.

Lola McEvoy (Darlington) (Lab): I recently met a woman who had spent her career fighting fraud for the Department for Work and Pensions. If she had behaved in the way that this company is behaving around her pension, she would have been fired on the spot. It is one rule for ordinary working people and another for these outsourced companies, which behave so terribly on the taxpayers' money. In Darlington, we have a Capita base with over 1,000 employees. Capita recently announced that it could no longer afford to pay the real living wage. How much profit is it making on this £200 million contract that it is failing to deliver?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I have not hesitated to use commercial levers to withhold millions of pounds from Capita when it has not delivered the performance it should have. My hon. Friend puts her finger on a very important point: it is for Capita to have a sense of self-awareness about its own conduct and the consequence for a lot of very vulnerable people.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): Like all of us, several constituents have raised heartbreaking issues with me—they are getting into real financial duress. My constituents viewing our proceedings today will be thinking, “Well, what's going to change?” Will the Minister consider compensating people from Capita's profits, so that all missed payments are given to people who are in financial difficulty? Everybody should get what they should have got on the date they should have got it, straight out of Capita's profits.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On the principle of compensation, the right hon. Gentleman has a valid point. I set out some of the arrangements that are already in place, particularly in relation to interest where money should have been paid that was not paid on time. There is a second principle here, which is that the taxpayers of the United Kingdom will not pay for Capita's failure.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I declare a non-pecuniary interest as the chair of the Public and Commercial Services Union parliamentary group. I take it as read that, when the Minister refers to the stakeholder group, it will include PCS, as the trade union. I also take it as read from the tenor of the questions so far that insourcing will be top of the agenda for that review. I ask him, in all rationality: how is it that Capita has been awarded a £320 million contract to administer the pay of 250,000 civil servants?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: To my right hon. Friend's first point: yes, of course, the stakeholder group includes PCS. His question on Capita being awarded the contract in the first place is a valid one. It is fair to say that the previous pension provider was certainly not providing a sufficient level of performance, but, as he will have

heard in my answer to the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), the contract was signed in November 2023; we inherited a long-term contract and I have been trying to deal with the issue since.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): One of my hard-working caseworkers attended one of the virtual surgeries that have been mentioned, but every single update they received was wrong. Lump sums, quotes, paperwork and complaint responses were all said to have been sent out, yet not one case had actually moved. My constituents feel lied to and my staff feel disrespected. Will the Minister tell the House what further action will be taken to hold Capita to account for those false assurances?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Quite simply, that should not be happening. If the hon. Lady is willing to write to me with precisely the information that was given, and what the correct information was, the Parliamentary Secretary will look into it.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for coming to the House to give this important update. To be honest, I think that many of our constituents will be watching with a lot of alarm, concern, anger and frustration, thinking, “How will this situation change?” A constituent of mine wanted me to raise his case. He said:

“I turn to you as a last resort for help in a moment of personal crisis and right to family life. For the past six months I have been trying to get the civil service pension scheme to issue me with a letter confirming my annual and monthly pension entitlement...I am a 70-year-old retiree with medical conditions. I reside 50% of year in Brazil...with the remainder of the time spent in the UK where I am a UK taxpayer. I am a retired member of the FCDO having served almost 38 years in various diplomatic roles.”

This is not a way to treat hard-working members of staff who have given so much of their time to our Government. Can the Minister assure me that Capita will be held accountable for the failure, and will he say that heads should roll?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the situation has been totally and utterly unacceptable. Capita has been and will be robustly held to account. That is why I have appointed an audit to look at the future of the scheme, as well as the remedial adviser—who is being appointed at Capita’s expense—to force rectification directly on the ground. There are two things too look at here: the immediate operational issues, and the future of the scheme.

Blake Stephenson (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Capita’s failures have caused significant hardship to retiring civil servants across the country. The Minister is right that the immediate priority should be to resolve the hardship caused to our constituents. Looking forward, it is also important that the Government—and I mean all Governments, not just this one—get much better at managing and overseeing third-party contracts, to prevent this and similar issues from happening in the future. Time and again on the Public Accounts Committee, we assess departmental oversight of third-party contracts; the commercial management is, frankly, not good enough. Will the Minister outline what the Cabinet Office is doing to improve commercial management throughout the whole of Government?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s constructive tone. The Government have introduced the new public interest test to end outsourcing by default, which will mean that the reassessment will happen from the start of next year. It is important, as the hon. Gentleman fairly concedes, that we need to look back over a few years across different Governments.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The questions are far too long. Too many colleagues will be disappointed unless questions are kept short. I call Kim Johnson to show us how it is done.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I really welcome the Minister’s statement, and his acknowledgment that Capita has failed—and failed miserably, not for the first time—1.7 million civil servants, including some in my constituency. I would like to ask him: what due diligence was undertaken, and how much profit is Capita making when it is not paying the living wage? Should you now consider sanctioning the company more than the £9.9 million, and will you please work with unions to—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Gosh—a long question and the hon. Member is saying “you”; it is not my responsibility. Minister, over to you.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, we will continue to work with trade unions and other stakeholders. Yes, it is correct that £9.9 million in milestone payments has been withheld, but my hon. Friend can rest assured that I will not hesitate to continue to use all commercial levers if there is poor performance.

Danny Kruger (East Wiltshire) (Reform): I welcome the statement. I want to follow on from the question from the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Blake Stephenson). Yes, Ministers must take responsibility for the contracts, but ultimately Whitehall fails to deliver value for money on behalf of the public. It is not enough to say that the Government plan to insource more contracts—they cannot insource everything. What are the Government doing to ensure that Whitehall gets better value for money when it does procurement and project management?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I know that the hon. Gentleman has looked carefully at a number of these things. The point of the public interest test is to end outsourcing by default, but he is right that there is an additional cross-governmental issue: the management of contracts. That is something that I have certainly been thinking about looking at in the Cabinet Office, and the hon. Gentleman is correct to say that we need to look at it across the board.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): Angela, from Great Barr, worked for the civil service for 42 years. She was looking forward to retirement but it became a nightmare when, despite her long and loyal service, she could not get her pension from Capita for six long months, causing her huge distress. Will the Minister commit to holding Capita to account every single day, and will he make sure that we remember this if the company ever applies for public contracts again?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am sorry to hear about the experience of my hon. Friend’s constituent; she can be assured that we will continue absolutely to hold Capita robustly to account every day.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The Minister set out for the House the robust accountability measures that he has in place. I appreciate that it is difficult for him to ensure that he gets the response he wants from Capita, but can he please ensure that when constituents of mine, like Keith Wyvill, contact their former employer, the Cabinet Office, they are not simply given the brush-off and told to raise the issue with Capita, but at least have set out for them the actions that the Government are taking?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, and I am very sorry to hear about what has happened to Keith. The hon. Member will know about the pensions recovery taskforce, but if he can specifically tell me the date and what exactly happened to Keith, I would be more than happy to look into the matter.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): My constituent logged into the pension portal this morning and it told him that he had only been employed by the civil service for one year, not the 35 that he had been employed for. He was told this by an agency that did not even exist when he started working for the civil service, and that still cannot tell him what his annual pension value is. That is after a software upgrade at the weekend, by the way, so God knows what it was like before then. This shows just what a shambles the system is. I welcome what the Minister said about the public interest test, but do we not also need to make a competence test a key part of that, so that these companies that are serial offenders do not get near public contracts again?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very sorry to hear about what has happened to my hon. Friend's constituent. He is right: competence and delivery are absolutely central under these third-party contracts. We need to hold to account every person who has been awarded the contracts to ensure that they are delivering for the public to the standard they are expected to.

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): My constituent Anita was widowed suddenly in December 2025, and Capita has failed to calculate her lump sum and pension payments. She is living in desperate hardship; she has exhausted all her credit cards and there are no friends and family left who can support her. She has not even been able to scatter her husband's ashes. The Minister has insisted that bereavement cases are prioritised, but the evidence suggests otherwise. What is the Minister doing now to ensure that people like Anita are not living in hardship? They need urgent action.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am very sorry to hear about the hon. Lady's constituent. First, if her case is not being prioritised, we would want to see it individually so that we can take it up. Secondly, I am not sure whether her constituent has applied for a hardship loan, but that is the type of situation that I introduced the loan for earlier in the year. If the hon. Lady could write to the Cabinet Office with the details of the case, we could also look at eligibility, if a hardship loan was something her constituent wanted to look into.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and I appreciate all the Government's work to resolve this inherited issue.

However, the system is inadequate, and it is causing serious problems for many in my constituency, which has a higher than average number of outstanding cases. Capita's communication is terrible; my constituents are left in the dark, and vital documents and quotes are repeatedly lost—either that, or it is a deliberate delay tactic. Capita builds up expectations, sets deadlines and, time and again, fails to deliver. When does the Minister envisage that all my constituents will finally get their pensions paid?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to all the public servants in my hon. Friend's constituency and indeed across the country, who frankly deserve better. On past retirement quotations and past retirement dates, and on the actionable bereavement cases, as I indicated a moment ago, Capita's working assumption is that they will be cleared during the rest of this month and next month. Collectively we must hold them to account for that.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): One of my constituents submitted a request for their pension just over a year before their proposed retirement date, but is still waiting—sadly, it is little wonder that the June date has been missed. My constituents will thank the Minister for explaining the significant resource that the Government have allocated to eradicating this backlog, but, in advance of the August deadline, what additional resource in terms of staffing or funding is Capita allocating to the task?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. I stand ready to continue with the surge resource; I have very frequent updates on that, and I give consideration to what additional resource might be required from me. However, he is absolutely right that we must not neglect the resource or prioritisation that Capita itself is giving to this. It is hugely important that it sticks to its word.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Paul and Susan Robinson each worked for the Health and Safety Executive for more than 40 years. They have not been able to plan for their retirement since finishing work last year; they have been living off their savings and the small loan that they have had. They are typical of the dozens of constituents who have contacted me. The Minister has talked quite rightly of his anger at the missed deadlines. How can he give us confidence that we will not be back here again in a few months' time with another deadline having been missed?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is precisely because of that concern that I am looking to come back to the House in very short order to look at a range of options for this matter.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): I declare an interest as a former civil servant and a future civil service pensioner. Many of my constituents are angry about this situation, like Gary, who waited more than six months and has now received a pension that is wrong, or the widower who has not received anything yet. I am glad that the Minister is angry, but let me ask him this: if a senior civil servant had been responsible for this scheme, would he not have sacked them? What is he doing to ensure that the chief executive, who has told him so many lies, loses their job?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his many years of service to the public and pay tribute to him for his work before entering the House. On holding people to account, he can rest assured that I have been doing just that since last autumn and through this year, and that I am doing it financially with Capita as well.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): A constituent of mine who served for 44 years in the civil service contacted me in May and said that, despite assurances given to Ministers that call wait times were down to a couple of minutes, she had waited that day for an hour and 40 minutes before giving up. Does the Paymaster General agree that civil servants who have served our country for decades are entitled to a far better standard of service than the woeful one Capita is providing?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I also must declare an interest, as my husband is a civil servant and is currently paying into a pension. Does the Minister agree that this is one of the best examples we have of the social contract falling apart? People who have literally worked for the state are now unable to be paid by the state. I really welcome your statement about insourcing. You have said that it is important that the taxpayer not have to foot the bill—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I have not said anything. End your question quickly.

Sorcha Eastwood: There has been a cost to the taxpayer in people's lives. What can you do to restore confidence in the system?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. What can I do to restore confidence, or what can the Minister do? You mean the Minister?

Sorcha Eastwood *indicated assent.*

Madam Deputy Speaker: Good.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to talk about the cost in people's lives; considering what has happened when people are at their most vulnerable, it clearly goes beyond the monetary. We absolutely have to restore a contractual level of service as a priority and then, as I say, look at a range of options in the medium term.

Olivia Blake (Sheffield Hallam) (Lab): Mr Evans applied for early release of his civil service pension on health grounds because of terminal illness in November 2025, but sadly passed away this May. His case is still not resolved, despite repeated urgent representations from my office. Capita has failed inexcusably. What actions can be taken to ensure that Mr Evans's family receives the pension and payments owed without further delay, and to hold Capita to account? Will interest be paid on back payments?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On compensation, there is provision around interest. I would be very grateful if my hon. Friend could write to me about that specific case, and we will look into it.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I am pleased to hear the Government accept that part of the issue here is successive Governments' obsession with outsourcing by default. I ask the Minister for some reassurance that, when assessing the merits of insourcing this particular contract, they will not do so in isolation, but will also take into account the wider benefits of building state capacity so that the Government are able to execute their core functions with confidence.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, absolutely. That is why it is so important for the public interest test that we look at the different contracts right across Government. I agree.

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): I thank the Minister for this statement. Time and again, our constituents have been failed by outsourced companies; it is not just Capita, and it is not just Government services. Following on from an earlier question, what else will the Minister do to ensure that the other parts of the public sector—Government agencies, local government and so on—can learn from what he is now putting in place in future on outsourced contracts?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why the introduction of the public interest test to end outsourcing by default is so important for systemic change.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): My team are dealing with 18 civil service pension scheme cases. One of them involves Frosoulla, from Glastonbury, who took partial retirement earlier this year to care for her 92-year-old mother. She has made more than 15 calls to Capita and each time been reassured that her case has been prioritised—but she still has not had any correspondence at all, and she has no pension to draw on. After years of public service, she deserves better. How does the Minister intend to restore confidence for people like Frosoulla, who simply want access to the money that they have worked hard to earn?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The only way to restore confidence is quite simply to get this service to the level it should be at—to the level that her constituent deserves.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I have been contacted about this issue by 14 constituents and have raised their cases. Only three of them have been resolved; the unresolved ones include bereavement cases, which we were told would be prioritised. I went to the drop-in for MPs, but I sat there for 40 minutes and then left because nothing had happened. It beggars belief that this company has ridden roughshod over people who have been public servants for years. Can the Minister say what will it take for us to take the contract off Capita?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the drop-in for MPs. Again, that is why I felt I had to intervene directly, because even that was causing a problem. On his second point, he can rest assured that wherever contractual performance falls

[Nick Thomas-Symonds]

below the level required, I will take action—and I have. As I say, in the context of our policy on insourcing, we are also looking at this contract being a prime candidate.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): My constituent Jamie Dalgleish served 25 years in the submarine service, followed by 23 years in the Ministry of Defence police. He retired last year, but is still waiting for his monthly pension to start. Such is his financial hardship that at 65 years of age, Jamie has now taken a civilian job back with the MOD police, cleaning out the dogs' kennels for minimum wage. He has been failed by Capita. Will the Minister take Jamie's case directly to Capita and find a speedy resolution to this shocking injustice?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am more than happy to do that for the hon. Gentleman's constituent Jamie. That is totally unacceptable.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): My constituents have been treated appallingly by Capita. Some of them have died waiting for their pension—the inevitable consequences of outsourcing contracts on the cheap. I welcome the Government's decision to hold Capita to account at last. Will the Minister ensure that no more Government contracts will be awarded to Capita and explain why, given its dreadful performance, anyone thought it was sensible to award it the Synergy contract?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend has spoken powerfully on many occasions about how her constituents have been affected by this issue; I know she has many cases. The introduction last month of the public interest test, which will end outsourcing by default, will make such a difference.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Aberdare) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and the work he is doing to bring this issue to a resolution. A growing number of my constituents are affected. The response from Capita has been appalling, and correspondence is taking weeks or indeed months to get through. Just today, at one of the surgeries that the Minister has set up, Capita failed to provide my caseworker with an update on an individual case, despite us giving more than a week's notice of the background. The response from Capita continues to be shockingly poor. Can the Minister ensure specifically that those surgeries are fit for purpose? At the moment, they are not delivering.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, I am certainly happy to do that. We now have taskforce members on each one, but if Members are not getting the information that they require, I ask them please to escalate it to me.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): One of my nine remaining open cases is Dr Carol Furlong, who lost her husband in 2015. She was told in October, after a long battle, that nearly £15,000 would be paid within 28 days. She still has not received a penny. Can the Minister please assure the House that Capita has sufficient resources in place to deal urgently with cases causing financial hardship, and will he confirm that claims involving bereavements will still be treated as a priority?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes; they should be being prioritised. I can assure my hon. Friend that I will continue with the surge resourcing until I am satisfied that the contractual standard can be met—it the moment, I am not.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): My constituent Carol Campbell is a marine coastguard team leader in Stornoway. Civil servants like her do not just serve the public—they save the public. The June deadline has come and gone, and all she sees is a shambles. I know Carol; she has given a lifetime of service. She tells me, "At 63, I am loath to continue working through another Hebridean winter doing 12-hour dayshifts and nightshifts, but currently I don't feel I have any alternative." What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that Capita and its chief executive are held to account for failing these lifesavers?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I am grateful to Carol for her service. She can be assured that I will robustly continue to hold Capita to account. I do not know whether, in her particular circumstances, a hardship loan would have been appropriate, but if my hon. Friend writes to me with the details of Carol's case, I will be more than happy to look into it.

Tom Rutland (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): Too many of my constituents are seeing delays to receiving their civil service pensions because of Capita's failures. In some cases, it is causing serious hardship, and I am doing all I can to assist people to access their hard-earned pensions. Will the Minister outline what steps he is taking to ensure that correspondence from Members in this place, advocating for their constituents, is dealt with quickly by Capita?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend puts his finger on the issue. That is why the Parliamentary Secretary escalated this problem to Mr Speaker, so serious was it. My hon. Friend can be assured that we will continue to hold Capita robustly to account on that.

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. He may recall that in a Westminster Hall debate on 4 February many of us raised cases of affected constituents. I spoke about four Dartford residents who were unable to access their civil service pensions. Two of those cases remain completely unresolved, and one has been only recently resolved. Does the Minister agree that our civil service pensioners deserve much better than this and that, of the tough measures he has announced today—I thank him for those—taking the contract away from Capita must be firmly on the table?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Absolutely. Public servants, who are represented in the Chamber by Members across the House, deserve so much better. My hon. Friend can be assured that the independent audit will be looking at a range of options.

Danny Beales (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Several of my constituents have been failed by Capita; with the support of my team, they have been battling to get the pensions that they are owed and deserve. Frustratingly, for some the June milestone has come and gone. Just last Friday I met Barbara, whose husband

passed away in January. On top of that grief and sorrow, she is still battling to get her late husband's pension. She has been asked by Capita for the same documents over and over again. Does the Minister agree that that is completely unacceptable, and can he assure me and the rest of the House that every single option is still on the table, including bringing the contract back in-house?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is right that that situation is totally unacceptable. People should not have to battle in that way at vulnerable moments in their life. He can be assured that we will look at every method to ensure that people get the level of service that they deserve.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Can I place on record my thanks to the pensions recovery taskforce that the Minister deployed? They have been working with my team in my constituency to resolve at least one of my constituents' cases, so I am grateful for that. I am now being contacted by civil servants who are due to retire but are really worried that they will be swept up in this too. What reassurances can he give them?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is a good question. First, we will continue to prioritise operational delivery day to day, so people who are to retire in the very near future have that reassurance. Secondly, they can be assured that we are looking in the medium term at the best, most effective way to have a proper service level.

NATIONAL SECURITY (STATE THREATS) BILL (ALLOCATION OF TIME) (NO. 2)

Ordered,

That the Order of 17 June 2026 (National Security (State Threats) Bill: Allocation of Time) be varied as follows: in paragraph (8)(b) (consideration of Lords Amendments), for "one hour" substitute "two hours".—(*Dame Angela Eagle.*)

National Security (State Threats) Bill

Consideration of Lords amendments

[Relevant documents: Correspondence between the Joint Committee on Human Rights and the Minister of State for the Home Office, on the National Security (State Threats) Bill, reported to the House on 1 July and 17 June.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I can inform the House that nothing in the Lords amendments engages Commons financial privilege.

Clause 2

OFFENCES RELATING TO DESIGNATED BODIES

6.47 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dame Angela Eagle): I beg to move, That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

Madam Deputy Speaker: With this it will be convenient to discuss Lords amendments 2 to 6.

Dame Angela Eagle: The first duty of any Government is and will forever be to secure this country and keep all its inhabitants safe. It is a mission that has challenged us relentlessly, but it has grown and evolved in recent years. The threat posed by foreign powers will be known by all here: physical threats against individuals and property; theft of trade secrets; attempts to interfere in and influence our democracy; and cyber-attacks targeting both the state and the private sector that disrupt critical infrastructure and compromise sensitive data.

As the House has heard many times before, the source of those threats has come predominantly, though not exclusively, from three countries: Russia, China and Iran. The threats from each present differently, but those threats are very real, and they are evolving. The Bill before us will strengthen the Government's ability to disrupt hostile intelligence services and their proxies by adapting counter-terrorism tools to tackle state-based security threats to the UK. In developing this legislation, we have worked closely with the police, security and the intelligence agencies. The Bill gives our operational partners the powers that they need, and it does so in a way that reflects the differences between state and non-state actors. As Jonathan Hall himself has said, this Bill "does the job".

As the Bill progressed through its stages, the Government listened carefully to the arguments about legitimate humanitarian assistance, as well as concerns expressed by non-governmental organisations and the International Development Committee. The Government's position remains that the Bill should not criminalise legitimate humanitarian aid work or the important work of journalists and diplomats.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I welcome Lords amendments 1 to 6, which clarify the Bill. However, as the Bill stands, journalists could still face a prison sentence of 10 to 14 years for working with or even approaching sources in hostile Governments. Will the Minister consider pausing the legislation so that we can go back to the drawing board?

Dame Angela Eagle: I do not agree with my hon. Friend's interpretation of the Bill at all. The threats that we are facing mean that this Bill ought to be on the statute book sooner rather than later, so that we can begin to deal with them.

As I was saying, the Government's position remains that the Bill should not criminalise legitimate humanitarian aid work or the important work of journalists and diplomats, and it remains our view that the Bill does not have that effect. However, to avoid a potential chilling effect, the Government felt that it was better to accept amendments to the Bill to put that matter beyond doubt. That is why the Government supported amendments 1, 2, 4 and 6, tabled by Baroness Northover in the other place.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): I am pleased that the Minister is accepting the amendments. This will hopefully give some comfort to journalists in every war zone who are in incredibly precarious situations, where somebody usually accuses them of being terrorists for what they are reporting. The number of journalists killed around the world is rising year on year, so what practical support will the Government be able to give to the journalists or journalists' unions that face these very real threats?

Dame Angela Eagle: We are very confident that the Bill as it is written does not place journalists in any jeopardy. In fact, these measures allow us to act against those who are conducting harmful activity in the UK, including targeting journalists here in the UK because of their attempts to expose activities in other regimes. The right hon. Gentleman makes a more general point about the jeopardy in which journalists put themselves in war zones, and I would agree that their news reporting is some of the bravest. We all support a free press and journalists' ability to report in war zones, but I would say respectfully to him that these things are slightly different and he is combining the two issues. We are convinced that this Bill does not and will not put journalists in any more jeopardy in this country—certainly not for reporting.

Baroness Northover tabled amendments 1, 2, 4 and 6 in the other place. They introduce a new defence into the offences at new sections 17B and 17C of the National Security Act 2023, specifically to cover legitimate humanitarian aid activity. This means that non-governmental organisations that have to engage with a designated body in order to carry out legitimate humanitarian activity will benefit from the same protections under the Bill as do UK diplomats.

The Government also supported amendments 3 and 5, which were tabled by Lord Anderson. These amendments were based on the advice of Jonathan Hall KC and also had the support of Lord Carlile. They add a reasonable excuse defence in new section 17C of the 2023 Act for obtaining, accepting or agreeing to accept information from a designated body. This means that where a person has a reasonable excuse for receiving information from a designated body, they benefit from a defence. This might include, for example, a journalist conducting an interview or a charity receiving information on the location of landmines. The Government considered the case for exempting humanitarian NGOs from the offences, but we were advised by our operational partners that

this would provide a loophole that hostile actors would seek to exploit, which in turn could make the NGOs themselves a target for infiltration. In fact, that is the case that I made to this Chamber in Committee.

I am grateful to the other place and the International Development Committee for their engagement on this Bill and for the constructive amendments, which have helped strengthen the Bill and broaden its support. The Bill represents an important new addition to our toolkit to address the growing threat from foreign powers. As I said in Committee, my officials have worked closely with operational partners in the creation of this power and the accompanying offences, and our partners are fully supportive of the Bill. It closes a gap, and they have been explicit that it provides them with vital tools capable of addressing the sharpest threats that they are tackling.

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

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): The Government's decision to allow alterations to this Bill will come as a surprise to many who followed it through its earlier stages. As colleagues in the other place observed, this came as a surprise because, throughout the interregnum, the Government repeatedly informed the official Opposition that they were unable to make further policy decisions. That position even extended to measures confirmed as Government policy, such as passport seizure powers. Given that even fundamental issues relating to countries such as China could not be addressed then, it is surprising that we are considering further amendments to this Bill now.

Nevertheless, we are where we are, and we are considering the Government's amendments on humanitarian activities. I understand the intention behind them. Nobody wants genuine humanitarian organisations that are carrying out vital work in difficult parts of the world to be caught by legislation never intended to target them, but we also have to recognise the reality of the threats that we face. As the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation recently pointed out, hostile states are willing to hide behind legitimate activity. Just as they might exploit legal or journalistic cover, they might also seek to exploit humanitarian cover. That is why the amendment he suggested was narrower than the one before us today.

My concern is that the Government's wording is capable of broader interpretation, particularly around conduct said to be for the purpose of "the carrying out of humanitarian activities".

That risks creating uncertainty and opportunities for abuse. What is striking is that this is not the position the Government took a short time ago. On Report, the Minister made it clear that genuine humanitarian work would not be prejudicial to the safety or interests of the United Kingdom. Indeed, when rejecting amendments tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Stamford (Alicia Kearns), she argued that the prohibited purpose test would protect legitimate conduct without creating loopholes for hostile actors. If that was the Government's position then, what has changed?

We would be naive to assume that this defence could never be exploited. We have seen hostile states attempt to use charitable organisations as vehicles for influence and interference. The chief executive of the Charity

Commission has warned about those risks, and Ministers themselves have highlighted concerns about Iranian-backed charities operating in this country. Members have worked hard to expose those threats. As we strengthen our powers to tackle hostile state activity, we must be careful not to create new opportunities for hostile actors.

This Bill already contains a higher threshold—or safeguards, as some would call them—that creates greater protections for those who support state bodies directing acts of terror, such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, than for those who support the terrorist groups that the IRGC funds and directs, such as Hamas and Hezbollah. This threshold, we believe, will make prosecutions far less likely, as the extra hurdle and burden of intent is too high, and necessarily so.

In addition, any prosecution requires the consent of the Attorney General, providing a significant safeguard against inappropriate cases. That makes me question whether these provisions are necessary. I appreciate the Government's intentions, but our first responsibility is to ensure that this legislation is robust. This Bill exists because the threats posed by hostile states are real and growing. If we are giving our police, intelligence agencies and security services the powers they need to respond, we must ensure that those powers are not weakened by loopholes. For that reason, we remain concerned that these amendments, however well intentioned, risk creating opportunities for hostile actors to evade the measures that the Bill is designed to put in place.

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I rise to welcome Lords amendments 1 to 6 and to support the progress being made regarding the implications of this Bill on the vital work of the humanitarian sector. I place on record my thanks to Baroness Northover, Lord Alton, Lord Anderson, Baroness Helic and Baroness D'Souza for all their work in the other place. I would also like to pay credit to the courageous NGOs operating on the frontlines of global crises, who I know are following the progress of this Bill carefully to understand how it might impact on their work. With them in mind, I would like to express my regret that measures covering the humanitarian sector do not go further to provide robust, full legal protections.

As Chair of the International Development Committee, I wrote to the Home Office on this matter on 17 June as the sector was facing a terrifying landscape of legal uncertainty. Under the original drafting of the new offences, particularly on assisting or obtaining material benefit from a designated body, humanitarian actors were at risk.

In conflict zones, where state-linked or designated actors hold territorial control, neutral humanitarian organisations are often required to engage in dangerous circumstances. That sometimes means that they must negotiate access, pay routine local utilities or permits, or provide medical care to all sides working in accordance with international humanitarian law. Under the Bill, humanitarian workers could have been prosecuted.

7 pm

As it stands, political reassurances alone are simply not good enough to prevent a catastrophic chilling effect across the sector—for example, driving banks to de-risk and forcing NGOs to pull out of regions where millions rely on UK-supported aid. I therefore welcome

the Lords amendments that provide a statutory defence as a significant step forward, and I thank the Minister and her Department for their full engagement on that.

However, we must be honest about what a defence is and is not. A defence does not stop an organisation from being caught by an offence. An aid worker or an NGO could still be investigated. They could also still be prosecuted and find themselves in a criminal court, having to shoulder the immense legal, financial and reputational burden of proving that defence. The Government can and should go further.

A true exemption would take impartial humanitarian actors out of the scope of those offences entirely, removing the legal risk from the table and protecting organisations from the threat of proceedings altogether. Therefore, while I welcome the Lords amendments as a step in the right direction, I urge the Government to monitor the operational reality of these measures closely and to consider taking further steps beyond the Bill.

I make these specific requests of the Minister. Will she ensure that explanatory notes, prosecutorial guidance and any industry guidance issued to regulate entities provide clear, comprehensive and consistent direction on the treatment of legitimate, impartial humanitarian activity? Those materials should make it explicit that humanitarian organisations acting in accordance with international law must be afforded appropriate protection in the application of the legislation. They should provide practical guidance on how the statutory defences are intended to operate and the factors that decision makers should take into account when assessing whether those defences are engaged.

Given that humanitarian actors would otherwise be required to rely on the availability of a defence only after an investigation or prosecution had been initiated, it is essential that the accompanying guidance minimises legal uncertainty and reduces the risk of legitimate humanitarian action being deterred or disrupted. Clear and authoritative guidance will be critical to ensuring that investigators, prosecutors, regulators, financial institutions and other relevant actors apply the legislation in a manner consistent with Parliament's intention and do not inadvertently impede the delivery of impartial humanitarian assistance.

To ensure that such materials are both legally effective and operationally workable, humanitarian organisations should be meaningfully consulted during their development. Those with practical experience of delivering assistance in complex and high-risk environments are best placed to identify areas of ambiguity, anticipate unintended consequences and ensure that the guidance reflects the realities of humanitarian operations. Such consultation will help to ensure that the guidance provides genuine legal certainty and appropriately safeguards legitimate humanitarian action.

Subsequent guidance regarding how these statutory defences are intended to operate in practice must provide a clear, comprehensive and consistent direction on the treatment of legitimate, impartial humanitarian activity. Such materials must make it explicit that humanitarian organisations acting in accordance with international humanitarian law must be afforded appropriate protection in the application of this legislation.

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

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The Liberal Democrats have supported the principle of the National Security (State Threats) Bill for some time. We know why it must pass, and why it must pass quickly. At present, our country is suffering from co-ordinated attacks from foreign states. Their actions subvert our democracy, intimidate the public and erode our values.

The number of state threat investigations by MI5 has surged by a staggering 48% in the last year alone. Those figures are a stark reminder of the scale of the threat we face. That is not an isolated spike; it is the frontline of an expanding and evolving threat that the United Kingdom faces from both foreign Governments and hostile foreign actors. Chief among them is the increasingly emboldened Iranian regime, which is aggressively asserting itself to undermine our national security.

Since the start of 2022, our security services have responded to 20 Iranian-backed plots, which present a direct and potentially lethal threat to British citizens and UK residents on our own soil. Let us be clear about who Iran is targeting: it is targeting dissidents, media organisations and journalists who have the bravery to report on that regime's violent oppression. I have spoken to constituents who fled Iran and now live in Woking, and I know that they would support the Bill.

Critically, Iran is also targeting the Jewish community who live in our country. We cannot allow that to happen.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Hear, hear!

Mr Forster: I am pleased that, for once, we have cross-party consensus on an issue.

However, it has been more than a year since Jonathan Hall KC first recommended the powers contained in the Bill to tackle state-backed and state-linked threats. The Government and this Parliament have been too slow to listen to his concerns.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the fact that the legislation creates the power for state-backed entities to be designated under the National Security Act 2023. On Second Reading, my Liberal Democrat colleagues, including my hon. Friends the Members for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson) and for Esher and Walton (Monica Harding), raised strong concerns that the offences in the Bill might inadvertently capture the activities of humanitarian workers. Tackling state threats and protecting those who provide vital assistance and support to some of the planet's most vulnerable people are not and should never be mutually exclusive. I therefore highly commend the amendments tabled by my noble Friend Baroness Northover, as well as by Lord Anderson, in the other place, which we are now considering. They will protect those who carry out humanitarian work, which, as colleagues have said, we never intended the Bill to capture. I am pleased and relieved that the Government are supporting the amendments.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Does the hon. Member not think that this shows that we do not properly consider the inadvertent effects of the legislation we pass in this place? We have had useful amendments introduced in the House of Lords, but surely when we are drafting legislation on issues as important as this, we should get it right in the first place. We should not have to rely on hastily drawn up amendments in a Bill's last stages to put it right.

Mr Forster: I am pleased that my colleagues in the other place drafted the amendments and that the Government support them. Earlier today, we were talking about the Immigration Act 1971. Parliament never intended to protect someone who had been stripped of his British citizenship and committed heinous crimes, but there is a risk that because the legislation was badly drafted in 1971, we cannot do what we all want to do now and deport him.

The intention of legislation is so important, and I am pleased that through the Lords amendments, we have managed to put some meat on the bones of the Government's legislation to protect vital humanitarian workers. It is so important that we tackle state threats while also protecting those workers. I therefore highly commend the amendments tabled by my colleagues in the other place. I pay tribute in particular to Baroness Northover, whose work with the Government on these amendments deserves our praise. I also thank other colleagues in the other place for their work on the Bill.

Humanitarian workers often work in extremely challenging and unstable areas, and they need to know that the law has their back when they are putting their lives at risk. To provide essential aid, they have to work with a wide variety of local groups. Without the new legal protections, they could easily be penalised simply for doing their jobs. Sometimes, that involves landmine clearance or paying a fee to access a particular zone. We must ensure that our laws do not criminalise aid workers. My noble Friend Baroness Northover's amendments—Lords amendments 1, 2, 4 and 6—provide a defence for those carrying out humanitarian activities. The amendments ensure that humanitarian organisations will not face significant additional barriers to delivering their invaluable work.

If the Bill passes today—and I hope it does—the Government need to work with urgency to introduce secondary legislation to finally designate the IRGC, as the Liberal Democrats and I have called for. As the summer recess looms, it is clear that such regulations must be made before the House rises on 16 July. Will Minister reassure me and the House that they will?

Mark Swards *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Swards, normally when a Member is called last, they are under a time limit, but you now have more than an hour.

Mark Swards: Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. [*Interruption.*] The Whip, my hon. Friend the Member for Hamilton and Clyde Valley (Imogen Walker), is making a strange gesture at me, suggesting that perhaps I do not have 60 minutes in which to contribute. I can reassure her and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, that I intend to speak only very briefly.

When I contributed on Second Reading, during the consideration of amendments and on Third Reading, I was convinced by the Government's argument that the Bill as drafted already contained an exemption that NGOs and humanitarian organisations could take advantage of. I therefore came to the House today keen to listen to the Minister explain the reasoning behind the Government accepting these amendments. I also wanted to hear the reasoning from my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion), who has contributed throughout the passage of the Bill and had

thoughts on why that exemption was not enough. Having listened to the reasoning, I am convinced of the need to accept the amendments—they absolutely make sense—but I have some thoughts and follow-up questions for the Minister, which I will go through now.

Lords amendments 1 and 2 are about creating exemptions for humanitarian support, NGOs and the like. They directly affect the part of the Bill that is concerned with assisting designated threats. Assisting a designated state threat should bring with it grave consequences, but at the same time we should not do anything that risks legitimate NGOs stopping their engagement, their involvement and their important work in some of the most difficult regions in the world. It is clear that there needs to be space for them to operate—but, but, but. We know that nefarious state actors will seek to exploit any loophole or advantage to inflict harm on this country. Does the Minister think that amendments 1 and 2 are slightly too loose, or is she confident that designated state threats could not take advantage of the amendments to continue to carry out their actions through other bodies?

I have fewer concerns about Lords amendments 3 to 6. It is right that there should be an exemption for humanitarian bodies to share information with designated state threats when that information relates to, say, the clearance of a minefield. That makes sense and, of course, that exemption should exist.

One of the reasons I am so keen to accept the amendments and see the Bill receive Royal Assent is that it is absolutely essential that we designate the IRGC as the threat that it is to this country. I am under no illusions about Government policy—no announcement will be made at the Dispatch Box today, and rightly so—but I want to take this opportunity to spell out that the IRGC is a threat to the British Jewish community in the UK. If we do not take action to proscribe it now—or, in this case, designate it now—we are risking the safety of our fellow citizens. Let us accept these amendments, pass this Bill and protect our communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Minister to wind up. As I said, an hour and 15 minutes is yours.

Dame Angela Eagle: I am grateful for the contributions of all right hon. and hon. Members. The hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) was worried that we had changed the Bill in a way that would make it less effective, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) still made the case for having an exemption rather than a defence for humanitarian assistance. I confirm that in our view the Bill as originally written would have excluded humanitarian assistance completely, because of the primary purpose rule, but we felt that there was some merit in the argument about the chilling effect of not having a defence. That is why we accepted the amendments in the other place, but that is belt and braces—nothing has changed. We are trying to accommodate potentially legitimate worries and chilling effects that might have an effect on the operational effectiveness of some NGOs, even though the law itself would not have caught them.

7.15 pm

Sarah Champion: Can the Minister give some assurance that, in the guidance, we will be able to see that in black and white, so that the defence is laid out for all to see?

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, my hon. Friend may know her *Pepper v. Hart*, and I have just put it on the record in this House, but obviously I will take a close look at the guidance as it is developed.

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Forster) made a powerful speech, particularly about the rising level of threat that we face. That is why the Bill needs to be on the statute book as quickly as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards) asked about the designated threats defence. Again, the answer is the same: it is about the chilling effect.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): To return to the point made by the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sowards), it is clear that this new piece of legislation could allow hostile states to set up shell charities or hide behind humanitarian cover. As a matter of purely operational wording, does the British state have the ability to actually identify whether that is happening and put a stop to it?

Dame Angela Eagle: I do not want us to go into specific examples, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we keep a very close eye on what proxy actors and state actors by proxy are doing in our country. We believe that designation, which is what this quite narrow Bill will allow us to do, will make it much clearer that we know what they are doing. It will make for a harder operating environment for those who wish us ill and are directed by state actors. That is what the legislation is intended to do.

Against a backdrop of growing threat from foreign states and their proxies, including through espionage, interference, sabotage and threats to life, the Bill will strengthen the ability to disrupt hostile intelligence services and their proxies by adapting counter-terrorism tools to tackle state-based security threats in the UK. It will create a new power for the Secretary of State to designate organisations involved in foreign power threat activity, backed up by new criminal offences of supporting, assisting or obtaining benefits from designated bodies.

There has been some concern, both in this House and in the other place, regarding potential unintended consequences, but I reassure the House that the Bill was never intended to, and does not, criminalise genuine humanitarian activity by NGOs or journalists or other legitimate activities. We have listened to the arguments, and it is right to put that matter beyond doubt. The amendments do that. We have worked closely with operational partners, and I am satisfied that these narrow amendments do not weaken the Bill.

The Bill will enable proxy organisations to be treated in practice like foreign intelligence services, making it easier to prosecute those acting on their behalf. Overall, this manifesto commitment will strengthen the national security framework so that the UK becomes a more difficult operating environment for foreign intelligence services and state-linked proxies. With that, I commend the Lords amendments to the House.

Question put. That this House agrees with Lords amendment 1.

The House divided: Ayes 394, Noes 85.

Division No. 49]

[7.19 pm

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Anderson, Callum
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Aquarone, Steff
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Babarinde, Josh
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Bird, Lara
Blackman, Kirsty
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brewer, Alex
Brickell, Phil
Brown-Fuller, Jess
Bryant, Chris
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burnham, rh Andy
Burton-Sampson, David
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Caliskan, Nesil
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Cane, Charlotte
Carden, Dan
Carling, Sam
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Carns, Al
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Collins, Victoria
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Daby, Janet
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Darlington, Emily
Davey, rh Ed
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Davies-Jones, Alex
Dean, Bobby
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dillon, Mr Lee (*Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain*)
Dixon, Anna
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doogan, Dave
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Dyke, Sarah
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eagle, rh Maria
Edwards, Lauren
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Fenton-Glynn, Josh
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Fookes, Catherine

Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Franklin, Zöe
Frith, Mr James
Furniss, Gill
Gardiner, Barry
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gemmell, Alan
George, Andrew
German, Gill
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gilmour, Rachel
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Goldsborough, Ben
Gordon, Tom
Gosling, Jodie
Gould, Georgia
Grady, John
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lillian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Haigh, rh Louise
Hall, Sarah
Hamilton, Paulette
Harding, Monica
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hopkins, Rachel
Hughes, Claire
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jardine, Christine
Jermy, Terry
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Clive
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Afzal
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia

Kumaran, Uma
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leadbitter, Graham
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Logan, Seamus
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacCleary, James
Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
MacDonald, Mr Angus
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Maguire, Helen
Mahmood, rh Shabana
Martin, Amanda
Martin, Mike
Maskell, Rachael
Mathew, Brian
Mayer, Alex
Maynard, Charlie
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McEvoy, Lola
McFadden, rh Pat
McGovern, Alison
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
McNeill, Kirsty
Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
Midgley, Anneliese
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Morrison, Mr Tom
Mullane, Margaret
Munt, Tessa
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Murray, Susan
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Nash, Pamela
Newbury, Josh
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte

Norris, Alex
O'Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osamor, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Owen, Sarah
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Payne, Michael
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perteghella, Manuela
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Pitcher, Lee
Platt, Jo
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Dr Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reed, rh Steve
Reid, Joani
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rigby, rh Lucy
Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote*
cast by Rachael Maskell)
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Russell, Sarah
Rutland, Tom
Ryan, Oliver
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Sandher-Jones, Louise
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shanker, Baggy
Shanks, Michael
Siddiq, Tulip
Slade, Vikki
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John

Smart, Lisa
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Sollom, Ian
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Stone, Jamie
Stone, Will
Strathern, Alistair
Streeting, rh Wes
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Thomas, Cameron (*Proxy vote*
cast by Wendy
Chamberlain)
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Tomlinson, Dan
Trickett, Jon
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Ward, Chris
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
Williams, David
Wilson, Munira
Wishart, Pete
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin

Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Young, Claire
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Imogen Walker and
Mark Ferguson

NOES

Allister, Jim
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib
Blackman, Bob
Bowie, Andrew
Brandreth, Aphra
Burghart, Alex
Cartlidge, James
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David (*Proxy vote*
cast by Joy Morrissey)
Dewhurst, Charlie
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Fortune, Peter
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mike Wood)
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Garnier, Mark
Glen, rh John
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard

Johnson, Dr Caroline
Jopp, Lincoln
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lopez, Julia
Lumsden, Douglas
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Obese-Jecty, Ben
O'Brien, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paul, Rebecca
Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast*
by Mike Wood)
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Smith, Greg
Smith, Rebecca
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mike Wood)
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Timothy, Nick
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wood, Mike

Tellers for the Noes:
David Simmonds and
Mr Andrew Snowden

Question accordingly agreed to.

Lords amendment 1 agreed to.

Lords amendments 2 to 6 agreed to.

Environmental Protection

7.34 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I beg to move,

That the draft Environmental Permitting (Waste Controlling or Transporting) and Relevant Functions of Primary Authorities (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.

It is a pleasure to be here on this hot and sultry evening. Despite our late nights or early mornings—whatever we decided to do in order to get over the football—I hope I can entertain the House with this vital piece of new legislation. I would like to acknowledge the important work of the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee in its review of this statutory instrument. Its scrutiny is a vital part of our legislative process, ensuring that the policy intentions behind our secondary legislation are clear and well founded.

As Members across the House will know from their inboxes and will have seen for themselves, waste crime blights our constituencies. Criminals who dump waste illegally in our streets, our fields and our woodlands show contempt for our communities and for us, creating eyesores that damage our environment. Under the Control of Pollution (Amendment) Act 1989, a light-touch registration system was set up for those who transport and deal in waste. It has remained pretty much untouched since then. As a result, it has been exploited by waste criminals, leaving the public with a huge clean-up bill. Enforcement, sadly, is only reactive. The system is not fit for purpose, with anyone or anything—a dead dog called Oscar, a fish, or even a cow called Beau Vine—being able to register on the system. That stops today.

This Labour Government are scrapping the broken waste system that the Conservatives left behind. Today we are introducing stricter checks and requirements, closing the loopholes long exploited by illegal operators, and the objective of this Government's waste crime action plan, published in March, is to stop waste crime at its source and to bring pride back to our communities. We are cracking down on the waste criminals, dragging the regime into the modern age and improving waste traceability.

These regulations bring those in England who control and transport waste within the scope of the Environmental Permitting (England and Wales) Regulations 2016. They repeal the current carriers, brokers and dealers registration, which is now over: finished, kaput, no more. These regulations introduce tougher checks for waste controllers and transporters. Permitting will now be required for those who control and transport waste, bringing the system in line with site-based waste activities. Those who apply for permits will undergo strict background checks, including tax checks, identity checks and criminal records checks. They will need to demonstrate that they are technically competent to do the job.

The Environment Agency will be responsible for managing applications for, and ensuring compliance with, this new permitting system. The fees introduced for permits will also mean that the Environment Agency will be effectively resourced for its compliance work.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My constituents in Rushcliffe have experienced the consequences of waste crime very recently. In April, there was a fire at the

Hathernware industrial estate, eight years after a previous fire. This particular fire raged for seven days and caused significant health impacts for the local community. Will my hon. Friend go further and think about how the different agencies with responsibility for waste should be working more effectively together? Although the Environment Agency was involved with this incident, it also thought responsibility lay with the county council and other agencies. I think they all need to come together so that there is proper accountability.

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We inherited a bit of a “pass the parcel” system: “Who is the landowner? Who is the local authority? What is the size of the dump? Is it permitted or not?” That means that waste criminals can fall between the cracks and that there is effectively impunity. We have introduced a digital waste system, but under the current system, enforcement can only be reactive, not proactive. For that reason, we are introducing identity checks, to find out the answers to questions like, “Does this person actually exist, or is it a dog or a cow?”, “Do they have a criminal record?” and “Are they fit and competent to manage the waste?” All those things matter. As my hon. Friend described, we are talking about dangerous materials. We do not want to see them piled high and not moved on, and then, sadly, a fire coming along—whether deliberate or accidental. In all these environmental crimes, including dumping and burning, the profits are privatised, but the costs, and the social and environmental consequences, are socialised.

Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con): In my previous role as Lancashire's police and crime commissioner, the connection between such sites and organised crime gangs was often well documented. As the hon. Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish) outlined, a multi-agency response is often needed, but it is important that we do not forget the role of the police, who often have to escort other agencies to the sites in order to protect them from the people operating them.

Mary Creagh: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point. The idea that we can send Environment Agency officials to deal—in some cases—with serious organised crime groups is simply for the birds. People say, “There aren't prosecutions” or “The penalties are too light”, but the waste is often one part of a multifaceted criminal enterprise—it is just another wing of a business empire. We need to get better at looking upstream, looking at tax checks and looking at the web of companies behind the business, and basically doing the Al Capone method—getting them on tax evasion—and prosecuting them under the Proceeds of Crime Act 2002.

There is a wider point here: we cannot expect council officials who have been denuded and stripped of funds over the last 14 years to suddenly become waste crime enforcers. There may be only one or two trading standards and compliance officers in post in a local council, but this sort of sophisticated crime requires a lot of multi-agency work. Someone from the National Police Chiefs' Council is now tasked with doing that work; we are doing a review, particularly of local authority competence in this area.

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): The Minister has touched on organised crime. As I am sure she is aware, modern slavery can be a real issue within the

waste crime sector; we have had some powerful debates on that issue in the Chamber. The waste crime action plan sets out that people will be held to account and given community service, but we need to reach further up the chain, because often the people who are caught in the act are the ones being exploited or forced to carry out such activities. I am reassured by what she says, but does she agree that we need to go further up the chain?

Mary Creagh: We need to take action at every level. For example, the person who does a weekend job for their friend, transporting half a skip of old kitchen waste that suddenly ends up on a lay-by, in a farmer's field or blocking a lane, will now face up to nine penalty points on their licence; that should make them think twice before doing that job for their friend. They may only be on the periphery of the criminality, but in order to stop it, we have to look right the way along the chain. Anecdotally, I often hear that when these small-time crooks are apprehended, they are only too pleased to pay the fixed penalty notices to the council and to be let away with it, because they can be the front end of a much, much larger serious and organised crime group.

So what does this all mean? The Environment Agency is finally going to be effectively resourced to undertake the compliance work. The move to permitting means that the agency can suspend and ultimately revoke permits where conditions are breached. It can also prosecute, and those found guilty will face fines or up to five years' imprisonment. The regulations will mean that the public should have more trust in the people they hand their waste to. We will require waste controllers and transporters to include their permit number on advertising, whether that is a Facebook ad or a branded van.

Terry Jermy (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I very much support the proposals that the Minister is outlining. One of the groups most impacted by waste crime is farmers. There is a farm in my constituency where more than 200 bales of DIY waste were dumped on the land, at an estimated cost of £250,000 to remove. I welcome the discussion on fines, but does she agree that we need to look at whether those fines can go towards the cost of the clear-up to a greater extent, to match the scale of the crimes committed?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend is right. We are acutely conscious of the issue that farmers face. There is innovative work being done with drones, and I met one farmer who told me that his neighbour turned up with a tractor to block the lane as the criminals were trying to make their exit; they caught them in a trap and then called the police. That was a happy outcome in Hertfordshire, but we cannot have eyes on the ground in every field and back lane, so we are working with insurers to see what we can do to ensure that this type of crime is properly covered under farmers' business insurance.

The regulations will mean that the public should have more trust in the people to whom they hand their waste. The public will be able to look up operators and ensure they have a valid permit. This reform is one of a number outlined in the waste crime action plan. It is nothing new: it was first announced eight years ago by the Conservative party, in the 2018 resource and waste strategy. It was consulted on back in 2022 and the Government gave their response in 2023, but it is this Government that have delivered it.

We have introduced digital waste tracking, replacing outdated paper-based methods for monitoring waste movements. We will be tightening the waste permit exemption system by getting rid of exemptions abused by those dealing with end-of-life vehicles, tyres and scrap metal. We will be enabling the Environment Agency to tighten up on exemptions abused in other parts of the waste sector, including the use of waste in construction, preparatory treatments, the treatment of waste wood, manual treatment, burning of vegetation at the place of production, storage in containers and storage in a secure place. Taken together, these measures strengthen the regulatory framework and the Environment Agency's ability to prevent, detect and tackle waste criminals.

Mr Snowden: The Minister is being very generous in taking interventions. In my previous role, and from meeting people working in the industry in my Fylde constituency, I discovered that the Environment Agency often regularly visits those businesses that are already abiding by the law and keeping good records, because those records are easy to inspect and the companies are easy to deal with, and it often issues fines for small misdemeanours. Meanwhile the criminal operators, who are flagrantly breaking the law, often evade any inspection because they are difficult to deal with and aggressive. The regulatory framework is important, but the culture of going after those who are flagrantly breaking the law, rather than just checking people's paperwork, is really important as well.

Mary Creagh: Under the current system, checking the paperwork is all that the Environment Agency can do; that is the problem. Under the managing public money rules, the Environment Agency is not funded by legitimate operators to go and seek out criminals. We consulted on that during discussions about digital waste tracking. There is an issue with saying to legitimate operators, "We will add a tenner on to your licence so that we can go after the criminals", because that is not allowed under Treasury rules. There is a chicken-and-egg situation, and I have heard the same anecdotes as the hon. Member. The bottom line is that if someone is controlling or transporting waste, they should be registered, the registration should be clear for all to see, and we should be able to check that they are a true person on the system and that there is nothing in their background that would make us hesitate about whether to issue a licence.

To come back to the issue of a multi-agency response, we have an action plan and we are working with the Environment Agency, the national lead for waste crime, alongside His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, which is going after the tax, the Home Office, which is covering the issue of vulnerable workers and exploitation, local police forces and local authorities. We are undertaking co-ordinated cross-Government action. We will monitor the effectiveness and improve metrics so that we get a much better multi-agency waste crime response.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Minister was just talking about metrics. Further to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden), will she say a little more about organised crime? In assessing the effectiveness of these changes, what key metrics would she apply to prosecutions relating to organised crime?

Mary Creagh: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me, but it is a bit too early to say. These prosecutions often take a long time to piece together. We have all seen the pattern where a company goes bust, owing HMRC a vast amount of money—sometimes in the tens of millions of pounds. I do not want to get into saying, “One, three, five or seven,” and setting out those targets; I do not think we are at a stage to talk about that.

However, I can reassure the House that my risk appetite for not granting permits to people who may be questionable is very high, and I am very happy to be taken to court by people who think they may have unjustly been denied a waste permit. So far, there have been no cases against us or the Environment Agency for refusing a licence.

We are tightening up all the way along the system, but I do not want to get into metrics. We know the sites where we have problems and we see new ones appearing, and the thing is to stop the proliferation of those sites, many of which are simply illegal and are not permitted in any way, shape or form. That is where our difficulty comes in.

James Naish: I want to go back to the case that I mentioned earlier. For the Minister’s reference, there will be a two-and-a-half-month delay between the Environment Agency wanting to take action and managing to get the court order that will prevent the individual from getting access to the site, where there has been a second illegal fire within eight years. May I put on the Minister’s radar the importance of sorting out the courts so that immediate action can be taken when problems are identified?

Mary Creagh: I am responsible for many things, from forests and international biodiversity to peat and trees; I am afraid the courts are slightly outwith my jurisdiction, but I will pass that point on. We are working with our colleagues on issues around sentencing.

On the metrics, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) knows, as a former Environment Secretary, that we have a risk-based, intelligence-led approach that directs the greatest effort towards the highest harm illegal operators. By strengthening the regulatory framework and their abilities, alongside these reforms, we are providing those in the joint unit for waste crime, who are responsible for tackling it, with the tools that they need to stamp it out.

I was very disappointed to read *The Times*’s leader today on fly-tipping; I thought it was a little unfair. This Government have doubled the Environmental Agency’s waste crime enforcement budget by committing an additional £45 million over the next three financial years. I believe the budget in 2024-25 was £10 million. We have added £5 million on this year, and then we will add an extra £15 million. Essentially doubling that budget means more boots on the ground and more drones in the air to expand enforcement activities and track down waste criminals. Since March, I believe we have had 18 waste crime prosecutions.

I acknowledge the strength of support in the legitimate waste industry for this reform, and its patience over the years as that reform has been developed under the watch of the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire and others. These regulations are a significant change. They level the playing field for all operators and will

protect communities and the environment from waste criminals. As I said, this is a really important part of our plan to stop waste crime.

These regulations also bring the Environment Act 2021 within the scope of the primary authority scheme by adding it to schedule 3 to the Regulatory Enforcement and Sanctions Act 2008. For those unfamiliar with it, the primary authority scheme allows businesses with operations in more than one area to work with a single local authority that provides consistent, tailored advice on meeting their legal obligations, which can cover areas such as environmental health, trading standards and fire safety.

Extending the scheme to include the Environment Act is important, because it will enable primary authorities to support retailers in understanding and meeting their responsibilities under the forthcoming deposit return scheme, which launches next year. That will help to ensure a more consistent and effective approach across the country. I recommend this statutory instrument to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

7.54 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): We recognise that the current system for regulating those who transport and control waste needs to be updated to ensure the waste sector has a regulatory framework that delivers the safe and responsible management of waste and reduces opportunities for criminal activity without being unduly burdensome to businesses in the sector. The impacts of waste crime are significant, causing damage to our environment and natural habitats and imposing a cost to the taxpayer of nearly £1 billion per year. It undercuts legitimate businesses and undermines public confidence.

I am pleased that the Government are attempting to tackle waste crime at source through this SI, but I have some concerns as to how it will be implemented and function, which I will address shortly. Before I come to that, I note that the responses to the consultation were broadly supportive of the proposal to move from registration to permitting, as this SI outlines, with 73% of respondents agreeing that the current waste carriers, brokers and dealers regime should be brought under environmental permitting regulations.

The concept of proportionate regulation, in which higher-risk activities receive greater scrutiny while genuinely low-risk operators can benefit from exemptions, is one that makes sense and that we would support in principle. However, recognising the need for reform does not mean burdening legitimate businesses with ever-increasing costs. I want to raise some concerns with the Minister in a constructive manner, in the hope that she can reassure the House that the Government have struck the right balance between stronger regulation and the burdens being placed on businesses already under considerable pressure by the costs and consequences of other policies brought forward by this Government.

Over the appraisal period, businesses will face almost £187 million in permit fees, more than £50 million in familiarisation costs, significant application and audit costs, and well over £190 million in additional training and technical competence requirements. The Government

are banking on the fact that those costs, which are very significant, will be outweighed by the benefits of reductions in waste crime and of creating a fairer marketplace for legitimate operators. However, as the Minister will know, the impact assessment showed an overall negative net present value from this policy of £340 million over the appraisal period. That is substantial.

Even given the potential for a conservative estimate of reduced waste crime and other potential non-monetised benefits and wider social benefits, there is significant uncertainty. In the current economic climate, will the Minister reassure us that there will be appropriate monitoring and evaluation to ensure that the significant costs for businesses do not escalate further and to check that the benefits are fully realised? In particular, how will the Government monitor the cumulative impact of these new requirements on smaller operators? We all want to drive criminals out of the sector, but we must ensure that we do not inadvertently make life disproportionately harder for responsible businesses.

Businesses are already dealing with the consequences of this Government's policies, from the jobs tax to increased costs and ever more burdensome regulations. Against that backdrop, it is entirely reasonable to ask whether businesses have been given sufficient time, support and clarity to prepare for these significant changes to the waste sector. Will the Minister provide further detail on the guidance that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Environment Agency intend to publish ahead of commencement? What assurances can she give about the resources in place so that any permit applications will be responded to and actioned promptly? While we welcome the intention to strengthen enforcement, what confidence can the Minister give the House that enforcement activity will be genuinely targeted at rogue operators, rather than becoming an additional bureaucratic burden on compliant firms?

Finally, the Government intend to evaluate these reforms through the wider resources and waste policy programme, with reporting due in 2029. Given the scale of these changes and the costs involved, will the Minister commit to providing Parliament with earlier updates on implementation, compliance costs and whether the anticipated reductions in waste crime are actually being achieved? Given the Government's familiarity with U-turns, we may need to revisit this SI sooner rather than later if it is failing to work for the sector.

If this SI is implemented well, it should protect the environment while enabling responsible businesses to thrive. We support the objective of modernising an outdated regime and strengthening action against waste crime, but we also believe Ministers must recognise the cumulative pressures facing businesses and ensure implementation is carefully managed. It is in that constructive spirit that we will continue to scrutinise the implementation of these regulations, holding the Government to account to ensure these reforms deliver the environmental benefits that Ministers promise without imposing unnecessary burdens on the businesses that are working hard to comply with the law.

8 pm

Jon Trickett (Normanton and Hemsworth) (Lab): I welcome the robustness and energy that the Minister has brought to her task—it is very welcome. Inevitably, the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chester South

and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), wants to revert to some kind of light-touch approach, but we need to make sure the communities we represent are adequately protected—if necessary, by criminal action, as the Minister envisages.

Let me briefly describe the small, peaceful village of South Elmsall in my constituency. Like many other communities in Britain, it consists of law-abiding, hard-working, fair-minded people who play by the rules and expect to be able to live a satisfactory life. Many of them have saved hard to take out a mortgage and buy a house or to rent one. Close by, however, there is what is called the ash pit. Many, many years ago, permission was given under licence to do some recycling there, in order to eventually turn it back into arable land. When the people who live there bought their houses or moved in, they had a more than reasonable expectation that that work would be finished within a 10-year period. It has now been 17 years and the work still has not been satisfactorily resolved, which is a great misfortune.

I will come to the Environment Agency in a minute, but let me quickly describe what has been happening at the so-called ash pit. Various authorities, including the appeal inspector for the Planning Inspectorate, the EA and the council, have all indicated that what has happened on that site is completely unacceptable. Noxious materials have been placed there. It was intended that 50,000 tonnes would be stored at the facility; that is quite a lot, but almost 250,000 tonnes have been discovered on the site, and much of it consists of material that is not inert, but noxious. That is a problem. Not only that, because of the scale of what has been dumped there, whenever it rains, dangerous and polluted water runs into watercourses and local streams such as Frickley beck. Dust and waste is everywhere, and it escapes from the site whenever there is even a small breeze.

Turning briefly to putrefaction—which I am sure we do not want to think about—the level of putrefaction on that site is quite extraordinary. It creates what I will call an odour. In Yorkshire, we would probably call it a horrible stink. It can spread over large distances, and several hundred houses can be affected by that horrible smell. I was a witness to it the other day. When it rains, it is awful; when the wind blows, it is terrible; and when it is hot and the wind is blowing, it is really, really horrible.

The other day, I spoke to a gentleman who is a long-term resident of South Elmsall. His birthday was coming up—it is a number with a zero at the end of it, so it is an important one—and he wanted to bring 30-odd members of his family to sit in the garden in the projected heatwave, but in the end they could not do it. The effect of what had been left on the site was so horrible that he could not enjoy his birthday. Lots of people tell me that they cannot have their windows open in summer, and they cannot have their doors open to let a bit of fresh air in because of the problems that site is creating—a site that is five times larger than intended and has run for seven years beyond the original licence.

I have spent a long time dealing with this issue, because the people of South Elmsall are decent, and I am sure we would all do the same for any community that came to us. Large numbers of people have been involved, and we quickly latched on to the Environment Agency. The officers who work for the EA are genuine,

[Jon Trickett]

hard-working, knowledgeable people who understand the impact of a site such as this. They told me that it is probably the worst site in the north of England—other sites are competing for that award, but let us put that to one side for a minute. However, it became clear fairly quickly that the Environment Agency was understaffed and under-resourced and lacked the powers it needed to begin the process of enforcement. That left me worried, because people pay their tax—their council tax and so on—yet we were unable to get action. Eventually, we persuaded the Environment Agency's enforcement people to begin to take action. The site was then refused permission to continue, but the operator simply abandoned it, or appears to have abandoned it, so no work has been done there for some time. The area is putrid; it is grossly unfair that people who live decent lives should be left in a situation like this.

At first, the Conservative Government envisaged light-touch regulation. It seemed to me—this has now been confirmed by the Minister, and I welcome her comments—that light-touch regulation simply does not allow the EA to take the necessary enforcement action when activities such as those I have described take place. Obviously, this case is not the only one in the country, but it is worth raising to justify what is being done.

I notice that the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has said that the powers that currently exist are reactive rather than preventive. When you are reacting, it is too late—you need to be there at the beginning to prevent things like this from taking place. I am quite sure that a much more proactive operation by the EA will be welcomed across the country. The shadow Minister has said, “Well, we’ve got to be a bit careful. We don’t want to over-regulate these things.” The idea that these activities should be dealt with using a light touch will raise a bitter laugh in the communities I represent, and in communities all across the country who are suffering from the same kinds of problems. We want action. Obviously, we do not want inappropriate action, but action must be taken. That is why I welcome the decision to proceed with this SI.

I have two final questions. First, when a licence has been granted to an operator under the new procedure, if things begin to go wrong, does the Minister envisage that the EA will be able to remove that licence if a satisfactory resolution is not reached? It is quite clear that being preventive will not always work—some problems will emerge.

Secondly, last Monday, we were having a planning appeal on this site, and the planning inspector went way beyond his brief and said to me—I am a Member of the governing party, but he thought I was the Government—“Will you ask the Government what they are going to do about those operators who deliberately take millions of pounds of profit from a site, then abandon it at the last minute and declare themselves in liquidation?” What happens then is that either we get the putrefaction I have described, or the taxpayer has to pick up the bill. That is happening all over the country. Possibly the planning inspector abused his position—I felt slightly intimidated—but I said there was a debate today and that I would put that question to the Minister. In a situation where a cowboy operator has taken millions of pounds in profit, left the place in a state and then gone

into liquidation—or even gone to live abroad, as has been reported to me—what does she envisage will happen to avoid the taxpayer having to pick up the bill? These are serious matters.

I will finish with this: those who I have described will welcome today's debate and today's action, but what they want to see next is action across the country. In my patch, we want to see some progress so that this site is no longer a horrible mess.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

8.9 pm

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I thank the Minister for setting out this statutory instrument, which the Liberal Democrats support.

For too long, the system regulating who can transport and manage our waste has relied on a simple registration scheme, scarcely able to distinguish between reputable operators and rogue ones. That simply cannot continue. Replacing carrier, broker and dealer registration with an appropriate and robust permitting regime is the right call. Distinguishing waste controlling, waste transporting and waste controlling-transporting means that regulation can finally be risk-based, rather than having a one-size-fits-all free-for-all. Giving the Environment Agency the power to check before granting a permit, rather than after damage is done, is exactly what the Liberal Democrats have long called for. We therefore back this statutory instrument, but supporting it does not mean we accept that it is job done.

Permitting who is allowed to move waste does nothing for what happens when criminals move it anyway. Earlier this year, a space outside the Red Brick Building alongside a key gateway into Glastonbury was blighted by a mountain of fly-tipped waste. No single body was able to or wanted to take responsibility for its clean up, so local residents stepped in and raised £1,500 towards clearing this eyesore. After a full day of volunteers shifting rubble by hand, and a local firm sending a biohazard specialist to safely handle and remove what had been dumped there, it was finally cleared. Although it is a great example of people power and coming together to solve a problem that could not be solved otherwise, it should never have been necessary for local people to be forced into intervening. That is what enforcement failure looks like on the ground. It is not an abstract statistic, but ordinary people left to clean up after the criminals, simply because nobody else would. The scale of the problem stretches far beyond Glastonbury.

Council figures show that 3,000 fly-tipping incidents were reported just last year in Somerset alone. Across England, there were 1.26 million reported incidents but just 1,377 initiated prosecutions. The average fine was a meagre £539, while fewer than 0.2% of incidents ever saw the inside of a courtroom. That is just the start of the problem. A BBC investigation at the end of last year identified 517 active illegal waste dumps across England. Eleven of them are what investigators call “super sites”. The largest is in Northwich and holds an estimated 280,000 tonnes of illegally dumped waste. That is not fly-tipping; that is industrial-scale organised crime happening in plain view. Just 13 custodial sentences were handed down for fly-tipping offences in England last year, while a massive 35% of waste crime is attributed

to organised criminal gangs. The former chief executive of the Environment Agency called waste crime “the new narcotics”.

While this SI fixes the front door, it is silent on who it brings to justice. That must be the criminals committing serious waste crime. A permit regime has the ability to stop a rogue operator registering, but it will never stop a criminal gang that were never going to register in the first place. Why would they, when they are making their millions in the knowledge that there is no fear of being caught? What assessment has been made of how this new permitting framework will improve detection and enforcement against the organised gangs already operating illegally, outside any system that the Government could permit them into?

The Liberal Democrats have consistently set out what genuine reform looks like. It is not more law stuck on the statute book, when the powers to fine, seize vehicles and imprison for up to five years already exist and are barely used. What we require is proper resourcing and co-ordination to actually use those powers. That is why we call on the Government to go further. First, they should raise each fixed penalty notice for fly-tipping to £2,500, so that the penalty better reflects the profit being made.

Secondly, the National Crime Agency or the forthcoming national police service must be given clear and unambiguous responsibility for investigating serious organised waste crime. There must be no more gaps in co-ordination among local police, the Environment Agency and our hard-stretched local authorities.

Thirdly, we must introduce rewards of more than £5,000 for information leading to the successful prosecution of the criminal gangs behind sites such as Northwich.

Fourthly, we must establish a single national reporting route for rural and waste crime, with one number and one point of contact, with automatic triage to the correct enforcement body. As it stands, the system gives a farmer in Somerset who finds waste dumped on their land no clear direction as to whether to call the unitary council, the Environment Agency or the police. That confusion is actively suppressing reporting, and with that comes the lack of enforcement.

This SI is a genuine and welcome step. Risk-based permitting is well overdue. The Liberal Democrats will back the SI today, but my constituents in Glastonbury and Somerton and rural communities the length and breadth of the country need to know that criminals are not able to act with impunity, illegally dumping waste across the country. I hope that the Minister will confirm that today's reform marks the start of that reckoning, not its conclusion.

8.16 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I thank the Minister for her opening remarks. This is an overdue and welcome attempt to curb a problem blighting a number of communities. I acknowledge the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). I worry slightly that we are at risk of entering into some sort of terrible British waste tip competition, but I definitely challenge him, as the one that I am experiencing in my constituency of Carlisle would probably rival the one that he described.

No one relishes living next to a landfill site. However, my constituents in the village of Rockcliffe, a couple of miles to the north of Carlisle, have done so largely without issue for decades. I am particularly glad that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), is in his place. He will be able to testify to the fact—having been the Member who represented Rockcliffe before he moved to Epping Forest—that bar the odd incident, the Hespian Wood site was largely compliant for over four decades. However, that changed last year when the site was sold.

In less than 12 months, the new operator, Seletia, has in no short order turned a once compliant site into a towering mountain of fetid and probably non-compliant waste. Debris from the mountain has been blown on to the adjacent M6. The heap dominates the skyline. The liquid run-off trickles into a beck that runs through adjacent farmland. The smell is stomach-churning and can be smelled on the other side of the city, more than 10 miles away.

I will just read some of the comments that the villagers of Rockcliffe made when the BBC asked them about the site a couple of months ago. One said that the odour was so dreadful he could almost taste it. He said:

“You can't get away from it, even with the windows shut...It woke me up at one o'clock in the morning once and I was tasting it, not just smelling it.”

Another said that she had become more and more concerned as the landfill had grown in height, and she was especially worried about the fact that the pupils at Rockcliffe Church of England primary school could see the mountain when they played outdoors. Another local resident said that her migraines, she believed, were linked to the smell:

“Migraine sufferers can be sensitive to smells and I'm realising now that that's what's triggering it.”

In response to the BBC, Seletia said that it was one of four operators on the site and did not believe that its landfill site was causing the problem. In response to that, I would say that the other three operators on the site have been there over the same period. The only thing that has changed at Hespian Wood is the takeover and management of the site by Seletia. Moreover, people living at the nearby sister site, another Seletia site at Flusco in Newbiggin—in the constituency of the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron)—have, over exactly the same period, experienced an increase in problems, to the point at which the Environment Agency has now suspended operations on the Flusco site. Thanks to action by the Environment Agency at the Hespian Wood site, it seems to have temporarily stopped accepting new waste, although local villagers doubt that somewhat. The bottom line is that the actions of Seletia and other rogue operators require a new approach, which is why I welcome these new regulations. For too long, our landfill sites and local communities have been targeted by rogue operators.

Driven by the evasion of landfill tax and disposal fees, waste crime has evolved into a highly profitable and organised enterprise. It undercuts legitimate businesses, pollutes our soil, and leaves taxpayers with staggering clean-up bills. The current system for registering waste carriers, brokers and dealers is broken. It relies on a basic tick-box exercise with minimal background checks—a vulnerability that criminals have systematically exploited. That is why I believe that the regulations represent a

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massive regulatory shift, dismantling the old registration model and pulling these rogue operators directly into the robust environmental permitting regulations framework.

When these laws take full effect, they will tighten the net on waste criminals at landfill gates in three distinct ways. First, operators will no longer just be able to sign their names on a register; they will have to actively prove that they are fit to handle waste. The Environment Agency will enforce strict background checks, mandatory identity verification, criminal record screenings and technical competence assessments before a single permit is issued. Those with a history of illegal dumping will and should be locked out of the system entirely.

Secondly, there is the issue of transparency. Bad actors frequently use anonymous white vans and misleading online advertisements to trick the public and smuggle illegal loads into disposal sites. Under the new regulations, operators must prominently display their unique permit numbers on their vehicles and in all advertising. That simple change turns each one of us into an enforcement officer and enables us to target and identify rogue traders, who will be instantly visible.

Thirdly, heavy penalties are needed. Previously, illegally transporting or brokering waste carried no custodial sentence, which was unacceptable. The draft regulations change that, introducing a maximum penalty of five years' imprisonment for those who flagrantly break the law and ruin people's lives. Furthermore, the Environment Agency is being granted expanded, decisive powers to revoke permits instantly and issue immediate enforcement notices to freeze rogue operations on the spot.

As the residents of Rockcliffe know, non-compliance and waste crime are not a victimless nuisance; they constitute an assault on our environment and on our economy, and an assault on people's homes. By transforming the way in which waste is controlled and transported, the regulations will ensure that only legitimate, heavily scrutinised operators can move material through our supply chain and through our communities. I welcome the closing of loopholes and the crackdown on criminality in the waste sector, and I look forward to a day when the likes of Seletia are forced out of the waste sector altogether.

8.24 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Cannock Chase knows all too well the impact of waste crime, and especially that of fly-tipping. Residents of Norton Canes and Little Wyrley in particular find that our country lanes, easily accessible from Walsall and Wolverhampton, are blighted by illegal dumps that are often huge and dangerous. I know that the Minister is passionate about tackling these vile crimes, and she is right to say that the current system is simply not fit for purpose. I am glad that she highlighted the case of Beau Vine, the Charolais-cross cow owned by Ann Maidment, the director of CLA South West, which, although humorous, highlighted the stark holes in our current system.

I very much welcome the robust new system, which will be in line with much of the rest of the waste sector. The public have rightly been calling for background and competence checks so we can have confidence in those whom we trust with our waste. In this context, I am always reminded of an elderly constituent who came to

me when I was a district councillor in Norton Canes. She had contacted a waste carrier, checked his licence to make sure that—as she saw it—he was legit, and handed over her waste and her money. A few weeks later, she was contacted by the council because her waste had been dumped, along with that of others, not 3 miles away in a rural part of our community. She was distraught, and told me that she would never have been intentionally careless about who she gave her waste to. Thankfully, in the end she was able to help identify the criminal who had exploited her and he was prosecuted, but many of our constituents end up paying the price under the current system.

I pay tribute to the environmental protection team at Cannock Chase district council. As a cabinet member, I saw at first hand the brilliant work that they do. They are more effective than those in many Tory-controlled neighbouring councils. I hope that the new Reform administration continues Labour's long-standing backing for their work, and that local government reorganisation brings others up to their top-notch standard.

The regulations will give us the structures that we need to root out waste criminals, from sole traders all the way up to organised crime groups, which, as we have heard, are increasingly moving into waste crime as a whole business model. I welcome stronger powers for the Environment Agency, particularly the ability to revoke permits, which I hope will act as a powerful disincentive—something that we lacked before this Government came to office. I am particularly happy to see the requirement for the visibility of permit numbers—on vans, for example.

This weekend, I met business owners who run high street shops in Hednesford and Rugeley to discuss various illegal practices happening on the high street. The Minister will not be surprised to hear that among them was waste crime. One told me of a business that regularly dumps its waste “out the back” in black bags—probably including electrical waste, because the business sells vapes. It is picked up by an unmarked van, and goes who knows where. Meanwhile, the business owners I spoke to have bins that are fully compliant, because they take their responsibilities seriously, and they want to know that others who do not will be hauled over the coals.

This is not just about fly-tipping at beauty spots in protected landscapes like Cannock Chase and idyllic hamlets like Little Wyrley; it is about fly-tipping in our high streets and town centres. Wherever waste crime occurs, the regulations will be another plank in the Government's strategy to crack down on this vile criminality, so that our constituents can see the back of these blights on our communities.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Minister to wind up.

8.27 pm

Mary Creagh: I will be brief and try not to detain the House for too long, but what a rich and insightful debate we have had. Let me begin by addressing the question of costs, which was raised by the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), who speaks for the Conservative party. Legitimate waste businesses are highly supportive of these regulations, as they raise standards and level the playing field across

the industry. There is a tiered approach to the new permitting regime, which will ensure that those carrying large amounts of the most at-risk types of waste will be distinctly identified and charged accordingly.

If we do the maths—I stopped doing maths when I finished O-levels, which was quite a long time ago—we are providing £186 million over the 11-year appraisal period, which will be offset against businesses incurring costs from increased tax. In other words, they will be brought into compliance and begin paying tax—£183 million. So yes, they will have to pay more. The ones that do not pay anything at the moment are going to be paying their tax. One of the reasons they have moved into this space is that they can take mixed household waste and charge people £125 for landfill, then move it on to somewhere else and say, “It’s only soil.” They are making £120 profit on every tonne that they take. Let us do the maths: if we have 300,000 tonnes here and 100,000 tonnes there, pretty soon we are talking about tens of millions of pounds from one illegitimate landfill site. I am not crying any tears about that and I think that, outside this place, our constituents will be cheering and clapping.

As I have said, legitimate companies know that they are being undercut by the rogues and the criminals—and why should they not have to learn how to do this? We have heard about vapes, industrial waste and all sorts of stuff turning up in landfill sites, and at the moment we are saying that it is absolutely fine—that anyone with a pair of gloves and a van can just come along and take the waste. No, that was the old way. We want to protect the environment and protect people as well, and we are also interested in protecting businesses. The impact assessment for the regulations says that businesses will “benefit from reduced waste crime”,

to the tune of £159 million, so I hope that most businesses will be better off. There are exemptions for charities, but we do not exempt small businesses and microbusinesses from complying based on their size; we have heard about all the small businesses and microbusinesses in this space, and exempting them would undermine the policy and our risk-based approach. Some of these businesses pose a significant waste crime risk, so we will be rolling this out.

The hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury asked about monitoring and review. We have an independent resources and waste policy programme evaluation, which will assess the impact of the major reforms that we are bringing in. That will report in March 2029, but as with anything, if stuff is not working, we will listen and take action.

I turn to the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for Normanton and Hemsworth (Jon Trickett). I know his neck of the woods very well, having served as one of the four MPs for Wakefield until 2019, and he is right to say that our constituents have the right to the peaceful enjoyment of their home. I was really saddened by the story of his constituent who was unable to celebrate his birthday with his family in his own home because he was ashamed of where he lived. I was also saddened to hear of constituents waking up with migraines and tasting the smell, and of kids feeling sick at school. It is absolutely disgusting.

Mineral processing at the site has significantly exceeded its permitted waste volumes, which has resulted in approximately 320,000 tonnes of misdescribed inert

waste containing biodegradable fines—the little bits that are chipped down. The site permit has been revoked but the waste remains, and we have heard the persistent and worsening concerns about the odour. We have had warmer weather recently, and there were 18 reports over 24 hours on 24 and 25 June. There is increasingly dissatisfaction with the persistent impact, so the EA is monitoring the site, and it has installed an additional air quality and odour monitoring facility to provide further data.

The EA is carrying out proactive odour monitoring in the area, requiring the operator to submit an odour management plan to address odour pollution. It is studying air quality impacts by using mobile monitoring facilities installed in the area and handheld gas analysers, and it is continuing to inspect the site and record permit breaches when it finds them. The EA is also monitoring the water quality in Frickley beck, because we do not want persistent and potentially organic pollutants to end up in our water supply, only for taxpayers and bill payers to be responsible for the clean-up further down the river. We are acting on intelligence received about vehicle movements at the site and are working closely with partners, including colleagues at the UK Health Security Agency and Wakefield council. The site permit has been revoked, and the site is no longer operational.

Members have asked questions about how we prosecute people for the misdescription of waste. The first thing we have to do is bring them into this regime, so that we are not reacting when there has been an accidental overloading and breach of permit conditions—I do not want to say it is a crime, because I would not want to prejudice anything.

I have had a long and very interesting conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) about the issue of the landfill gases at the Seletia sites at Hespin Wood and Flusco. As I say, these are horrible gases, and it too, with the same model, has breached the permitted waste, with massive over-dumping at those sites. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) told the story of his constituent, who was aghast at being dragged into this, and potentially criminalised by an innocent act of trying to do the right thing and get her waste dealt with properly.

I thank everyone for their valuable contributions to the debate. I have issued statutory guidance to councils on how to use their powers to seize and crush vehicles, because we are aware that, although they have the powers, they may not feel confident about using them. We are also working with CrimeStoppers to get the public to be part of the army of people tackling waste crime. If people do see something suspicious, I would ask them please to report it on 0800 555 111—I say that from memory, but I think it is the correct number.

These regulations are vital if we are to tackle waste crime. This change is long overdue for those moving and controlling waste. I thank all my departmental officials in the Box—James Cruddas, David Read and Freya Ballard—and Leena Hardy from my private office. The regulations are widely supported by our stakeholders and highly anticipated by our constituents. I thank all those working at the Environment Agency and in police forces across the country on tackling waste criminals and this new form of organised crime.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Environmental Permitting (Waste Controlling or Transporting) and Relevant Functions of Primary Authorities (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.

Payment Scheme

8.36 pm

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): I beg to move,

That the draft Infected Blood Compensation Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 18 June, be approved.

Before I begin the debate, I do want to pause and reflect on the reason that we are once again here today. Thousands of people had unimaginable suffering and hardship inflicted upon them through the use of infected blood. There are thousands of individual stories—in recent years, I have had the solemn privilege to listen to many of them—of how lives were upturned, changed and, in some cases, tragically lost. I know many Members across the House will, as they always do in these debates, very movingly share their constituents' stories, and it is important that we keep those at the forefront of our minds. It is also essential that we base our work on these stories, and that the compensation scheme reflects the lived experience of those to whom it seeks to bring justice.

I would like to briefly update the House on the delivery of compensation. Since it opened in 2024, the compensation service—the Infected Blood Compensation Authority—has contacted all infected people registered with the support scheme to start their claim. By December last year, it had opened its service to all cohorts, including to affected people. It has made offers of over £2.7 billion and paid out over £2.1 billion, in addition to the £1.4 billion that has already been paid in interim compensation.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Paymaster General for his speech and the way he is framing the debate by talking about the victims of this scandal, which is really important. Can he confirm the number of interim payments of £100,000 that have already been paid out?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will be delighted to write to my hon. Friend with the absolute up-to-date figure, but he is absolutely right to draw attention to the importance of progress. I know that Members across the House will, as they always do, welcome that progress. I also acknowledge, quite rightly, the House holding me, and indeed IBCA, to account on the speed of compensation. We always want to see swifter delivery of compensation.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): The Minister is right to point out that although we—I think across the House—welcome his work and diligence, and that of the previous Government, on the scheme and recognise the work that needs to be done, there is absolutely no doubt there are still too few who have received compensation. As of 2 June, my understanding is that just over 3,000 out of a potential 30,000 victims had received compensation. Can he update us on what he is doing to ensure that more people get the money they need as soon as possible?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I thank the hon. Lady; I worked closely with her on this issue when I was first in this role back in 2024 and she was in her previous role. What happens is that IBCA starts small. It uses a test-and-learn approach. With the infected, that worked very well because it reached a point where, if we imagine a graph that is time and numbers of payments, there was an

exponential bit where the graph went up very, very rapidly. That is where we now need to get to with the affected cohort. Indeed, IBCA is taking that same approach; it is starting small. That allows the authority to learn what additions to the claims service are needed, and to open the service to more people, as it is built around specific needs. I completely accept that that does mean that the numbers are initially lower, but I certainly expect that with the affected cohort, as with the infected cohort, we will get that moment when the numbers rise exponentially as progress is made.

As well as ensuring that the victims of the scandal receive compensation as swiftly as possible, we must deliver compensation packages that reflect their experiences. The infected blood inquiry's additional report, published in July 2025, made clear the importance of ensuring that the community of infected and affected people were at the centre of every discussion regarding the infected blood scandal. It has always been this Government's priority to deliver a compensation scheme that truly recognises the hardships faced by those impacted, and to do so while acknowledging the extraordinary resolve of this community in continuing to tell the stories of their experiences and their fight for justice. The regulations before the House today are a direct product of what we heard in the consultation.

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): There are still concerns among the community about the regulations before us today. The Minister knows that the regulations were laid on the day of the Backbench Business debate on 18 June. That meant there was no opportunity for Ministers to take on board the points that hon. Members were making on behalf of their constituents, who still would like to see the compensation scheme tweaked. Through his ongoing dialogue with the community, does he accept that there must be an opportunity for that tweaking to take place in response to some of those concerns?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: On my hon. Friend's first point, what we have before us is based on extensive consultation with the community. On the laying of the regulations, I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will see that the timing of this debate is designed so that we can speed up payments as quickly as possible going forward. That is why, as I am sure the House will appreciate, I have done all I can to get the debate scheduled before the summer recess.

Chris Vince: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will, and then I will come back to the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford).

Chris Vince: I thank the Minister for giving way again; he is being very generous with his time. It strikes me that the victims of these sorts of scandals—sadly, this is not the first we have discussed; I think of the Horizon Post Office scandal—are put in this position through no fault of their own and do not necessarily have degrees in how to access compensation schemes. What support—for example, through some sort of caseworker—is he giving to people who are looking to claim?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise that point. I have always been clear about the individualised caseworkers and the personalised approach of IBCA, and about the importance of legal and financial support, so that people can make informed decisions as to what they want to do with regards to the compensation.

I return to the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst. Following on from what Sir Brian Langstaff said, I have sought to introduce a proper mechanism for feedback from the community, so that whatever the issue is within the regulations, it can be elevated to the appropriate place: to me, or whoever is the Minister, to IBCA, to IBCA's board, to the chair or the chief executive—whoever has the power to deal with the issue. As my hon. Friend and I have discussed before, the mechanism and ability to look at the scheme is important.

The other point I would add, which my hon. Friend and I have previously discussed, is that many of the issues raised are to do not with the structure of the regulations, but with their implementation. It is important that, where there are issues of implementation—indeed, hon. and right hon. Members raise them with me—we make adjustments where necessary. I think he would acknowledge that there is a diversity of views in the community on certain issues, but we have sought to ensure that the compensation scheme reflects the views of the majority.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): The Minister is being generous in giving way. I have met people in Wokingham who are affected by the scandal. It does not just affect the person infected; it affects their family as well. My constituent is adamant that the effect on their spouse must be recognised. Does the Minister agree that the Government should give clarity on whether the spouses of those infected should receive their own separate compensation?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes. That is why the scheme is designed for both infected and affected people—and not just spouses; it includes children and siblings, and I am proud that it also includes carers. We think about the awful injustice for those who were infected, but we also remember the effect on their families and those around them. The hon. Member makes a powerful point.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): On that point, I acknowledge the huge amount of effort, attention and concentration that the Minister has put into the scheme. I am therefore slightly surprised that the Haemophilia Society, which is a great champion for the community, says that in its opinion, care provided by family members is not being fairly compensated. It says that the scheme does not currently enable carers to make an adequate claim for the full impact of the care they provided, and that it does not sufficiently reflect the financial and personal sacrifices made by those who have delivered that care over decades, with particular reference to children and their educational sacrifices. I know there are no easy answers to this, but has the Minister had an interaction with the Haemophilia Society, which is well placed to represent the affected community?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: As the right hon. Gentleman can imagine, I have interacted with the Haemophilia Society and many other charities over the past two years. It is important to mention that the scheme does

[*Nick Thomas-Symonds*]

include carers; I am perfectly willing to look at what the Haemophilia Society is saying about the precise package for carers, but the fundamental point is that carers should be recognised, and they are within the scheme.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I was interested in the Minister's answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford). He said that, notwithstanding the regulations and all the work to set out the rules and scope of the compensation scheme, there is an opportunity for people who are affected or infected to go all the way to the chief executive or chair of IBCA—to all the bodies involved or even the Minister, if necessary. Could the Minister set out in detail the parameters of that? That could ride roughshod over a carefully developed scheme, even if not everything is perfect. How far could it go? There might be a risk that many people feel that they have not been fairly treated and then take it all the way up to the Minister, which would put this or a future Minister in an invidious position.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend makes a fair point. When it came to this particular recommendation from Sir Brian Langstaff, I was concerned about two things. First, I wanted to ensure that there was a proper structure for the infected blood community to be able to put forward their views. I did not want that to become a glorified post box—I did not want it to just be a grand correspondence scheme, where letters came in and replies were sent back. What I wanted was a proper mechanism for sifting, so that complaints can go to the right place based on the particular nature of each one, so that the appropriate person can look at each complaint and see whether it can be dealt with.

To the broader point that my hon. Friend is alluding to, we also had to have stability in the policy in order to be able now to continue to drive forward compensation. My hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst, who does a fantastic job chairing the all-party parliamentary group, is quite rightly raising concerns with me. I want a proper mechanism for dealing with those concerns. That is why I have pushed so hard to make sure that we had this debate before the summer, because we must also ensure that we are doing what we can collectively to push forward the speed of payments as quickly as possible.

I should say that I have always been very grateful to the opposition parties, who have always facilitated that when I have brought regulations before the House. This is, I think, the fourth time I have done so.

Ashley Dalton (West Lancashire) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: I will give way to my hon. Friend, but then I had better get on to the regulations.

Ashley Dalton: My right hon. Friend is being very generous; I thank him for giving way. It was my sombre privilege to work with him on this matter when I was a Minister in the Department of Health. He is talking about driving forward the scheme; can he outline what work he has done with our devolved Governments in Scotland, Northern Ireland and Wales to drive forward the final compensation scheme?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It was a privilege to work with my hon. Friend in Government. She was excellent to work with on this matter, and I am very grateful for all her contributions. Of course, I have been dealing with a number of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations in the Cabinet Office, but, as my hon. Friend knows, the Department of Health also had responsibility for a number of them, and I know that she drove those forward very well.

My hon. Friend is absolutely right to talk about working with the devolved Administrations. Again, I have been lucky over the past two years to have worked very constructively with the devolved Administrations on this matter. This is a pre-devolution scandal, but we are taking measures to seek justice now, in the post-devolution age. To reflect that, it has been really important to work with Governments across the United Kingdom—all of whom have been constructive in the time that I have been working on this.

I will turn now to the regulations. Regulation 3 introduces a new level of award as recommended by the inquiry, so that the people who suffered from the side effects of interferon treatment will receive an additional injury award, as well as further financial loss and care compensation, to reflect the impact on their lives. Following the consultation, the regulations also ensure that people who received more than one round of interferon will be properly compensated for each of those rounds of treatment.

Regulation 4 removes the 25% deduction applied to past care compensation for people who choose to receive support scheme payments for life. Following the consultation, the regulations ensure that people will receive past financial loss compensation based on whichever of the two ways of calculating the award is most financially beneficial to them. I chose to do that to recognise that selecting only one way of calculating the award would mean that some people's expected awards would reduce in size, which was not the intention. By running both calculations and giving each person whichever is the highest amount in their personal circumstances, we will ensure that everyone gets fair compensation through this award.

Regulation 5 makes provision for a 50% uplift to the core autonomy award for those infected under the age of 18, calculated based on the highest severity of infection they experienced during childhood.

Regulation 6 amends the eligibility criteria for the unethical research award, so that everyone treated for a bleeding disorder before 1986 will receive an unethical research award. The regulations also introduce a new unethical research award for children, which means that people who were treated for a bleeding disorder in childhood will receive an uplifted award.

The regulations also increase the amount of compensation that all eligible people receive for this award. It is one of the most shocking aspects of this scandal; I do not think that any amount of money could ever truly make up for that heinous experimentation, particularly where it took place on children. We have listened to the feedback received through the consultation, and, as a result, people who attended Treloar's will receive £60,000 rather than the £25,000 proposed in the consultation. Other children will receive £45,000. Those treated in adulthood will receive £30,000, tripling the amount that they currently receive.

Regulation 7 ensures that everyone who was eligible for the special category mechanism or an equivalent payment through the infected blood support schemes—IBSS, as they are known—receives additional financial loss and care compensation. Following the consultation, the regulations ensure that everyone in this position has the award backdated to 2017, when the SCM award was first introduced, regardless of when they were assessed. Living people who were not assessed as eligible for SCM can also now apply for it through IBCA, including those who were previously unsuccessful in their application to the infected blood support schemes.

Regulations 8 and 9 make changes to the exceptional loss award under the supplementary route. These regulations introduce a compensation uplift of £60,000 for people who had entered or had an offer to enter a career that generally would have paid 10% more than the gross national median average earnings, as determined in 2024, at any point prior to retirement age, but were unable to progress in that career due to their infection. That award is on top of their core route financial loss award.

We also heard in the consultation that some people are concerned that they will not be able to access the exceptional loss award if they do not have historical payslips. The Government will work with IBCA to ensure that all relevant evidence can be used to help someone to show that they are eligible for the exceptional loss award, so that that is not a barrier. I have said repeatedly from the Dispatch Box that I want the scheme to be as sympathetic and unburdensome to applicants as possible.

On the occasions that I have visited IBCA, I have been very impressed by the culture being imbued there of taking a can-do approach when people are ringing and trying to find appropriate historical documents. That is particularly important for two reasons. First, the events often happened long ago. Secondly, we know from Sir Brian Langstaff's report that there is evidence of deliberate document destruction. For both those reasons, there needs to be a sympathetic approach.

Dame Meg Hillier: There have been occasions, in various roles I have had in this place, when we have looked at documents. The Government have a document destruction plan. At the Department for Work and Pensions, for example, a year after death one's records will be destroyed; that has been an issue when there have been problems with pensions.

Although the Minister is focused today on the regulations, what he has said is very interesting in the context of document retention and other schemes that require proof in order to pay out. With immigration, for instance, someone might need to prove that they had been in the country, and they might need to access doctors or school records. I wonder whether he, or others in the Cabinet Office, are thinking about how lessons can be learned from IBCA's approach in this case that could be applied to other areas of Government and other compensation schemes, so that we do not lose the learnings from this for the next time—because, inevitably, sadly, things will go wrong with Government.

Nick Thomas-Symonds: My hon. Friend is absolutely right and there are certainly lessons to be learned. That point applies in this case and, sadly, to a number of the other historical scandals that the House has dealt with over recent years.

Clive Jones: It is very clear that the Minister agrees that the infected blood scandal is a tragic disaster and a failure of public service. The Government must ensure that it never happens again and must strengthen any accountability measures that they can. Does he agree with me and many of the survivors that there must be a duty of candour on all public officials that is robustly enforced?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Yes, I do. The Hillsborough law is something that I have given a great deal of personal time to over the last couple of years; it has been before this House, and I do not think that it is far away at all from becoming law. I hope that over the next few months we will start to see the rolling-out of the duty of candour. It is a landmark law and putting it on the statute book will make a huge difference. It will be a hugely significant moment. It is also important that we drive forward the cultural change that it requires.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): The cultural point is really important because all the NHS scandals have this point of cultural failure, with cover-ups and defensiveness and people being badly let down. The Health Bill is going through Parliament at the moment, and one of our concerns is that the abolition of Healthwatch and the Health Services Safety Investigations Body will not help to progress that cultural change. Will the Minister urge his counterparts in the Department of Health and Social Care to reconsider those abolitions?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: The point I am making around duty of candour, which I think overrides all these other points, is really what Sir Brian Langstaff was referring to. He called it institutional defensiveness, saying that the problem when awful things happened was that people put either personal or institutional reputations above the public interest. It is that cultural change that we need to drive forward.

I will return to the regulations as I am conscious of the time. Regulation 10 introduces a 50% uplift to the core injury award for some affected people. That includes eligible bereaved partners, and children and siblings who themselves became affected under 18 years of age. Eligible bereaved parents will also be able to receive this award in the tragic circumstances where their child passed away while under the age of 18. I know that some Members have raised concerns about the eligibility for this award in previous debates, and I want to assure colleagues that, as with the rest of these regulations, the decisions we made on this award directly reflect what we heard through the consultation about the specific impacts of the scandal on children.

Regulations 11 and 12 are unrelated to the public consultation, and relate to the transfer of responsibility for making support scheme payments from the infected blood support scheme to IBCA. To maintain consistency with the support schemes, the value of someone's support scheme payments will be uprated every year in April at the rate of the consumer prices index of the previous September. These regulations therefore account for the next CPI uplift taking place in April 2027, after IBCA takes responsibility for making those support scheme payments from the existing infected blood support schemes.

Ashley Dalton: I thank the Minister for his kind words earlier. Could he clarify whether co-infected people will be able to make a compensation claim for each round of interferon that they had, or whether those are being lumped together?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: It is per round of interferon treatment. I am pleased to provide that clarification to my hon. Friend, and I repeat my thanks to her for her work.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Just to be absolutely tidy, could I make a plea on behalf of those families where the member is deceased but the estate still has a claim? There is sometimes, possibly wrongly, an impression that these people are put to the back of the queue. Could I have an assurance that that would not be the case?

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Certainly every single situation is a priority. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that IBCA is operationally independent. It has come up with a priority set of cohorts, which is publicly available, but the estates of the deceased are absolutely a priority. He can certainly have that assurance.

The regulations are a result of listening, as we have been doing through the public consultation, to those impacted by this terrible scandal. We want the scheme to reflect the hardships and suffering faced by those who had their lives upturned through no fault of their own, and we are always keen to balance this with ensuring that the scheme can be delivered as quickly as possible. I am pleased with the progress we have made on the compensation scheme, but this debate is not about the Government's work today. Rather, as has always been the case in these debates, it is about the House coming together to put the voice of the community first.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

9.4 pm

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): I would like to start by thanking the Paymaster General for bringing forward these important regulations and also to say thank you to the former Minister for Public Health, the hon. Member for West Lancashire (Ashley Dalton), for her valuable work when she was in office.

This debate takes place in the shadow of one of the gravest injustices in modern British history. The infected blood scandal caused unimaginable harm, with lives lost, families devastated, careers destroyed, potential never realised, children robbed of parents and many victims forced to fight for decades just for recognition and to be heard. Compensation is not a gift from the state; it is a duty owed to those who were failed by the state. That duty must be delivered with urgency, compassion and fairness.

The regulations make a number of amendments to the Infected Blood Compensation Scheme Regulations 2025. Many of the changes appear to address concerns raised by victims, families and campaigners about the structure and adequacy of the scheme and, obviously, those contained in the additional report. His Majesty's Opposition welcome the Government bringing forward these amendments to address the lessons learned from the early stages of the compensation scheme, to fill in some of the gaps and to implement the recommendations of Sir Brian Langstaff's additional report.

However, the existence of this instrument also underlines the importance of getting the scheme right. Victims and their families have already waited far too long. They must not be required to navigate repeated technical changes, uncertainty or delays before receiving the compensation and recognition they deserve.

The regulations also amend the method for calculating past and future amounts for certain awards, including financial loss awards. I would be grateful if the Minister sets out clearly how the Government will ensure that those changes are properly communicated to victims and to families so that people understand how their entitlement will be calculated and whether they may be better off as a result. The changes are sensible but, by necessity, regulations can appear rather daunting. My degree was in economics and law, and I am reasonably comfortable with legal texts and with algebra, but at first glance we can wonder what language some of it is written in, so it is obviously important that they are communicated in a way that can be properly understood.

His Majesty's Opposition also welcome the changes to the autonomy award for those infected as children. The fact that some people were infected at such a young age, with consequences that shaped their entire childhood and adult life, must be properly reflected in the scheme. This is not simply a question of medical impact; it is about lost childhoods, lost opportunities and the lifelong trauma experienced by those who infected when they were at their most vulnerable.

There are also changes in relation to unethical research practices, which we have discussed many times in the Chamber. We greatly welcome the increase in the relevant award amounts and the extension in provision to those who received treatment for bleeding disorders before 1986. Given the seriousness of the issue, will the Minister confirm how the Government will identify those who fall into that category and what evidence he expects they will have to provide so that the process does not become another source of distress for victims and their families?

We also note the creation of a new "severe health condition" category for qualifying chronic hepatitis-associated conditions based on support scheme categories. Again, we would welcome clarity from the Minister on how he expects that to work in practice and in particular how the Government will ensure consistency across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The amendments to affected injury awards are also significant. Families were not bystanders to this scandal; partners, parents, children and siblings lived with the consequences every day. Many provided care, endured bereavement, suffered stigma and experienced profound emotional and financial harm. The scheme must continue to recognise that the damage caused by this scandal extended far beyond those directly infected. Therefore, while these technical changes matter greatly, the central question remains delivery. Victims and families need to know when they will receive compensation, including as a result of the new regulations. They need to know how quickly claims will be processed, what support will be available to them to navigate the scheme, and how the Government will ensure that truly no one is left behind.

I therefore ask the Minister to address the following points. First, what is his intended timetable for payments under the regulations, and how many people do the Government expect to receive compensation in the coming months? Secondly, how confident is he that that the

Infected Blood Compensation Authority has the staffing, expertise and resources it needs to process claims under the regulations quickly and sensitively?

Chris Vince: This is a friendly intervention, because the hon. Gentleman's response has been very supportive, and we all recognise the cross-party consensus on getting this right. As he will be aware, last week the Prime Minister made a formal apology to the women impacted by the forced adoption scandal; some of the evidence that we got on the Education Committee was about the way that they were treated when they tried to get the records. Does he recognise the importance of the front-facing organisations that support victims of these scandals being sympathetic and supportive?

Mike Wood: I could not agree more. It is particularly important that infected and affected victims and their families, who for many, many years were not listened to, heard or believed, and who faced officials who denied what all the evidence later proved to be the case, now feel that they are being treated with respect and sensitivity.

Thirdly, will the Minister clarify further, as I asked earlier, how the Government will communicate the broader changes to victims and their families in plain English, rather than simply relying on the legal and technical language in the draft regulations? Finally, what appeal or review mechanisms will be available if individuals believe that their reward has been calculated incorrectly or does not reflect their full circumstances?

The Opposition strongly support the regulations, which build on work that has proceeded through this House with support from across the Chamber, and continue work that began before the last election. We recognise that they contain changes that many victims and families will welcome.

I am sure that the Minister will agree that our responsibility as Parliament, and his as a Minister, does not end with the passing of statutory instruments. It ends only when victims and their families have received the recognition, justice and compensation that they have waited decades to secure. This scandal was defined by delay, denial and institutional failure, and the compensation scheme must not be defined by the same failings. The regulations are a strong and positive step towards ensuring that that is not the case, but the Government must now deliver them with urgency, transparency and humanity. That is the very least that victims and their families deserve after all this time.

9.13 pm

Clive Efford (Eltham and Chislehurst) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Paymaster General for getting us to this point. It is time to move on, but there are still concerns, as I have mentioned already. I hope that those will be taken on board as we move forwards because, as he set out, the community out there are concerned about the pace with which payments are being made, particularly now that we are into the claims from those affected. It is time for test and learn to move us on and to ensure that those payments are made as soon as possible.

I urge that the ongoing dialogue, to which my right hon. Friend referred when he made his original statement in response to the inquiry report, continues and that those people's voices are heard. I am grateful for the meeting he had with me following the Backbench Business debate. I raised all the issues that I raised in that debate,

and I am also grateful that he will come back to me about those issues. I will not go through all of them again today and will instead give other hon. Members the chance to speak, but it is important that they are taken on board.

My right hon. Friend referred to the pace of payments, which is important, and to the evidence. We have to take note of the fact that so many of the people infected and affected have had to campaign for 40 years or more to get to this point and to get justice. It is unlikely that they will have evidence—the payslips and all sorts of evidence—that they were living with their parents at the time when a sibling was infected. It is not possible for people to provide that depth of information so late on. We have to be considerate in the way that we approach that.

My right hon. Friend and I have debated and discussed unethical testing, and we differ on this issue. I, along with those people who were the children who were deliberately infected, feel very strongly about this. It is a sobering fact that they were deliberately infected by the state that should have been there to care for them. For them, the compensation is not about the money but about the degree of recognition within this scheme of just exactly how badly treated they were. The level of payments for that should be much higher than they are.

I welcome these regulations. It is important that we move on as fast as possible now that we have them in place. Again, I congratulate the Paymaster General on all the work he has done.

9.17 pm

Ian Sollom (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): I thank the Minister for his continued commitment to improving the compensation scheme and for keeping the House up to date on its progress. I know that he takes this matter seriously, and I hope that we will see him continue to do so after the summer recess.

We Liberal Democrats welcome many of the changes being made today, as we welcomed the previous changes made in April. The infected blood scandal is the biggest treatment disaster in NHS history, and such a disaster should never be allowed to happen again. The suffering inflicted on infected and affected people was, and still is, immeasurable. It was compounded by a cover-up that no amount of compensation will ever truly make up for, but it can go some way. After all this time, it must happen quickly, fully and fairly. Unfortunately, the experience of too many of those impacted is that that is not currently happening.

Today I would like to draw attention to some significant omissions still missing from the legislation, and I hope that the Minister will take them on board in his efforts to achieve justice for everyone impacted by this scandal. I will share some stories from my constituents by way of example.

The first is the lack of a dedicated care award for living affected persons. One of my constituents infected with hepatitis C 30 years ago has repeatedly raised with me her concern about elderly affected carers who are still alive and providing care. Three decades on from her infection, her mother continues to live with her and provides care daily, yet there is no separate pathway for her to claim compensation for this. To possibly pre-empt the Minister's response that care awards can be applied for through claims made as an infected person, I would

[*Ian Sollom*]

argue that this method only works if it is performed at pace. We know that the speed of compensation is not what it should be. My constituent tells me that it is “painful to contemplate” that she

“may not receive compensation in time to meaningfully support or repay”

her elderly mother

“after a lifetime shaped by...infection.”

I would be interested to hear from the Minister what consideration the Department has given to calls for a dedicated care award paid directly to eligible living affected persons, and why, while simultaneously promising to speed up compensation, he is continuing to compensate carers only through this complex existing pathway.

Also missing from the regulations are measures to remove the impossible evidentiary demands currently in place, such as requiring victims to produce non-existent records, forcing elderly and grieving parents to go through complex online verification processes, or parents of children who died as a result of infected blood products being asked to prove that they lived with their child at the time. By way of example, I have a constituent whose father received blood transfusions following a severe car accident in 1989. He contracted hepatitis C and subsequently died from leukaemia in 2007. The records of his treatment across two hospitals have been destroyed, and his daughter has reached a complete impasse in trying to claim compensation for this incredibly traumatic series of events. I appreciate that some of this was only raised with the Minister very recently, but I do wonder if he might tell the House what steps he has taken to urgently investigate those reports and what steps he is taking to ensure that no victim is retraumatised and prevented from being served justice by having to provide impossible evidence.

I have on several occasions raised my constituents’ concerns about disparities in compensation for different diseases. One of my constituents has lived without his mother for 25 years after she died from hepatitis C in 1998, and he questions why claiming in her case involves complex severity bands whereas claiming for a living infected person with HIV is done through one single band. Can the Minister clarify whether he is still considering where there may be broader structural differences within the scheme and how they might be addressed?

My final, broader, point is that there are very few accountability mechanisms in place for infected and affected people to genuinely hold both IBCA and the Cabinet Office to account. Both have been responsive when I pass along letters from my constituents, but that does prompt the question of why they were not so responsive when the constituents made contact themselves. Victim and patient voices matter, and they must be listened to at every level.

We Liberal Democrats would mandate integrated care boards to include patient voices at board level through organisations such as Healthwatch, and we share the disappointment of many impacted by the infected blood scandal that the Government have consistently, it seems, listened to the advice of the technical expert group over the lived experience of hundreds of victims. We need to end the culture of cover-up exposed by the infected blood inquiry and other scandals by immediately

introducing that legislation to impose a statutory duty of candour on all public officials and establishing a patient safety taskforce to improve data sharing, analyse patient risk and co-ordinate safety responsibilities. I therefore ask the Minister for an update on the progress of the Hillsborough law and stress once again the urgency of getting it through this place.

In closing, I pay tribute to every victim of this awful scandal and reiterate calls from across the House for IBCA to work faster to ensure that justice is served for all.

9.23 pm

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): On behalf of constituents that I am proud to represent, I want to ask the Paymaster General questions of justice. I want to ask whether the infected blood compensation scheme is delivering the justice that Sir Brian Langstaff’s inquiry promised everyone who has suffered one of the greatest scandals in our nation’s history. First, however, I want to thank the Minister for our discussions about this topic, most recently just a couple of hours ago. I have raised it on the Floor of the House before, and I will keep raising it on behalf of my constituents.

Tonight, I want to represent one family in particular, but although I am raising the experience of one family from my constituency, that experience is identical to that of many other families up and down the country. Jane Yvonne Fitzgerald was infected with contaminated blood following the administration of a single unit of blood during a non-emergency procedure. She did not consent to the risks to which she was exposed, and according to the inquiry, many patients like her should never have had such transfusions in the first place. She endured decades of illness, repeated hospital admissions, invasive procedures, severe psychological trauma and profound threats to her sense of dignity. Her experiences of care fell short of expectations. On one occasion, she suffered litres of fluid being drained from her abdomen in what was effectively a hospital broom cupboard. On another occasion, she was sent home despite being in excruciating pain because no bed was made available. On that same day, her abdomen ruptured. When she sought support, she was told there was nothing physically wrong with her. The only psychological support she was offered was alongside alcohol and drug dependency groups, when she had no addiction. The state failed to protect her and failed to care for her mental and physical health.

Since she died 10 years ago, Yvonne’s family feel that justice has evaded them. Under the current compensation scheme, because she died before surviving long enough to make a claim under today’s framework, her compensation is deemed by her family to be around £300,000 less than for someone in otherwise similar circumstances who remains alive today. In her family’s view, the scheme creates a perverse outcome whereby dying from infected blood can result in less compensation than surviving with it. The younger someone was when they died, and the earlier they died, the greater the financial penalty imposed upon their family. In some cases, I am told that the disparity between deceased victims and survivors can approach £1 million. Will the Minister explain to my constituents why that is?

The technical expert group recognised that severe psychological harm and exceptional suffering could be evidenced through historical records and expert opinion,

yet many deceased victims cannot access enhanced awards because they died before modern assessment mechanisms existed. The inquiry recognised that affected family members suffered direct and profound harms and recommended a supplementary compensation route, yet that recommendation has still not been implemented. On behalf of my constituents, I ask the Paymaster General why the recommendation of the Infected Blood Psychological Service that affected individuals should receive individual assessments not yet been adopted.

The current approach also produces unfair outcomes. My constituent Ruairí Fitzgerald moved back into his parents' home to help save it when his father was considered too old to obtain a mortgage. He gave up his own first-time buyer status and put his own future on hold to care for Yvonne, his mother. He cooked, cleaned and accompanied her to countless appointments, witnessing at first hand the effects of her poor health. His mother died before she could see him marry, she never met his two children—her two grandsons—and he is living life in that knowledge. Under the current scheme, he is entitled to substantially less compensation than estranged relatives who played little or no role in her life or care. He wonders why the scheme compensates people according to broad family categories rather than recognising the harm individuals have experienced.

There are further concerns. Widows' support payments made under the previous schemes are now deducted from compensation awards for many claimants, while those who settled earlier are unaffected. Compensation is not routinely uprated for inflation, meaning delay steadily erodes its real value. The issue raised in my constituency is how compensation delayed should not become compensation diminished.

As we have heard from all hon. Members who have contributed, this debate is about trying to remedy what went wrong and trying to ensure that there is justice. Justice cannot depend upon whether someone survived long enough to satisfy an administrative process. Justice cannot depend upon the year someone died. Jane Fitzgerald endured years of suffering caused by failures of the state, before losing her life, and her family believe that the current scheme treats her life as though it were worth less because she died before the compensation framework caught up with the truth.

In closing, I put the following questions to the Minister. Will the Government review the disparity between awards for deceased victims and survivors? Will they establish a route for recognising severe harms suffered by deceased victims through historical evidence? Will they implement the inquiry's recommendation for a supplementary route for affected family members, including individual assessments where appropriate? Will they end the deduction of widows' support payments and ensure that compensation keeps pace with inflation so that delay does not diminish justice? For Jane Yvonne Fitzgerald, for her whole family, and for every family whose loved one was taken from them, this debate and the proceedings in this House offer us an opportunity to ensure that a promise is honoured—a promise that justice is given to all.

9.30 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): I am very grateful to the Minister for giving us an update and introducing the regulations. He did so with real

sincerity, guile and grace, and I think we are all grateful for the way in which he engages with us all across the House.

I do not know how many of these statements and urgent questions I have attended over the course of the past 15 or 20 years. I seem to be spending an awful lot of time with the hon. Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford), attending debates and meetings of the all-party parliamentary group that he so assiduously chairs. I have written letters to various Ministers, got responses, taken them to constituents, let them down again and perhaps even given them some sense of encouragement. I would like not to be doing that any more; I would like just for things to just work.

I would like to think that everybody I have represented and got to know within the community is feeling positive and good about what is happening, and satisfied that things are moving on. I would like to think that the people who deserve these payments are securing them. I would like to think that they do not have to worry any more or be anxious about their domestic or personal situation—that they do not have to be concerned about those they care for, love or live with, because things are just being done. It would be great to be in that position. I always like to hear from the Minister, and it is great that he gives us constant updates, but would it not be something to get to that place of resolution, where people are satisfied with the progress and the payments being made?

We had a very good debate a couple of weeks ago, which has been referenced by a couple of Members. I thought it was really good; lots of important and relevant points and issues came up. That is why I was a little bit surprised to find that the regulations were laid the very next day. Surely we should have taken that opportunity to pick up some of those things, because the themes were quite consistent across the House. Several concerns were consistently raised, and I think the Minister got a very clear impression of the priorities among those of us who work with the community—that was all loud and clear.

There is something I do not get; perhaps the Minister can explain it to me. Maybe it was always part of the timetable that the regulations would be laid on that particular date, but surely we should have had time to reflect and go through the various points that came up from Members right across the House before we made this final progress and these regulations were laid. Important points came up, and we have heard some of them again today. I will not repeat them, because I have said them so many times to various Ministers at the Dispatch Box.

The key thing that really needs to be progressed, looked at and resolved is the pace of the payments. We know that the infected are being looked after, and it looks like we are making real progress there. The Minister is right to refer to the structure and process used, because it has worked; I think we are all satisfied that things have moved on quite significantly and that payments are being made. But when it comes to the affected, I think we need to see a little bit more dynamism and energy. We need to ensure that the payments are made to these people, who are desperately waiting.

I do not think the issues around interferon are properly addressed through the regulations. We are all happy and satisfied that we have the new 2B payments, but there is a huge case to be made for further levels of payments,

[Pete Wishart]

particularly around 3B or 4B awards, which the community have been asking for quite consistently. The Government and their expert group seem to have ignored the huge amounts of real-world evidence of the debilitating, enduring impact of interferon treatment. In the debate a couple of weeks ago, I said it was akin to chemotherapy. We should start thinking about the damage that has been done by interferon on the same basis, and take it as seriously.

We welcome the increase in the figure for families who have been subject to research and medical trials; I think the Minister said £60,000, compared with £25,000 previously, so that is a significant rise. However, there are still a few questions and issues around some of those payments and the inclusion of some people in the unethical research group. Again, it all comes back to that date of 1986—I think I heard the Minister say something about that particular date. That still seems to be a pretty rigorous cut-off point for people to be considered, particularly as the report itself references damage done beyond that date. Maybe the Minister could clarify that a little bit, and satisfy me that any cases belonging to that particular group that came after 1986 will be addressed.

It is disappointing that there has been very little reference to the significant problems with estate claims, despite a number of meetings and much correspondence with the Cabinet Office. As we have heard from several hon. Members, it is a feature that came up in the previous debate. This is about the evidential hurdles that are impacting so many people—the fact that records do not exist, and it is really difficult to prove that certain documentation existed when it is no longer there because of historical issues, or because it has been lost, mislaid, or perhaps destroyed. We heard a little bit about the Government's role in facilitating that—a number of records that had been kept by various Departments are no longer available to people who need to access them in order to progress their claims.

Again, as a couple of Members have mentioned, we cannot forget the thousands of bereaved families who continue to wait for their compensation claims to begin, causing great anxiety and distress. The most important thing is the scaling up of the claims process to end the unbearable period of limbo that people are still having to endure. The number of the affected who have been through the process remains too low—now is the time for real progress. I think we are looking for a commitment that the Government will reflect on some of the issues we have highlighted, and perhaps think about coming back to the House having considered some of the things that have been raised consistently in debates and statements over the course of the past few weeks. Perhaps the Government could give us an update on how they intend to deal with those issues.

It will not surprise the Minister that I am going to raise the issue of the duty of candour, which I think is the most important missing detail in all this—the thing that profoundly needs to be addressed. We know that the Hillsborough law Bill is coming up; I suggest ever so gently to the Government that that Bill has to be an absolute imperative. We need a duty of candour for civil servants who are involved in some of these scandals. Twenty years ago, civil servants would give stuff to

Ministers for correspondence to me that they knew was lies, not just misleading or getting a few things wrong. I was raising issues on behalf of constituents who were experiencing real difficulties, and civil servants were supplying correspondence—facts and figures—to the Ministers replying to me that they knew was wrong. We need to try to understand why that happened and address it. The duty of candour aspect of any Hillsborough law is going to be highly important to ensure that nothing like this scandal ever happens again.

I will end by saying that we are in such a better place than we were five years ago, or even three years ago; we are getting there. All of us who care about this debate, who have been in the Chamber putting these issues to the Minister, do not want anybody left behind; everyone, infected or affected, should be brought with us and should benefit from this resolution in the House.

I will say one other thing to the Minister. The community have suffered so much throughout the decades. They have taken up this fight with such distinction and such courage, and they need to be thanked. We had the service, which was brilliant, but I hope that as we go forward, the Minister will look at the community as a resource—a source of lived experience who have a background in these issues that goes beyond anything that any expert group could have. They have lived with this, they have seen it, and it is they who are dealing with it. I am satisfied that we are moving forward and I hope we get some updates. I congratulate the Minister again on bringing the measure forward, but will the Government please look at some of the things that so many of us have been saying for such a long time, and make sure that they are properly addressed as we go forward?

9.40 pm

Nick Thomas-Symonds: Once again, this has been an excellent debate. It has been excellent in tone and excellent in terms of hon. and right hon. Members speaking about their constituents. I will try to deal with some of the issues, but there will be others, particularly issues of detail, that I will address if Members write to me.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) on his work as the able deputy for my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst (Clive Efford) on the all-party parliamentary group. The 1986 date is simply because the last medical study identified as unethical by Sir Brian Langstaff's inquiry was from 1984. The date goes forward a bit to try to ensure that we capture everything; that is the significance of the date. He and I have had the discussion about interferon during the debate some weeks ago. I agree with him and the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire (Ian Sollom), on the duty of candour. It is hugely important that we drive that forward.

If my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) could, will he send me that list of questions about his late constituent, Jane Fitzgerald? I just make one observation: there is a difference for those who have died versus those who are living, but I point out that money gets paid to dependants in the first circumstance, which should be taken into account. I will come back to him in detail if he sends me those questions.

I once again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eltham and Chislehurst for his work. I agree with him on the sympathetic approach to evidence, on the importance of the ongoing dialogue and certainly on the importance of speed. I could not agree more with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), about clear communication; it is something that I speak about frequently, and I will continue to do so. On the review mechanism, people can ask IBCA for a review. Beyond that, they have the option of a first-tier tribunal and, beyond that, the courts. The initial stage is a review by IBCA. Although IBCA is operationally independent, I entirely agree with his point about me being available to offer appropriate support where necessary. The bulk of infected people should be paid by the end of 2027 and the bulk of affected people by the end of 2029. However, those are backstops, not targets. As I have often said to the House, the aim is to speed up those claims and get to that point of exponential growth in payments of the affected claims.

The point about care was raised by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and the hon. Member for St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire. The care award is not paid directly to the person who provided care simply because if we did that, we would be asking IBCA to determine who provided the care and to go to affected people for evidence that they provided care. We could even end up with IBCA having to mediate disputes between multiple people talking about care. Going down that particular route could have led to further delays, and that is why we have taken the approach that we have.

It is absolutely right that these regulations reflect the majority of what we heard in the consultation and that we do make changes. The regulations complete the Government's response to the additional report, but as Members across the House have said, the hard work to deliver the compensation must now accelerate. It is our duty to remember the tragedy inflicted on thousands of people and to bring real change not just to this compensation scheme, but beyond that, and not least to the duty of candour, which is another of Sir Brian Langstaff's recommendations. I hope that colleagues across the House will join me this evening in supporting these regulations. I commend them to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Infected Blood Compensation Scheme (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 18 June, be approved.

Employment and Training

9.44 pm

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): I beg to move,

That the draft Industrial Training Levy (Engineering Construction Industry Training Board) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 1 June, be approved.

In my view, the provisions in this statutory instrument are compatible with the European convention on human rights.

The statutory purpose of the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board is to make better provision for training throughout the engineering construction industry in England, Scotland and Wales. Engineering construction is critical to the Government's wider ambitions for economic growth, clean energy and energy security. The industry provides the skilled workforce to build, maintain and operate major energy, manufacturing and industrial infrastructure across the country. The continued value of the ECITB and the Construction Industry Training Board was confirmed by a 2023 independent review, which found that a statutory levy remains the most effective model for industry-wide investment in training, and is needed to address persistent structural workforce challenges within the industries covered by the industry training boards.

This order gives effect to the ECITB's levy proposals for 2026, 2027 and 2028. The levy remains the board's primary source of funding, and the order is required for the board to raise mandatory assessments on employers that are in scope. It continues to receive strong support from employers: more than 85% of levy-paying employers supported the levy proposals, representing nearly 98% of total levy value—well above the statutory threshold of more than 50% support required from industry.

A 12-week Government consultation has just closed on a proposal to bring the two ITBs together into a single, unified body to support the combined skills needs of the engineering construction and construction sectors. The Government are now carefully considering the views expressed before making decisions on reforms that may be needed to ensure that the system delivers the support that employers need. I cannot prejudge the outcome but, in order to maintain the ECITB for support for employers, we need this levy order. If the Government chose to proceed with the proposed reform, the earliest that a single body could be in place would be the spring of 2028. If reform required a new ITB levy order, it would come to the House through the usual parliamentary process.

I thank the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments for its detailed review of this levy order. The order retains levy assessment rates from the Industrial Training Levy (Engineering Construction Industry Training Board) Order 2023 and retains the exemption threshold to protect small businesses and microbusinesses that are still eligible for ECITB grants and support.

An estimated £137.9 million will be raised in levy between 2026 and 2028. It will be invested in meeting the skills needs of the engineering construction industry. It will fund programmes to widen participation, raise skill levels, increase opportunity and maintain occupational standards for the industry. It includes targeted grant support for employers to develop the skills pipeline in engineering construction. Since 2023, more than 5,000

[Sir Stephen Timms]

apprenticeship starts have been supported through ECITB employer funding, including electrical, mechanical and nuclear-specific apprenticeships. That support includes direct grants for employers, travel and accommodation costs, and costs of additional qualifications that are required.

The funding raised by the ECITB levy directly underpins broader economic priorities. More than 90,000 people are employed in the leviable workforce, contributing an estimated £33 billion in gross value added, which rises to £100 billion when we include the wider sectors serviced by the engineering construction industry. However, the industry faces big, long-standing challenges in recruiting and retaining a skilled workforce, which makes voluntary investment in training harder to secure. Only a statutory levy can guarantee that the skills that industry urgently needs will be provided at the scale required. If this order is not approved, the ECITB will be unable to collect the levy in 2026. That would hit apprenticeships and other vital industry qualifications, employer support programmes, training standards and the future capabilities of one of our most economically significant sectors.

It is estimated that the UK needs an additional 40,000 engineering construction workers, and this order will play an important part in supporting major infrastructure projects nationwide. In addition to industry support, the proposals before the House today have received the full support of the devolved Governments of Scotland and Wales. They recognise, as we do, that the ability of the ECITB to raise and invest levy income is vital to ensuring that employers across all three nations can access the engineering construction skills that they need. I commend the order to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

9.51 pm

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): This draft order will allow the Engineering Construction Industry Training Board, known as the ECITB, to continue collecting a levy on employers in order to fund training and address skills shortages. The engineering construction industry underpins many of the services that we rely on every day: heating our homes, supplying clean drinking water, or providing the energy and fuels that keep our economy moving. The levy helps to ensure that we have the skilled workforce needed to build and maintain critical infrastructure, a workforce essential to the UK's future energy security and economic growth.

The order continues the board's established approach of setting levy orders for a three-year period. Under the proposals before us, the levy rates for employees working on site will remain at 1.2% of total enrolments and rates for off-site employees will remain at 0.33%. That is unchanged from the 2023 levy order. As we have heard, exemptions will continue to be in place for smaller employers.

This draft order is particularly relevant to my constituency. Devonport dockyard, in the neighbouring Plymouth Sutton and Devonport constituency, and its supply chain provide thousands of highly skilled engineering and construction jobs across Plymouth and the wider south-west. Indeed, the UK's continuous at-sea nuclear deterrent has been maintained from Plymouth for over

70 years and will need a trained workforce—something that Team Plymouth is working hard to deliver. As major investment continues in defence and nuclear infrastructure, it is critical that we maintain a steady stream of skilled engineers, technicians and apprenticeships.

I can confirm that we Conservatives will not oppose the order. However, this debate is a useful opportunity to scrutinise the Government's plans to address the issues with recruitment and retention.

As the Minister has already said, the training levy clearly commands industry support, with 85% of levy-paying employers voting in favour of it in 2025, representing 98% of the levy paid. The levy system plays a vital role in developing a consistent pipeline of home-grown engineering construction workers. According to research commissioned by the ECITB in 2024, 65% of employers felt that, without the levy and grant system, the training would not take place. In an increasingly fragile geopolitical climate, it is vital that we have a well-trained domestic talent pool across those sectors.

The levy works because it is driven by industry need. Companies understand their workforce requirements far better than Whitehall ever could, and we should be empowering businesses to create jobs, not burdening them with ever greater costs and then attempting to compensate through Government schemes that seek to manage the consequences of labour shortages after they have arisen.

One reason levy rates are not being increased is that employers are already facing higher operating costs, not least because of Labour's damaging national insurance hikes. That is classic Labour economics: making it more expensive to hire people, then intervening with subsidies to solve a problem of the Government's own making. As I have said before, most employers would rather keep more of what they earn and invest it themselves than have the Government take with one hand and give a little back with the other. I believe such details are included in the explanatory note.

The levy proposals are expected to raise a total of £137.9 million over the levy periods between this year and 2028. We must ensure that this levy delivers the workforce that the industry needs. More than 70% of employers are now experiencing significant hiring challenges, up from 53% in 2021. According to the ECITB's 2025 report, the main reasons for skills shortages include

"a shortage of qualifications and skills among candidates, a mismatch between candidate expectations and what employers can offer, a limited applicant volume, mobility and location issues, and increased competition among employers and other sectors."

To make matters worse, the engineering construction industry faces an upcoming wave of retirements. Almost 15% of the workforce are already over the age of 60. Workers in craft roles, in particular, are in short supply. Concerningly, about one in four welders and one in five pipefitters are over 60. Although the number of workers under 30 has slightly increased since 2021, from 14.7% to 16.8%, new entrants are not yet arriving quickly enough to offset experienced workers leaving the industry.

We know that the ECITB invested £28 million in training grants and new entrant programmes in 2024, supporting more than 2,000 new entrant starts, including 1,000 apprentice starts and more than 500 graduates. That is to be welcomed, but those numbers must keep growing if the industry is to replace retiring workers

while simultaneously expanding the workforce needed for future projects. The industry will face peak demand for workers in four years' time, and 40,000 extra workers will be needed for major projects by 2030, according to ECITB forecasts. That does not even take into account the demand in manufacturing sectors not covered by the ECITB. I accept that the Minister said that 5,000 places have been filled but, given that 40,000 figure, we will need further work on this.

Can the Minister outline what further steps the Government are taking, alongside the ECITB's work, to attract new entrants into the workforce? Given the significant training costs that employers incur, does he believe that current ECITB grant support is sufficient to incentivise employers to expand recruitment, particularly in occupations facing the greatest shortages? We know that retention is equally critical, so could he confirm what proportion of apprentices, graduates and new entrants supported through the ECITB are still working in the industry 12 months after completing their training?

The Government have recently consulted on proposals to bring together the Construction Industry Training Board and the ECITB in a single body. As those responses are considered, I would welcome further clarification from the Minister on how the specialist needs of the engineering construction sector will be protected. Constituencies such as mine rely on highly skilled engineering and technical workers to support major defence and nuclear infrastructure, but we also need construction workers to build new homes and the like, and it is important that those skills are not overlooked within a larger organisation.

I want to ask the Minister another question, if I may. Since the removal of local training groups by the Construction Industry Training Board, I have heard that money for regional employer networks has not been found in certain regions, and as a result those networks have not been properly set up. We have debated that point in the past, and I appreciate that it is not entirely related, but it is about employment and training. How is the Department working to mitigate the apparent failure of the regional employer network hubs that were being set up?

To conclude, the engineering construction industry requires a strong pipeline of skilled workers. There is clear evidence that employers continue to support the levy system, but I would welcome the Minister's response to the points I have raised about recruitment, retention and the future direction of the ECITB. If we are serious about delivering our ambitions on energy, infrastructure and industrial growth, we must be equally serious about investing in the workforce that will make those ambitions a reality.

9.59 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): The levy proposals may sound technical, but at their heart they are about investing in people and in Britain's future, because, let us be honest, everything we touch and see is supported, repaired and built by these industries. As the Labour MP for Portsmouth North, this debate matters deeply to me. Portsmouth is proud of its industrial heritage. Our city once helped to build and maintain the ships that defended our country. Skilled engineering and trade shaped our communities for generations, but many people in my constituency also know what it feels like to be left behind.

10 pm

The debate stood adjourned (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)).

That, at this day's sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the Motion in the name of Andrew Western relating to Employment and Training.—(*Mark Ferguson.*)

Question agreed to.

Debate resumed.

Main Question again proposed.

Amanda Martin: Too many of those skilled industrial jobs have disappeared and too many young people today do not see the same opportunities that previous generations had. When we talk about levies like this, we are really talking about whether today's young people will be given the opportunities that their parents and grandparents had. It is about creating the next generation of engineers and skilled workers who will build, maintain and modernise the infrastructure our country depends on. For many young people, particularly those who do not choose the traditional university route, apprenticeships offer a pathway into secure, highly skilled and well-paid work. By supporting the levy, we are investing in those opportunities and in the workforce our economy will need for decades to come.

We need to ensure that the levy enables maximum opportunity and flexibility, for example by supporting those in the construction industry to use the levy creatively for transport by maybe providing driving lessons, as it is not easy to get public transport to building sites at the hours and times that people need to be attending. Will the Minister work with me to consider how we can use the levy flexibly across the sector?

The truth is that our ambitions for clean energy, advanced manufacturing, industrial decarbonisation and major infrastructure projects will succeed only if we have the skilled workforce to deliver them. No single employer can solve the skills shortages alone. A collective approach allows industry to invest together in training, ensuring we develop not only the workforce we need today but the workforce for tomorrow. We need to find a way to ensure that larger businesses who do not use their full levy work to support the smaller businesses that need it.

Earlier today, the all-party parliamentary group for tradespeople held a roundtable with Checkatrade, presenting new research into young people's attitudes towards careers in the trades. The findings were encouraging. Almost half are considering becoming a plumber, builder or electrician, while 40% of under-25s now say an apprenticeship is more appealing than a degree. Just 10 years ago, that stood at 3%. An apprenticeship is slowly becoming their first choice. That is a remarkable shift, but it also creates a responsibility. If more young people want to pursue skilled trades, we must make sure the training and opportunities are there. That is particularly important when more than 1 million young people are currently not in education, employment or training.

Will the Minister support cross-party, cross-Government working to ensure that this opportunity is available in Portsmouth, where it is much needed and much wanted? I also know there has been a consultation taking place on the future of the ECITB and the CITB. I ask the Minister to engage with the APPG for tradespeople on those discussions and on the progress that will be made.

[Amanda Martin]

Finally, there is a wider national interest at stake. Engineering construction underpins our critical national infrastructure, from our energy networks to defence facilities. In an increasingly uncertain world, Britain cannot rely solely on importing the skills we need. We must develop the home-grown talent, and indeed the city-grown talent, that strengthens both our economy and our national resilience. To do that, we must recognise the barriers to taking up and completing apprenticeships, and ensure we remove them. For communities such as Portsmouth North, this is about restoring opportunity. It is about giving young people the chance to learn a trade, earn a good wage, build a rewarding career and take pride in contributing to Britain's future, as they once did in my city.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for her comments. On opportunities for apprenticeships, whether in construction or whatever they may be, they should also be available in, for instance, fishing and farming. Does she agree that there should be equality of opportunity for women and men to seize apprenticeships, because both can do the job equally well?

Amanda Martin: As someone who studied STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—subjects at college, I agree with the hon. Member. We need to ensure that our young people have the maximum number of opportunities to give our country resilience, whether that is in defence, farming or maritime—also something close to my heart—so I wholeheartedly agree with him. For those reasons, I am pleased to support the proposals.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

10.4 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Growing the economy is one of the essential duties of the Government, and the levy is a key part of ensuring that productivity is part of that agenda. The levy gives the opportunity to grow core industries and infrastructure, and to change our economy so that we become more environmentally sound, tackle climate change and have a cleaner economy, which is essential. Many of the jobs included in the levy help achieve that. Colleagues have already alluded to the more than 1 million NEETs that are in our communities, and we know that this issue can be tackled through the levy.

As Liberal Democrats, we believe in working in partnership with employers and educationalists, and we know that this can be achieved through the levy. Torbay is one of five core areas of opportunity for electronics and photonics across the United Kingdom. Companies such as Bay Photonics and Gooch & Housego work in partnership with South Devon college to ensure that there is a pipeline of opportunities for young people in Devon. As Liberal Democrats, we warmly welcome the proposals before us.

10.6 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): At the outset, I draw attention to my membership of GMB and Unite, both of which organise workers in the engineering construction sector. It is a pleasure to speak in this SI debate, which may be auspicious as, depending

on the Government's future reform of the sector, we may be moving towards longer-term settlements for levy changes on account of the consultation that closed two weeks ago.

Industrial training boards once covered a much wider share of the economy, before many of them were sadly scrapped in the early 1980s. It is difficult to imagine a role in the modern economy for the Wool, Jute and Flax Industry Training Board, but it is worth reflecting that, in the past, training boards oversaw some important skills transitions—particularly the Gas Industry Training Board's role in the highly successful conversion from town gas to natural gas. As we think about the future of home heating, perhaps we would be in a stronger position today if that body still existed. Thankfully, both the CITB and the ECITB have survived, and are now modern, 21st-century institutions.

Engineering construction refers to that aspect of the construction industry that crosses beyond design into implementation, covering everything from bridges to tunnels, and from energy from waste-plants to High Speed 2 and new nuclear sites. In other words, if we are to build the infrastructure that the UK needs, we need that steady pipeline of skills. Industry training boards are not the whole of the answer, but they are an important part of it.

Construction productivity is lower in the UK than in some comparable countries, such as Germany and the Netherlands. The problems in our country are deep seated: 38% of engineering construction workers are aged 50 or over, rising to 40% in the oil and gas sector. Although some progress has been made, there are still critical shortages for skills such as plating and welding. That is an issue that the Transport Committee, of which the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) is a member, looked at. We repeatedly heard that shortages in those key skills are holding back the UK's ability to deliver major products, as well as raising costs for taxpayers.

This statutory instrument is necessary to continue the provision of essential skills training. It carries forward an effective 1.2% levy on on-site net labour costs and 0.33% on off-site costs—rates unchanged since 2023. There is clearly a good level of satisfaction in the quality of individual courses, because the share of employers who voted in favour of the levy went up slightly in this round.

This statutory instrument should raise around £138 million over the next three years. To give an idea of the scale of the training that it delivers, in 2024, the ECITB supported almost 2,200 new entrant starts, and 64,000 people were trained on ECITB courses and other products.

We have heard a lot, rightly, about employment in the North sea oil and gas sector. Many workers in that sector feel a great sense of frustration because they know that their skills are transferable, but there has not always been sufficient recognition across related sectors of the transferability of those skills. Indeed, attempts to create a skills passport under the previous Government ran into some frustrations and ran over in terms of timing. I think it is important to quote the three North sea trade unions—GMB, Unite and RMT—in respect of the ECITB's connected competence programme:

“The Trade Unions have been calling for a standardised, fair and transparent approach to competence and skills assessment for several years and we welcome Connected Competence. We sincerely

hope this initiative is adopted and utilised by all contractors and industry bodies... This would truly enable workers to transition around the energy sector and help maintain and develop a...skills base. This is good news for both workers and the wider UK economy."

Clearly the value of the ECITB does extend beyond the provision of training courses, as important as that is.

We have heard about the Government's reform programme, which, in fairness, was prompted by the independent review commissioned under the previous Government. At the heart of those proposals is the proposed merger of the CITB and the ECITB, with the justification being more effective long-term planning and strategic decision making on which courses should receive investment. I am sure that the whole House will agree that it is important that we realise those aims. At the same time, however, while the construction industry and engineering construction are allied trades, they do have important differences. I think it would be helpful if we could hear about how the distinctive nature of engineering construction skills requirements would be protected should the merger go ahead. The consultation, as we have heard, has closed only recently, but it would be appreciated if the Minister was able to give any information on when he anticipates that the Government will respond in full.

I wonder whether in the short time left I might make a point about workforce representation on the ECITB—I have previously raised a related point about the CITB. When these boards were established in the 1960s, there was equal 50:50 representation on the boards of the industry training schemes for trade union representatives, representing the workers, and employer representation. Over the years—it was not an immediate process—the trade union representatives were gradually squeezed off both boards to the point where there is now no trade union representation on the boards of either the CITB or the ECITB. The trade unions are represented on a subsidiary advisory board, but this is of lesser status, and it means that they are not in the room when the core decisions are made.

As we approach the point of potentially wholesale ITB reform, I wonder whether we could take this opportunity to right what was, I think, a mistake, which was removing that direct worker voice from the boards of these organisations, whether through the continued stand-alone, separate existence of the ECITB or CITB or otherwise. I wonder whether the Minister would provide some information on that proposal either in writing or when he sums up.

10.14 pm

Sir Stephen Timms: I am grateful to all those who have spoken in the debate for the thoughtful scrutiny they have given to this instrument, and I am grateful for the support expressed by the hon. Members for South West Devon (Rebecca Smith) and for Torbay (Steve Darling) and my hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) and for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner).

What I think the debate has effectively underlined is just how important the work of the ECITB is and the scale of the challenge that faces one of our most economically vital industries, which has a core workforce of 90,000 people and is responsible for £33 billion in annual output. The importance of that industry has been well reflected in the contributions to this debate. It

is clear that the engineering and construction industry cannot meet its skills demands in the coming decade without a stable, collective system of investment in training. The evidence is consistent that market forces on their own will not deliver the pipeline of skilled workers that the industry urgently needs.

The ECITB levy is the mechanism that enables the collective benefit for the focused skills strategy for this industry. It ensures that employers can access support for training and share the benefits of a skilled, competent and resilient workforce. It also opens up opportunities. It helps apprentices and other new entrants to complete high-quality training, and it helps existing workers to reskill or upskill to progress their careers.

The hon. Member for South West Devon asked what the Government are doing to support the industry more widely with skills. Substantial Government investment is being deployed to that effect as part of wider reforms to help employers respond to current and future workforce needs. This includes an additional £1 billion of investment to help deliver some 50,000 more apprenticeship opportunities over the next few years, alongside increased flexibility through the new growth and skills levy and sector-specific skills packages in engineering and construction worth over £800 million.

The hon. Lady will know of the targeted incentives for employers, including payments of up to £2,000 for taking on foundation apprentices, which will help more young people to enter skilled careers. The continued investment that we are making in skills bootcamps and increasingly devolved approaches through mayoral strategic authorities are enabling local areas to respond more effectively to local employer demand and skills shortages. Together with support from the ECITB, the measures certainly will strengthen the pipeline of skills, and I agree with the hon. Lady about how important that is.

The hon. Lady cited the figure from 2024 that £28 million was invested by the ECITB in training grants and new entrant programmes. That went up to £32.6 million last year. We are expecting continuing increases, and we recognise the importance of being able to fulfil the growing demand that we are seeing.

My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) quite rightly reflected how important these measures are for Portsmouth, and she asked for engagement with the all-party parliamentary group. I will pass on that request to the Minister for Transformation, my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Andrew Western), who I am sure will be very pleased to do that.

To the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner), I am afraid that I am not in a position to shed any light on the timing of the decision following the recent consultation. I will, though, pass on his suggestion that trade union representation should be considered when the reorganisation is being reflected on.

The shadow Minister asked me a question about the proportion of new entrants. I think she was asking about those who are still in the industry 12 months on. That is not a figure that I have to hand but I will, if I may, drop her a line, if I can get the information to answer her question.

The debate has reminded us just how important supporting the needs of small businesses is, ensuring maximum impact and value for money from employers'

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levy contributions, and I think that the order gives reassurance on all those points. It maintains support for the engineering construction industry by minimising burdens on employers, holding steady levy rates and protecting smaller firms by maintaining exemption thresholds. Regardless of any future decisions needed to future-proof its support, the industry cannot afford a gap in funding now, and approving this order provides continuity, stability and confidence for engineering construction employers across England, Scotland and Wales. I am grateful for the support this measure has received in the debate, and for all those reasons I urge the House to support it.

Question put and agreed to.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

EDUCATION

That the draft Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 (Establishment of Schools) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 8 July (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

HEALTH AND SAFETY

That the draft Supply of Machinery (Safety) (Amendment etc.) and the EU Machinery Regulation (Enforcement etc. in Northern Ireland) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 1 June, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 8 July (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

ELECTRONIC COMMUNICATIONS

That the draft Wireless Telegraphy Act 2006 (Directions to OFCOM) (Revocation) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 18 May, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

TOWN AND COUNTRY PLANNING

That the draft Town and Country Planning (Discharge of Local Planning Authority Functions) (England) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

The Deputy Speaker's opinion as to the decision of the Question being challenged, the Division was deferred until Wednesday 8 July (Standing Order No. 41A).

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

LEGAL AID AND ADVICE

That the draft Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (Legal Aid: Anti-social Behaviour and Prevention and Investigation Measures) (Miscellaneous Amendments) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 1 June, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPANIES

That the draft Register of Overseas Entities (Protection and Trusts) and Limited Liability Partnerships (Application of Company Law) (Amendment) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 1 June, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Government of Wales Act 2006 (Increase of Capital Borrowing Limits) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 2 June, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

CRIMINAL LAW

That the draft Criminal Justice Act 1988 (Offensive Weapons) (Amendment) (England and Wales) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 8 June, be approved.—(Mark Ferguson.)

Question agreed to.

SCOTTISH AFFAIRS COMMITTEE

Ordered,

That Jack Rankin be discharged from the Scottish Affairs Committee and Douglas Lumsden be added.—(Gen Kitchen, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)

Patient Safety Review

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mark Ferguson.)

10.23 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I am grateful for this opportunity to evaluate the Dash review of patient safety, and I thank the Minister for the meeting with her this afternoon.

I hope that the House and Penny Dash will forgive me, but in the interests of brevity and clarity, I shall be direct. Whenever asked to justify the abolition of the Health Services Safety Investigations Body, Ministers refer to Dash, but Dash fails to make the case for what it recommends. This new clinical incident investigator was established less than three years ago. HSSIB is a new concept in healthcare, conceived to challenge the culture of denial and blame in the NHS. It is proving itself, even with its very limited budget. One early report on aortic dissection led to 300 more people receiving lifesaving treatment. The Minister now has a list of key recommendation impacts produced by HSSIB. A lot of them may seem small or piecemeal, but so far it is only a small body.

After a boy suffered an avoidable death from cancer, HSSIB recommended to NHS England a new community language translation and interpreting services framework so that non-English speaking patients would get appointment letters for their children that they could read and understand. HSSIB recommended a protocol between prisons and ambulance services to avoid wasting ambulance time and new guidance for non-accidental injury of babies in emergency departments where no specific guidance had existed before.

The Dash review shows no understanding of HSSIB's purpose and no comprehension of coherent safety systems management. Dash gets facts wrong and misinterprets the law, either through a failure of understanding or because the recommendation to abolish HSSIB somehow reflected the desired outcome of the review, regardless of the facts.

I will set out some specific questions, most of which the Minister has had in advance. If she does not have enough time to respond, I look forward to discussing them at a future meeting that we discussed having.

Sir Jeremy Hunt (Godalming and Ash) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. Does he agree that one of the common themes in all the maternity scandals that we have been discussing in recent weeks, sadly, has been how a blame culture in the NHS makes it hard for NHS staff to speak openly about why tragedies have happened, and that that is why they welcome HSSIB, with its safe space protections? Is he worried that that could be undermined by putting HSSIB into the Care Quality Commission, which has a legal duty to act on information it receives, therefore creating the worry for people talking to HSSIB that the information that they give to it may no longer be protected in the same way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I 100% agree with my right hon. Friend. He will note that I will pick up on those points during my remarks.

I come back to the questions that I want to put to the Secretary of State. First, if HSSIB's investigations are intended to continue unaffected by the transfer to the CQC,

why bother with the expense of the transfer? Are Ministers simply using Dash as the pretext for what people in the Department or elsewhere in the NHS would like to have?

HSSIB was deliberately started very small, but the intention was that over time it would take over more investigations in health and replace the need for wasteful, lengthy, inexpert ad hoc public inquiries. Over the years, inquiries have proved to be a chaotic means of investigation, assembling expertise from scratch, which is then lost after the inquiry, and failing to command public confidence or to fix the system. That is why, after the 1999 Paddington rail crash, the Ladbroke Grove inquiry in 2001 established the rail accident investigation branch. Since then, despite many fatal rail accidents, there has been no public inquiry into a rail crash—nor has the public felt the need to demand one—and rail safety has improved.

Given that HSSIB is expert, full time, and can conduct much cheaper and quicker investigations than public inquiries, how can Ministers accept the Dash recommendation to abolish it? Why not consider expanding HSSIB to avoid the need for so many costly public inquiries?

Dash complains about there being far too many recommendations—yes, there are—but, as Dash itself enumerates, it is the 30 public inquiries that, in its language, have “cluttered” the “landscape” with some 1,400 recommendations over recent years. HSSIB is therefore not the source of those recommendations. In HSSIB's first 34 months of operation, it has produced only 56 recommendations. How can Ministers use that reason to justify HSSIB's abolition?

Dash refers more than once to “quality (including safety) of care”.

That elides quality of care with safety. In any other safety-critical industry, safety is seen as a distinct, separate and overriding priority. It is telling that in the report, the words “including safety” are added merely in parentheses, as though safety is ancillary to quality, but that becomes justification for rationalisation while actually compromising safety.

Safety system management is intrinsic to safety and public confidence in other safety-critical activities, such as aviation, but this is alien to NHS culture. I therefore ask the Minister again: without HSSIB, which independent body will promote a coherent understanding of safety system management in health, and who is to hold the NHS and Government to account for safety failures?

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Very briefly—I have a lot to say.

James Naish: In that case, carry on.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank the hon. Gentleman.

Recommendation 1 in the Dash review says that the new National Quality Board should

“avoid unfunded mandates being imposed on the system without due consideration”.

Public inquiries have certainly made well meaning but unaffordable recommendations—I think of the Francis inquiry recommendation on blanket standards for minimum staffing—but it is wrong to see safety as a cost in

[Sir Bernard Jenkin]

opposition to other benefits. The cost of safety failures is astronomic, with NHS clinical negligence costing £3.6 billion a year, despite all the public inquiries. Effective safety management is about the cost-effective management of risk, not risk elimination at any cost. If the air accidents investigation branch did not balance costs with effective risk management, aeroplanes would not fly. Can the Minister therefore point out which of HSSIB's recommendations have been too expensive to implement? If not, where is the justification for abolishing HSSIB?

Neither the NQB nor the CQC should control investigations. The AAIB cannot be prevented from making independent recommendations by the Civil Aviation Authority, the Transport Secretary or airlines themselves. Why should the NQB, which will be subject to political direction, be allowed to decide what safety recommendations should be made and what should be investigated, as Dash recommends?

On page 31, Dash incorrectly states:

"HSSIB was not able to retain the maternity programme because the Health and Care Act 2022 does not make provision for maternity investigations under HSSIB."

Why have the Government accepted that assertion as true? It is wrong in fact and law. The new statutory HSSIB did not take on maternity and newborn safety investigations, because they were commenced without the safe space protections, so their evidence is available for legal proceedings. That is not how HSSIB operates. Since 2023, HSSIB has been conducting its own maternity investigations. Indeed, when the Amos review was established, it took on the relevant investigations from HSSIB and then relied on HSSIB for assistance with them.

With sufficient resources, HSSIB could conduct all maternity investigations much more effectively than the maternity and newborn safety investigations programme. Amos reported that MNSI investigations are not trusted by families, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt) was saying, and are not consistent or effective in identifying learning or providing accountability. Amos also says that families should have access to an independent investigation if they lose confidence in the local investigations. Without HSSIB, who will provide those independent investigations?

Finding 6 accuses HSSIB of having "expanded" its

"scope of work beyond the original remit...For example, HSSIB was originally established, along the lines of safety investigatory bodies in other industries, to look at specific cases or incidents of severe harm, but it has since broadened its work into making more systemic recommendations."

That is what Dash says. It is complete nonsense. HSSIB is exactly equivalent to the AAIB, the marine accident investigation branch and RAIB, and was, like them, set up to conduct systemic investigations. That is why they are such effective bodies. The Health and Care Act 2022 does not limit HSSIB investigations to individual incidents. There is no reference whatsoever to "severe harm", as Dash puts it, in the 2022 Act. It was always intended by Parliament that HSSIB should make systemic recommendations arising from the investigation of specific incidents or groups of incidents. I can say that with authority because it was my Select Committee that recommended HSSIB in the first place, and I also

chaired the pre-legislative scrutiny Committee on the draft legislation, so how can Ministers give any authority to the Dash review, which claimed that HSSIB has expanded its remit, when it has done no such thing?

Recommendation 3 proposes:

"Most investigations into safety incidents should continue to be managed within provider organisations".

This really is the fundamental flaw in Dash. Recent maternity investigations conducted by trusts have highlighted the deficiency of provider-led investigations, as Ockenden and Amos have pointed out. Do the Government accept that investigations by provider organisations are inherently conflicted? Just ask the clinicians, patients, families and patient safety organisations what they think about trusts marking their own homework. None of them has confidence, because providers are keen to protect themselves from litigation and reputational damage. How can Ministers accept the Dash recommendation that we should rely on investigations conducted by provider organisations?

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I commend the hon. Gentleman for speaking so clearly about why having an independent HSSIB—*independent of those providers—to investigate is so important. Time and again, we hear about devastating failings in the NHS. He alludes to maternity services, but we could add to the list infected blood and pelvic mesh. Does he agree that professionals and those working inside the NHS must be able to speak freely when things go wrong in order to learn lessons, and that that is only possible with an independent investigating organisation?*

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. Only an independent investigator can find the causes of the incident that may be part of the culture or practice of that provider, or of the system as a whole. It is like suggesting that airlines or aircraft manufacturers can protect passenger safety without the independent accountability provided by the AAIB. Of course, providers should have the capacity and capability of conducting patient safety investigations, but they must know that HSSIB can and will look at that work and will hold them to account.

Recommendation 3 also says that HSSIB should continue as what it calls

"a centre of excellence for investigations"

in the CQC, but I am afraid that this is just a sop. The CQC, as was pointed out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash, is a regulator and compliance enforcer, not an investigator. How can the CQC also be an independent investigator? Dash also says that the CQC internal successor should collaborate through the NQB to agree the scope of any investigations it carries out and agree the recommendations. Dash is effectively saying that CQC investigations will be overseen by the NQB. That is a direct attack on the independence of investigations.

Can the Minister explain who in future will conduct independent and unconflicted investigations into safety incidents in the NHS? For example, how would an investigation under the CQC be free to find that the CQC inspections themselves were causing unintended harm to patients, or is it back to the misery of litigation through the courts and more public inquiries?

The recommendation also makes no reference to the statutory safe space raised by the hon. Member for Shipley (Anna Dixon) that provides for protected disclosure by patients and their families, clinicians and others in safety investigation bodies. It is a crucial safeguard, allowing people to speak. It allows for the duty of candour. I would just point out that the duty of candour does not work if it is just imposed on people. People cannot be forced to incriminate themselves. If placed under the CQC, confidence in the safe space investigations will collapse—and back we go to public inquiries.

The Health Bill does attempt to address this by replicating the 2022 Act's safe space provisions, but that Act also provided for disclosure in certain circumstances, which is allowed on the basis that the benefits for the safety of patients outweighs any impact on current and future investigations. But under this Bill, who will decide what protected information can be disclosed? How will the CQC give the same confidence that the safe space is not being compromised as HSSIB?

Finally, Dash fails to look at the comparative cost of HSSIB investigations versus the cost of public inquiries. HSSIB at the moment only costs £6.3 million per year. To save money, the Secretary of State should request that HSSIB conducts far more investigations into matters which he thinks are important, provided that he also provides the funding for the necessary capacity. HSSIB, for example, has conducted eight investigations into mental health suicides since 2023. Each was completed in a few weeks or months, costing a total of £850,000. In comparison, the Lampard inquiry into the Essex partnership university trust in my constituency—investigating the same problem—is expected to cost more than £5 million. Ockenden cost £14 million. This is very far from the best use of resources for conducting investigations.

So I ask the Minister, why have Dash and the Government ignored the whole question of HSSIB's value for money? Even if HSSIB only saves a fraction of the £3.6 billion in costs of clinical negligence, it will pay for itself many fold. I do hope that Ministers will reconsider the whole issue, reflecting on the fact that none of the Royal colleges, nor any of the patient safety organisations, nor the all-party group on patient safety support this unjustifiable policy.

10.40 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): I thank the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin) for securing this important debate. He has long taken a serious interest in patient safety, including in the importance of independent investigation. I recognise the strength and sincerity of the points that he has raised and will try to answer all of his questions.

At the heart of this debate is a simple question: when patients and families tell us something has gone wrong, does the system listen and learn, and, most importantly, does it change? Patients do not judge the system by the number of reports published, the number of organisations involved, or the number of recommendations written; they judge it by whether care becomes safer. For too long, across too many parts of the system, we have seen the same pattern: harm happens; a review follows; lessons

are identified; but the change patients were promised does not always follow quickly enough. This Government are determined to change that.

Dr Penny Dash's review was commissioned to consider whether the current landscape of organisations provides effective leadership, listening and regulation on patient safety and wider quality of care, and whether a different approach could deliver better outcomes for patients.

James Naish: I rise to intervene before the Minister goes down the HSSIB route, which I completely understand is the focus of the debate today. I want to put on record once more the concerns about Healthwatch and its abolition. I know there is a strong desire to see independent patient voice maintained outside the system; of course, Healthwatch was established due to issues within health structures, including, notably, the Mid Staffordshire scandal.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for putting that on the record. He will know that we are in Committee stage of the Health Bill and there will later be the opportunity to debate this issue on the Floor of the House.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for outlining the case incredibly well. I have a request in relation to the vital lessons learned on data collection, streamlined complaints and patient safety culture. It is important for us all that those lessons are shared with the Northern Ireland Assembly Minister, Mike Nesbitt, as health is a devolved matter; we need to ensure that there is safety for all across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

Preet Kaur Gill: Absolutely. I am very privileged to have patient safety in my brief. I know everybody across this House really cares about it, and I will make sure that officials do as the hon. Gentleman requests.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I want to concur with all of the remarks by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), who has made a crucial point. But there is a wider issue, which the Health Bill completely misses and which I urge Ministers to look at, around the accountability systems within the NHS. The reforms are not going to deliver accountability. They are going to weaken it, and as a result we will see more requests for investigations into patient safety. I want the Minister to take that point away, because I am really worried that we are going to see a system that is more unsafe as a result of these reforms.

Preet Kaur Gill: I thank my hon. Friend for her contribution—she is absolutely right. I take accountability very seriously and am going to talk about it in my remarks in this debate. Far too often, we see so many inquiries and so many recommendations but nobody taking responsibility for implementing the change. In the end, patients have to feel that things have changed, not that we are just having further reports and recommendations.

The Penny Dash review examined six organisations that are overseen by the Department: the Care Quality Commission; the National Guardian's Office; Healthwatch England and the local Healthwatch network; the Patient Safety Commissioner; the Health Services Safety

[Preet Kaur Gill]

Investigations Body; and the patient safety learning functions of NHS Resolution. The review's conclusion was clear. The problem is not that people working in patient safety lack commitment—we all know that there are dedicated people across the system doing important work every day—but that the system around them has become too cluttered, complex and difficult for patients, staff and leaders to navigate.

We inherited a landscape with more than 70 routes for patients and service users to raise concerns or provide feedback, and around 40 public bodies with a formal role in quality and safety. That complexity does not automatically make patients safer. It can make responsibility unclear, create duplication and make it harder to ensure that learning leads to improvement. A cluttered landscape, as we would all agree, is not an effective landscape.

The hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex asked me about the expertise in HSSIB, the full-time job that it does and whether it could undertake investigations more cheaply and quickly than public inquiries. The investigation function within the CQC will be expert and full time, and it will be able to conduct investigations in the same cheap and quick way that HSSIB does now. In future, there will be the same opportunity to use the CQC investigation function instead of needing a public inquiry as there is currently with HSSIB.

The review also found that too many recommendations are generated through reviews, inquiries and investigations, as the hon. Member said, without enough clarity on ownership, prioritisation, implementation and impact. This is the fundamental point: recommendations alone do not make patients safer; change does. That is why the Government have accepted all nine recommendations of the Dash review.

The hon. Member asked how the CQC will provide the same confidence that the safe space is not being compromised. The criteria for disclosing protected information outside the investigative function are set out in the Bill. Those criteria set a high bar for any disclosure—as high as it is currently with HSSIB—and the CQC will publish further guidance setting out much more detail. As the Bill sets out, the CQC will appoint a responsible person who will decide whether the case matches the criteria and whether it warrants information sharing outside the safe space. That person is likely to be the CQC's chief executive officer.

The hon. Member asked why the Dash review and the Government have ignored the whole question of HSSIB's value for money. Let me be clear: the Dash reforms are not about saving money; they are about strengthening patient safety and patient voice across the system. The abolition of HSSIB and the transfer of its functions to the CQC play an important part in making the system of patient safety much more effective. Safety is the issue, not money.

Accepting recommendations is the beginning, not the end. Patients who have suffered harm, families who have campaigned for years and staff who have spoken up do not want another report sitting on a shelf. They want evidence that the system can listen, learn and prevent harm from happening again. I want to be absolutely clear: every organisation in the system has a responsibility

to meet that challenge. Patient safety cannot be something we support in principle but resist when it requires us to change.

No organisation, however established or well-intentioned, should believe that learning and improvement only apply elsewhere. That is why we are streamlining and strengthening the patient safety landscape. The hon. Member mentioned the National Quality Board. We have revitalised the board by giving it a stronger role in providing a single, authoritative view of quality across the system. That will help reduce duplication, bring greater clarity to recommendations and ensure that effort is focused where it has the greatest impact. All hon. Members recognise that we need fewer recommendations because we know that they disappear into the system. More recommendations are needed that are owned, tracked and delivered.

I recognise the concerns raised by the hon. Member in respect of the Health Services Safety Investigations Body. We had a constructive conversation earlier today. On his point about the accusations that HSSIB had expanded the scope of its work beyond its remit, he explained to me in detail how HSSIB's inception came about. The Government have accepted the Dash recommendation that HSSIB's role as a centre of excellence for investigation should continue, and clarified the remit of any future investigations. I think that the investigation function with the CQC will perform the role of a centre of excellence for investigations.

HSSIB has developed important expertise in understanding why things go wrong and identifying system-wide learning, and I acknowledge that work. The question before us is not whether investigations matter—of course they do—but how we ensure that investigations lead to action, because learning without implementation does not improve patient safety. The Dash review recommended transferring HSSIB's functions to the Care Quality Commission, while maintaining a dedicated investigation capability. I understand why colleagues will want reassurance on that, because, as the hon. Member said, independence, transparency and trust are essential in patient safety investigations, but so is impact. The purpose of these reforms is not to weaken investigation, but to strengthen the link between investigation, learning and improvement. We need a clearer route from identifying problems to making recommendations and ensuring that someone owns delivery and that patients see change.

The hon. Gentleman asked if I could explain who will conduct future investigations into safety in the NHS if the Dash review is implemented. The investigation function in the CQC will have autonomy to launch investigations into any part of the health system and will be able to make recommendations on any part of the system, just as HSSIB does now. There will be no barrier to an investigator finding out that CQC inspections are causing unintended harm. If they are, and if the investigator feels that a recommendation for change should be made, they will make it. There will be no need for litigation through the courts, and insights gained from investigations will continue to inform recommendations concerning the Care Quality Commission's regulatory functions.

The Bill also allows for the investigation function to make recommendations to the CQC in its report, and the CQC would be legally required to respond to such recommendations. I hope that the hon. Member is

assured that we will work carefully with colleagues, patients, staff and system leaders as these reforms are implemented.

The same principle applies to patient voice. Patients do not share their experiences simply for the system to record them; they do so because they want to see things change. Listening matters, but acting on what we hear is what makes patients safer. That is why we are ensuring that patient experience is closer to where decisions are made, with commissioners and providers responsible not only for delivering services, but for listening and responding. The Patient Safety Commissioner will continue to champion patient voice on medicines and medical devices and report directly to Parliament.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I am listening very carefully to what the Minister is saying. She has engaged positively with the questions I have asked, but she has actually made the case for keeping HSSIB separate. Will she reflect on that? If the only thing she wants is for the CQC to own the recommendations, she should amend HSSIB and say, “The CQC must ensure that the recommendations are implemented.” In fact, the recommendations are directed at Ministers and bits of the health service that are answerable to her and to the Secretary of State. We

should keep HSSIB separate, but by all means let us discuss how to ensure that the recommendations are implemented properly.

Preet Kaur Gill: I am grateful to the hon. Member for his comments. I did recognise the reason for keeping the functions separate, but just because they are part of the CQC does not mean to say that they do not have their independence. I have pretty much set out the powers that they current have and what they will be able to do, but they do not prioritise investigating the situations that we spoke about, such as “never events”. It is not simply about the investigation; it is about how we get those “never events” to lead to learning and change in the system. How do we hold the system to account to ensure that the very thing that the regulator recommends is implemented? What that journey looks like for patients will be far more significant, as opposed to those bodies simply doing investigations that lead to further recommendations.

10.53 pm

House adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 9(7)).

Westminster Hall

Monday 6 July 2026

[DR ROSENA ALLIN-KHAN *in the Chair*]

Public Office Disqualification: Terrorism Offences

4.30 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 759385 relating to disqualification from election candidacy for terrorism convictions.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I begin by thanking Richard Donaldson for creating this petition and the more than 200,000 people across the United Kingdom who signed it. I also thank the 205 people from my own constituency who added their names.

As Members know, my role today is to introduce the petition and facilitate this debate. However, having considered the evidence and having spoken to the petition creator, I believe he raises an important point that Parliament should not dismiss. At its heart this debate asks a simple question: should someone who has been convicted of terrorism offences be entitled to seek public office? For me the answer is no—not because I reject the principle of rehabilitation and not because I believe people cannot change, but because holding elected office is not an automatic right. It is a privilege bestowed by the public, and with that privilege comes an expectation that those who seek to represent our communities demonstrate respect for the democratic institutions they wish to serve.

For most people, the current law simply does not pass the common sense test. We already prevent certain people from standing for elected office. Individuals may be disqualified because they are subject to certain bankruptcy restrictions. Others are disqualified because of corrupt electoral practices, certain sexual offence notification requirements or offences involving intimidation of candidates. Yet someone with a historical terrorism conviction may still be entitled to stand for election. Many members of the public struggle to understand that distinction.

Terrorism is not an ordinary crime. It is an attack on democracy itself. It seeks to replace political debate with violence. It seeks to intimidate Governments, frighten communities and undermine the rule of law. That is why Parliament has consistently recognised terrorism as different. We have unique counter-terrorism powers, unique sentencing provisions and unique monitoring arrangements following release from prison. We recognise that terrorism is fundamentally different because it is directed against the democratic values on which this country is built. If we accept that principle elsewhere in our law—and I believe we should—it is entirely reasonable to ask whether those convicted of terrorism offences should be permitted to hold democratic office.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): Shahid Butt is a convicted terrorist. He was convicted of attempting to blow up the British consulate in Yemen, an Anglican church and a hotel. That vile individual should never have been allowed into the UK, let alone be able to

stand for the local council. It makes an absolute joke of our democracy, and I strongly support the idea of changing the law so that it can never happen again. But does the hon. Member agree that what should terrify us more than anything else in his case is that 452 people who have the vote voted for him? They voted for a convicted terrorist to represent them in the city hall in Birmingham. That is what should keep us awake at night.

John Lamont: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for making that point. I will come on to that individual's case shortly, but I do share his concerns. Indeed, there were cross-party concerns at the time of that individual's candidacy—both Labour and Conservative politicians expressed concerns about that. As I say, I will move on to that later in my speech.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I do not wish to dwell too much on this point, because we will all come back to it later, but in the interests of accuracy I think it is also important to record that 90% of people in the Sparkhill ward did not vote for that candidate.

John Lamont: I am grateful for that point. That is accurate, but the fact that anybody would want to vote for a convicted terrorist does raise serious questions, which I think we should be concerned about.

Every day we walk through this palace, reminded of the human cost of terrorism. Within these walls are memorials to Members of Parliament murdered in terrorist attacks, including Airey Neave, Ian Gow, Jo Cox and Sir David Amess. Their lives were taken because they believed in democracy. Those memorials serve as a permanent reminder that terrorism is not simply another criminal offence; it is an attack on democratic life itself.

We should not forget the many other victims of terrorism across our country. From Lockerbie to the 7 July bombings, the Manchester Arena attack and the attack here at Westminster in 2017, terrorism has left deep scars on communities throughout the United Kingdom. Those attacks were intended not just to kill innocent people, but to undermine our confidence in democracy and the rule of law.

The petition before us arises because many members of the public were surprised to discover that under our current law, someone convicted of terrorism offences in certain circumstances could stand for elected office. Historical convictions, even for very serious offences, may not prevent someone from standing. Indeed, candidates largely self-certify that they are eligible, with returning officers having only limited powers to determine whether someone is disqualified. The Government's response to the petition states that there are currently "no plans" to change those rules. I hope that today's debate will persuade the Minister to think again.

As we heard from the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), the catalyst for this petition was the case of Shahid Butt, who stood as a candidate in Birmingham during this year's local elections. It is a matter of public record that he was convicted in Yemen in 1999 of involvement in a terrorist bombing plot that targeted, among other sites, the British consulate and that he was sentenced to five years' imprisonment. Mr Butt has consistently maintained that he was wrongly convicted and that his confession was obtained through torture. Those claims have been reported widely. Members may hold differing views about that case, but today's

[John Lamont]

debate is about something much broader than one individual. It is about whether our electoral law contains an obvious gap that should now be addressed.

There is also a practical consideration that deserves attention. If someone convicted of terrorism offences were elected to this House, the parliamentary authorities would have little choice but to issue them with a parliamentary security pass, allowing routine access to much of the parliamentary estate. Members often focus on ourselves, but this is also about the thousands of people who work here every day: our staff, Clerks, police officers, security personnel, cleaners, caterers and many others. They deserve to know that Parliament takes their safety seriously.

Some will argue that once someone has served their sentence, they should once again enjoy the full rights of citizenship. That is an important principle, but society already accepts that certain positions carry additional responsibilities and require higher standards. Serving in Parliament, in a devolved legislature or on a local council is different from ordinary employment. They are positions of public trust. The public are entitled to expect exceptionally high standards from those who seek those positions. This debate is therefore not about preventing rehabilitation. It is not about denying someone the opportunity to rebuild their life. It is about deciding who should exercise democratic authority on behalf of others. Those are not the same things.

Others may point to Northern Ireland and the peace process. It is important that we approach that history carefully and respectfully. The Good Friday agreement transformed Northern Ireland and brought to an end decades of violence. Nothing I say today should diminish that achievement. Indeed, we should rightly distinguish between those convicted of terrorism offences and figures such as Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams, neither of whom was convicted of terrorism offences. Today's petition concerns something much narrower. It concerns people who have been convicted of terrorism offences. That distinction matters.

It is also worth noting that concern about this issue is not confined to one political party. Following the Birmingham case, both Labour and Conservative Members publicly expressed concern that someone convicted of terrorism offences could stand for election. Victims of terrorism have questioned whether such individuals should be eligible to represent the public in a democracy. This should not be a partisan issue. It should be about maintaining public confidence in our democratic institutions.

Democracy depends on not only free elections but public confidence in those elected. If the public lose faith that Parliament is capable of drawing sensible lines around who is fit to hold elected office, that confidence is weakened. Parliament should never be afraid to legislate where the public can plainly see that the law no longer reflects common sense. I was encouraged to hear the Secretary of State for Defence recently acknowledge that the Government are considering this issue through the defending democracy taskforce. That is welcome, but today's debate gives Members an opportunity to go further. The obvious question is: what should change?

The petition proposes a straightforward legal disqualification, preventing those convicted of terrorism offences from standing for elected office. The detail would

require careful consideration. There would undoubtedly need to be safeguards where overseas convictions were concerned, to ensure that politically motivated convictions, handed down by regimes without independent judicial systems, were not automatically recognised. Those are important drafting questions, but they are not reasons for doing nothing; they are reasons for careful legislation.

The principle is clear: those convicted of terrorism offences should not be entrusted with elected office. Our democracy is one of Britain's greatest achievements. We rightly welcome robust political disagreement; we encourage free speech and we welcome vigorous campaigning, but democracy also has the right—indeed, the responsibility—to defend itself against those who have sought to destroy it through violence. That is not intolerance; it is common sense, it is resilience, and it is about protecting the integrity of our democratic institutions.

I thank Richard Donaldson once again for bringing this matter before Parliament. Petitions such as this demonstrate democracy working as it should: a member of the public identified what he believed to be a gap in our law, more than 200,000 people agreed, and today Parliament has the opportunity to consider whether that gap should be closed. For my part, I believe that it should. I hope that the Minister will move beyond acknowledging the issue and commit the Government to examining proportionate, workable and robust legislative options. Those who seek to destroy our democracy should not be able to exploit it.

4.42 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I congratulate the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on the thoughtful and able way in which he introduced this important debate, and I thank the 583 Birmingham Northfield constituents who took the time to sign the petition.

This petition raises important questions about democratic participation and the potential abuse of our political systems, and it is right that we are debating it. I understand and share the sentiment behind the petition. Most people would hold the view that terrorists should not hold elected office, and certainly not positions of executive authority. There is also a valid question to be asked about the effective five-year prohibition against standing for election that applies in practice for domestic convictions of terrorism but not for overseas convictions. Those overseas convictions are not always straightforward, as has already been acknowledged, and I am sure that we will come back to that point during the debate.

It has been said that there are important matters of detail to work through. One of those is that the petition calls for people who hold such a conviction to be barred from standing for public office, but it would not, as drafted, debar appointments to the House of Lords or to senior civil service positions. I do not want to spend long on this point, because I suspect that it is a drafting issue, but hon. Members will recall when a former member of the Revolutionary Communist party—an organisation that acted as an apologist for the IRA's mainland bombing campaign—was appointed to the other place a few years ago and has never disavowed those views. That is a particularly important point for colleagues in Warrington, and for all those affected by the Birmingham pub bombings.

We must also be mindful of the precedent set by the peace process in Northern Ireland. One of the aims of the Good Friday agreement was to permit people to move from physical force republicanism and physical force loyalism to democratic participation. That peace was built on the primacy of the ballot box, and I am sure that it is not the desire or the intention of the petition's drafters to undo any part of that settlement.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Does it come as a surprise to the hon. Gentleman, if he is correct about the purpose of the Belfast agreement in that regard, that former terrorists who were elected continue to this very day to glorify and regularly celebrate their acts of terrorism? Surely that is not compatible with their having turned their backs on terrorism.

Laurence Turner: I think I have made it clear in my remarks about other representatives that I hold no truck at all with apologism for or the glorification of terrorism.

There is one more problem. The petition seeks to disbar from public office all those who hold overseas terrorism convictions, but such a disqualification could, if drafted without the greatest of care and precision, effectively allow foreign Governments to determine who can stand for election in the United Kingdom. Authoritarian regimes routinely misuse terrorism laws against political opponents and democracy activists. One example is Russia. UN special rapporteurs have said that the Russian Government deploy a

“repressive toolbox targeting civil society...A key part of the government strategy has been to abuse anti-extremism and counter-terrorism provisions by designating civil society organisations as ‘extremist’ or ‘terrorist’, and bringing criminal charges, including extremism and terrorism-related, against their members or anyone associated with them, including victims of human rights violations.”

We need only to think about parliamentary colleagues who have been sanctioned by regimes overseas because of comments they have made in this place. Critics of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine are now routinely labelled as terrorists or terrorist sympathisers. We cannot create the prospect of British citizens being tried in absentia by states they may never have stepped foot in and then effectively being barred from running for council or parliamentary positions. However well-intentioned the petition's aim, we cannot hand Vladimir Putin a veto over our political representation or any other aspect of British public life.

It is helpful to return to the case that led to the petition—that of an independent candidate in Birmingham, the city of which I am proud to represent a part. While I do not seek to tar them all with the same brush, Birmingham had no shortage this year of independent candidates who preached messages of division and seemed to enjoy bringing the circus of national and international media attention down on parts of the city. We even had candidates who took their direction from or co-ordinated with George Galloway, a man who used to make a pulpit out of the Russian and Iranian state broadcasters and who now apparently lives in Russia.

In Sparkhill, one of the independent candidates was a man called Shahid Butt. Mr Butt holds a Yemeni terrorism conviction dating back to 1998-99. We can also look to more recent events to see why Mr Butt is utterly unfit to be a community representative or elected

politician. Before the planned Aston Villa match against Maccabi Tel Aviv, he said this on social media—I have seen the original, and it is not taken out of context:

“if someone comes into your face, you knock his teeth out. That's my message”.

It is worth pointing out that while it is right that we debate the petition's important proposals, the people of Sparkhill rejected Mr Butt's candidature. He lost decisively and two Labour councillors were returned. In that case, we needed good organisation and trust in the people of this country.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley (Tahir Ali) would forgive some comments about part of his constituency. Much has been said in the national press about Sparkhill, egged on by inflammatory comments made two years ago by a former Member of this place who should have known better. My mum was born on Evelyn Road in Sparkhill, and I feel a certain defensiveness when that area or any other part of Birmingham is used as a national political football. Many of us are fed up, and I am fed up of the national and social media tourists who think they can use Birmingham as a passing canvas to propagate stereotypes for cheap clicks, and who give the oxygen of publicity to unrepresentative ideologues and self-obsessed narcissists who crave attention. I am very glad that this year, in Sparkhill, their politics was defeated.

4.50 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee, of which I am a member. I also thank all the petitioners from across the country who kindly signed the petition which, put simply, asks whether those convicted of terrorism offences should be permanently barred from standing for elected public office. That is a serious question that deserves careful consideration by Members.

Before I go any further, let me be clear that it is my firm belief that we should never be in a situation where someone convicted of terrorism can stand for office in this country. I accept that we cannot always rely on the integrity of some overseas courts, but a terrorism conviction is incredibly serious and should have an impact on a person's right to stand for and be elected to public office.

There has, quite rightly, been a lot of emphasis on the specific case of Shahid Butt, who, as we have heard, stood for election to the Sparkhill ward in the May 2026 local elections for Birmingham city council. At the time, it was known that Mr Butt had previously been sentenced in Yemen to five years in prison for terrorism, after being convicted with five other UK nationals of plotting to blow up the British consulate there, among other locations. This individual should never have been permitted to stand for election and—as others, including my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk, have said—it is deeply worrying that people in the ward voted for someone who had previously been convicted of terrorism offences.

This debate is incredibly important because it opens up a much wider conversation about who can and cannot stand for public office. It is right that we properly scrutinise any convictions that have been awarded by

[Robbie Moore]

foreign courts, but surely the fact that a conviction has been awarded sparks a level of interest in an individual, so I urge the Government to consider tightening the rules. The reality is that if someone becomes elected, having previously been convicted of terrorism offences, either to this place or to a local authority, they not only represent their ward members or constituents but have access to information. Public confidence is at risk of being derailed because of that individual. What does it say about democracy in this country when an individual who has previously been convicted of terrorism offences is allowed to stand for election?

I do not think the Government's response to the petition is anywhere near good enough. They have responded by saying that they

"currently have no plans to change the disqualification criteria"

for those standing for election who have been convicted of such offences, but that they keep the counter-terrorism framework

"under constant review to ensure it is fit for purpose."

I say gently to the Minister that the current scenario is not fit for purpose if someone such as Mr Butt was able to stand for election in the May 2026 Birmingham city council elections. Given the level of concern expressed in the debate, what will the Government be doing to tighten up provisions to deal with what the petitioner is ultimately asking for?

4.54 pm

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I commend the petitioners who brought forward the important issue we are debating. I certainly endorse both the spirit and the letter of the petition, but I want to make an important point. If the Government are ever to act on this matter, as they should, they must act on a UK-wide basis. I say that as someone who represents a constituency in Northern Ireland, where too often a double standard has been applied. We should not and must not have a double standard on the issue of terrorists being allowed to be elected in one part of the United Kingdom but not in another.

I say that in the context of the sad experience of Northern Ireland. We have had a gallery of serious terrorist convicts elected not just to the Northern Ireland Assembly, and not just to this House—they do not take their seats but get all the expenses that the rest of us get; some have gone on to hold governmental office in Northern Ireland. I think of some of the more notorious ones, such as the Old Bailey bomber, Gerry Kelly, who came to this city to bomb the Old Bailey. A man died and, in due course, Gerry Kelly was convicted and put where he ought to have been—in prison. He escaped, shooting a prison officer in the head in the course of his escape. He was then able to stand for and be elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly. More than that, he was able to become a junior Minister to the First Minister of Northern Ireland. And more than that, he is to this day a member of the Northern Ireland Policing Board. Think of the absurdity of that: an Old Bailey bomber sitting in judgment over a police service on the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

If the Government ever act as they should, they must take action across this United Kingdom to prevent all those with terrorist convictions from attaining office. Of course, Kelly is not alone. There are many more, including Conor Murphy, a man who was elected to this House. He has never served here, because Sinn Féin refuse to take their seats, but he still got all the expenses of this House. He is a man who was convicted of the possession of explosives and given a five-year sentence, and he still has unanswered questions about his knowledge of the murder of young Paul Quinn in south Armagh. Yet he is a man who was once an MP, then a member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and then a Minister in the Northern Ireland Executive. That is what happens when we do not fetter the rights of those who have taken up the bomb and the gun and we allow them to abuse the democratic process.

I think of another continuing member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Pat Sheehan, who got 24 years for an attempted booby-trap bomb. He still serves as an elected representative. I think of Paul Butler, who was convicted of the murder of a policeman. The Principal Deputy Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly, Carál Ní Chuilín, is a convicted terrorist. She was convicted for a booby-trap attack on a police station. There are many more besides. That illustrates what happens when we do not address an issue like this. There are abiding lessons from the experience of Northern Ireland

I must correct the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who said that Martin McGuinness had no convictions. Martin McGuinness was convicted twice by the Dublin criminal court of membership of the IRA, which is a terrorist offence. Yet he went on to become Deputy First Minister of Northern Ireland.

There are two abiding consequences of allowing terrorists to be elevated to elected office. The first is that it sanitises the very acts of terrorism. As I said in my intervention on the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner), we have a situation in Northern Ireland where regularly, weekend after weekend, elected representatives glorify acts of terrorism and salute the so-called bravery of those who were what they call freedom fighters and what the rest of us call vile terrorists. For example, to this very day the First Minister will regularly salute the memory of terrorists. She does that from a position of elected office, and that elevates, sanitises and justifies the very acts of those terrorists. That is the fallout of allowing terrorists to be elected to public office.

The second, chilling, abiding consequence of allowing terrorists to be elected is that it sends a very dangerous message to the next generation of people who might be tempted to tamper and get involved in terrorism, because what do they see? They see that it worked for the previous generation of terrorists. They end up in the highest offices in the land, so it incentivises rather than disincentivises the pursuit of terrorism.

If young people, misled by dissident republicans in Northern Ireland, look at the Sinn Féin Benches and see multiple former terrorists presenting and parading as statespeople, having attained elected office, what message does it send to those young people? It sends a message that terrorism worked for them—"So why not for us?", they might think. That is one of the dangers of allowing the elevation of terrorists into elected office.

An act of terrorism is an act that deliberately takes on the political system to destroy it by the bomb and the bullet. It is wholly incongruous, given the definition of terrorism, to then have those terrorists, still boasting of their acts of terrorism, involved at the highest levels of that system.

I come back to my first point. If the Government are to act on this petition, and they should, they need to act on a nationwide basis across the United Kingdom. We cannot have one rule for one and another for another. There cannot be any hiding behind what is euphemistically called the peace process in Northern Ireland to justify the elevation of terrorists, because peace came in Northern Ireland—I will correct some Members here—not because of the Belfast agreement but because our gallant security forces defeated the terrorists, who were then, sadly, able to win the peace and gain what they gained. With those thoughts, I strongly support the petition, and I salute those who brought it to the House.

5.3 pm

Zöe Franklin (Guildford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for his opening remarks, and the petitioners who brought the petition today.

Public trust in our democracy is sadly at an all-time low due to broken manifesto commitments, resignations or just the perceived lack of accountability that has led to general political disillusion for so many. Every failure of standards and every perception that rules do not apply equally risks further damaging confidence in not only us as MPs but our democratic institutions.

The petition was signed by over 200,000 people across the country, including 227 of my constituents in Guildford, and it asks a question that goes to the heart of our democracy: who is fit to stand for public office and how do we protect the institutions that make our democracy work? We Liberal Democrats believe that we should be working hard to restore public confidence in our democratic institutions. Those who have sought to undermine that confidence through political violence should face serious consequences.

However, the question raised by the petition is not a simple one. Those who signed it are asking beyond whether someone convicted of terrorism offences should be able to stand for elected office; they are asking whether the system is serious about protecting itself. They are asking whether we understand what public office is for. The UK already disqualifies certain people with criminal convictions from holding elected office. Anyone sentenced to three months or more in prison is barred from serving on an English local authority for five years. Police and crime commissioner candidates are disqualified if they have ever been convicted of an imprisonable offence. MPs serving prison sentences of more than a year are disqualified under the Representation of the People Act 1981, so a framework is already in place. The question is whether it goes far enough for terrorism offences specifically.

We do not think that it would be right to bar every person with any historic conviction from ever standing for office; that would be disproportionate and cut against the principle of rehabilitation. But terrorism and national security offences are different. They are, by definition,

attacks on the institutions that the person may later seek to serve. It is reasonable for Parliament to treat them as a special case.

Any new prohibition, however, must meet two tests. First, it must comply with the 1998 Human Rights Act. Restrictions on the right to stand for election must be proportionate and subject to proper legal safeguards. That is not a barrier to action; it is the framework that any workable law will have to fit within. Secondly, any prohibition must be consistent with the Good Friday Agreement. The constitutional settlement in Northern Ireland has held peace for a generation, and legislation drafted without regard to it could do real damage. That is a practical consideration, not a theoretical one, and I hope the Minister will address it directly.

Within those tests, though, there is a clear route forward. The Elections Act 2022 already allows courts to issue disqualification orders, but only for five years. The Liberal Democrats support giving courts the power to issue longer disqualification orders, so that people who pose an ongoing threat to our democracy can be barred from public office for as long as that threat lasts.

Currently, the Representation of the People Bill is making its way through Parliament. It provides a great opportunity for the Government to make changes to our electoral system. My hon. Friend the Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart) has tabled an amendment that I fully support, which would prevent anyone convicted of offences relating to the promotion, incitement or use of political violence from making donations to political parties. If we agree that people who have used violence against our democracy should not sit in its chambers, we should also agree that they should not be funding the parties that do. I ask the Minister to look at that amendment seriously at the next stage of the Bill.

There is a wider point about how nominations are handled. Returning officers currently have to accept nominations at face value. They cannot investigate allegations or reject a nomination because they think someone might be disqualified. As candidates self-declare their eligibility, the system depends on honesty. It is worth the Government asking whether that is still fit for purpose.

Tackling extremism also requires more than legal disqualification. It requires the police and prosecutors to have the resources and training to prevent and prosecute hate crimes. It requires protective funding for places of worship, schools and community centres that have been the targets of attacks, and it requires all of us in public life to think very carefully about the rhetoric that we use and about the rhetoric that has too often been the precursor to violence.

The Government currently have no plans to change the existing disqualification criteria. I hope that, having listened to the debate, the Minister will be willing to go further than that. Public trust is hard won and easily lost. On this issue, the Government can show that they take that trust seriously.

5.8 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Allin-Khan. I add my congratulations to my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) on the way in which he introduced this complex debate.

[David Simmonds]

Let me start by addressing the issue that prompted the petition that we are debating. Many of us will have heard of Councillor Robert Alden, the leader of the Conservative group in Birmingham, who called on voters to “help keep extremists out” of Birmingham city council. We have heard examples from a number of different parties of how, in response to a high-profile individual with a very serious conviction, there was a sense across the political system in that city that they would not welcome division into their local politics. Although some in the ward voted for that individual, the community exercised what I think most of us would respect as being good judgment.

That leads to the broader question of how, particularly in local elections where turnout can be extremely low—sometimes as low as 20% at ward level—and in complicated politics with sometimes five or more political parties and a number of independent candidates, we ensure that people who wish to bring extremism into politics do not use those types of elections to leverage public office to pursue extremist aims.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) represents a community that has had to face and deal with some tensions, and he has led the response to that extremely effectively. He set out in his clear contribution that we need to ensure that in our politics and democracy—how we come together to collectively make the best decisions to support our communities and national interest—we do not see people seeking to leverage political office to create division.

This debate comes at a time when there is a bigger picture when it comes to those seeking to import disputes from other parts of the world into our politics. All of us, as constituency MPs, deal with that on a daily basis. Sometimes there are heartfelt requests for the intervention of the British state. I recently met constituents who wanted to talk to me about access to reservoirs and water in Sri Lanka. They felt that people in their country would respect the intervention of the British Government and that it would produce a positive impact on something directly affecting the lives of their friends, family and relations in a community with which they, like Britain, have a strong connection.

However, there are also those who seek to use British politics as a means of pursuing conflict and division, and clearly we do not welcome that. In considering cases like that of Shahid Butt, we know that Yemen is a country beset by terrible conflict and violence that have cost the lives of many thousands of innocent people. We do not want that conflict to be pursued either in Birmingham city council’s town hall or in any other part of our politics.

The challenge for the Government, who currently hold the responsibility to address this issue, is how we strike the right balance when seeking to draw boundaries around who is eligible for public office in our country. We are a country that respects and cherishes freedom of speech, and we support the right to the freedom of religion and belief. We believe, and it is enshrined in our rules, that there should be a path to redemption and reconciliation for people who break the law or the norms of our society. However, as politics becomes an

increasingly contested space, we need to ensure that we balance those principles with preserving the integrity of our politics.

People could seek local office not to benefit the wider community but because they want a decision to be made in favour of a planning application, a grant from the council or the sale of a piece of land to the benefit of them and their associates. People could also seek election to this Parliament to try to change the policy of the British Government in respect of interventions in conflict, wars and disputes in other countries. None of those things is about the longer-term interests of the British people.

Given the rising tide of antisemitism, which most of us will have heard about from our constituents—the Maccabi football team case in Birmingham was a classic example—we need to ensure that our governance and local ethics are free from the taint of extremism, wherever it may be found. The official Opposition support the Government in seeking to take forward their policies on this area.

I reflect on what the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) set out in respect of the complex history of Northern Ireland. It must be difficult for members of that community to find themselves face to face with people who are not only terrorists but may have been involved in the murder or harm of their own relatives. I have personally heard about that from Northern Ireland politicians. They have told me what it is like to sit in a council chamber knowing that somebody there was directly involved in the killing of someone very close to them, and trying to work out how to put that dispute behind them and move forward in the interests of the community, while not disrespecting the memory of those they loved.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I would add that this is not complex, in so far as terrorism is always wrong. All communities in Northern Ireland knew and understood that throughout the troubles. When it comes to the wholesale rewriting of history, our job now, through the Representation of the People Bill, which we are taking through Parliament, and the debate on the petition today, is to ensure that those who continue to endorse and glorify terrorism are dealt with.

David Simmonds: The hon. Member has set out clearly, and I think boosted, the point about the complexity. She is absolutely right that we should not have a situation where someone feels that their election to office overrides their obligation to the basic good conduct and due process we expect of all politicians—the basic respect for human rights, the lives of other people and everything that makes this country strong.

We need to make sure—I am sure the Minister will—that the Government reflect on the long-term lessons from Northern Ireland. This is not just about what Shahid Butt may have done in Yemen in 1999; it is about our experience as a country of terrorism influencing our politics and our communities, and about making sure those lessons are taken into account, so that we can be better protected for the future.

The Opposition will support the Government in seeking to bring forward whatever policy changes are necessary, and some suggestions have been made in the debate about what those might look like. That could include a

test specifically around convictions for terrorism or around crimes of violence that would impact on the suitability of someone for public office. It could include how we work with other countries to ensure that convictions abroad are captured through the nominations process, so that we know what people may have been convicted of and are able to make an effective appraisal of the soundness of that conviction—recognising that a conviction in Russia or China may not carry the same weight in the view of our politics as a conviction in France, Germany or Ireland.

We pledge to work with the Government to seek to address this issue and make sure that all of our communities, for the long-term future, can have total confidence in the integrity of our political system.

5.17 pm

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Allin-Khan. I thank the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) for moving the motion, and all hon. Members who have participated in this important debate.

I wholly agree with what the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk said about terrorism. All those who bear the scars, the pain and the trauma of political violence know that the value of our democracy is not just good government, but the right of us all to peace. I feel proud every day of the work my predecessors did in office to bring about peace on these islands, and I am glad the hon. Member reasserted the value of that peace through this debate.

Democracy depends on public participation, so it is only right and fitting that I acknowledge and thank the more than 200,000 people who signed the petition, which calls for a ban on anyone convicted of terrorism offences from standing for public office. The Government recognise the concern that underpins the petition: public confidence in our democratic institutions matters, and terrorism represents one of the gravest threats to our society, as Members have said. Although the House clearly understands that the threat of terrorism is serious, the question is whether a further electoral disqualification is the right, proportionate and effective response, and how any such change would sit alongside both the current and wider proposed legal frameworks.

In my response, I will set out what the Government are doing, but first I want to respond to what Members have said by repeating the words of my right hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley North (Dan Jarvis)—now the Defence Secretary—from Question Time on 8 June. In response to the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), he said:

“the defending democracy taskforce...is looking carefully at the issue...The Government are considering whether further action is required, and I should be happy to work with him on it.”—[*Official Report*, 8 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 10.]

I will make sure that the Defence Secretary sees a copy of the debate we have had today, and I again extend that offer to Members to work with the defending democracy taskforce on these issues. I thank the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds) for his offer, and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for

Guildford (Zöe Franklin) for her interest. I know that the Defence Secretary will be grateful for the points they have raised.

It is worth noting, as Members have, the wider context in which the petition has come before the House. As has been set out, during the May local elections there were reports about an individual standing for local office who had previously been convicted of terrorism offences overseas. As we all know in this House, elections are democracy in action. The community considered the candidates before them and made its choice at the ballot box, and that individual was not elected. I recognise what my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner) said about Birmingham, and he is right to stand up for the good sense of the people of Birmingham. I look forward to being in the fine city of Birmingham on Thursday to hear more about issues we are working on there.

Our system places trust in not only legal thresholds but the judgment of the electorate. People will ask whether somebody with a serious terrorism conviction should be able to stand at all, even if the electorate do ultimately reject them.

Robbie Moore: Before we move on from Shahid Butt, I want to be clear that he was allowed to stand for local elections. The Government have said they currently have no plans to change the disqualification criteria for those standing for election. Why is that? At the moment, somebody convicted of terrorism offences is allowed to stand. Why would the Government not want to change that?

Alison McGovern: As I set out to Members at the beginning of my contribution, the now Defence Secretary has said that the defending democracy taskforce is keeping this under review.

I will now discuss the disqualification framework and set out the current position. In England, a person is disqualified from being elected to, or being a member of, a local authority if they have been convicted of an offence and sentenced to imprisonment for three months or more, including a suspended sentence, within the previous five years. Candidates are required to declare that they are not disqualified when they submit nomination papers, and making a false statement is a criminal offence. Where eligibility is disputed, that is a matter for the courts. That would be particularly true where the issues may involve historic convictions or offences committed overseas. Clearly, returning officers cannot make subjective judgments over the suitability of eligible candidates.

The phrase “standing for public office” covers a wide range of roles, each with different responsibilities and existing disqualification rules. Changing those rules would mean carefully considering whether the same approach should apply to not just councillors, but mayors, police and crime commissioners, and Members of Parliament and devolved Governments. Any exclusion such as that proposed must be principled, proportionate and legally robust. A lifetime or indefinite ban is the most serious restriction. If Parliament chooses to create such a bar, it must be precise about who it captures and why it is necessary, and safeguard against unfair or unintended consequences that prevent citizens from engaging in our democracy.

[*Alison McGovern*]

Let me turn briefly to the counter-terrorism framework. The threat from terrorism is always evolving, which is why we always keep our broader counter-terrorism framework under review and ensure that our operational partners have the tools they need to mitigate risk to the public. Independent of disqualification from elected office, the UK has one of the strongest counter-terrorism frameworks in the world. That includes a range of specialist counter-terrorism powers that support detection and disruption of terrorist risk, as well as a robust toolkit for managing terrorist offenders upon release. That is supported through the independent scrutiny provided by the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation.

Electoral law determines who may stand for office; counter-terrorism law exists to provide the police and other operational partners with a toolkit to disrupt, investigate and prosecute terrorism-related activity. Alongside both, the Government are taking action to strengthen our democracy and electoral integrity, and to protect those who participate in our democracy—I just came from the statement that the Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Chester North and Neston (Samantha Dixon), whose was responsible for the Representation of the People Bill, gave in the Commons Chamber.

Harassment and intimidation of voters, electoral staff and campaigners, both online and in person, are totally unacceptable and have a profoundly detrimental impact on our democratic process. Impersonation and fraudulent nominations reduce the trust integral to democracy. That is why this Government have introduced the Representation of the People Bill to take decisive action to secure our elections against those who threaten them, to protect those who participate, to ensure that our democracy remains open and accessible to legitimate voters, and to strengthen and preserve our democracy for the next generation.

Requiring candidates to submit ID and sign a declaration to confirm that they understand the legal consequences of providing false information will strengthen public confidence without creating unnecessary barriers to standing. The Bill will empower courts to give tougher sentences to those who abuse candidates, campaigners, elected representatives and electoral staff. The measures will be supported by working with the Electoral Commission and the Speaker's Conference to develop an updated code of conduct for campaigning and improved safety for returning officers and candidates.

From the moment a candidate puts themselves forward and asks the public to place trust in them, they are subject to public scrutiny. Disqualification rules decide whether someone is legally allowed to stand for election; they do not decide whether that person has the character, judgment or conduct to serve—that is for the public to decide at the ballot box. Once elected, Members are expected to uphold codes of conduct based on the seven principles of public life: selflessness, integrity, objectivity, accountability, openness, honesty and leadership, which are the foundations of trust in public life.

Sorcha Eastwood: I want to pick up on the Minister's point that it is for the electorate to decide. In the case of Northern Ireland, we made the decision—it was a bitter

pill—to allow people who were terrorists to get out of jail early as part of a wider peace process. Where some of those people have gone on to attain elected office, which is their right, we have seen a rewriting of history. Therefore, it is not just the people who are there to decide; we as a state retain the right to make sure that past terrorism is regarded as wrong and that those who continue to propagate it by other means are held accountable.

Alison McGovern: There is no excuse or justification for terrorism. I repeat those standards, which we must all uphold in public life, for that reason. The hon. Lady made her point clearly and directly on the record.

Jim Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Alison McGovern: I will give way very briefly—I do not want to detain the House.

Jim Allister: The Minister talks about standards in voting and public life. As I indicated in my speech, weekend after weekend, we have people in public life glorifying terrorism and saluting the memories of their fallen colleagues, as they call them, who were vile, vicious terrorists. How is that upholding any standard in public life?

Alison McGovern: I simply say again that there is absolutely no justification for terrorism. All of us who seek elected office are responsible for upholding the standards I just read out.

We are all too aware in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that the current local government standards framework does not have the teeth it needs. Where elected members fall short of the standards the public rightly expects, there must be meaningful ways to hold them to account. Specifically in English local government, the vast majority of councillors serve their communities with dedication and integrity. Poor behaviour, though rare, can have a profound impact by damaging trust, undermining the performance of local government and deterring good candidates from contesting elections. If we want high-quality candidates to come forward, they need the confidence that local government is a serious, respectful and safe environment in which to serve.

That is why we will introduce a framework that commands public confidence, which will include a mandatory code of conduct for local government; appropriate sanctions, such as suspension and disqualification for multiple breaches; and fair processes, such as a clear appeals route for complainants and members. Last year, we published the response to the consultation on strengthening the standards framework for local authorities in England. We have a substantial and ambitious legislative programme, and there was no capacity for a dedicated Bill to enact those reforms this time, but we remain committed to strengthening the framework and intend to bring forward legislation as soon as parliamentary time allows.

The 200,000 people who signed the petition raise a serious and legitimate question about whether the current framework is sufficient, and as I mentioned in opening, the defending democracy taskforce is considering it. Existing disqualification criteria, candidate declarations

and public scrutiny, alongside our wider counter-terrorism powers, provide significant safeguards from immediate threats. However, we are going further, and we will strengthen our systems to protect our democracy, embed high standards of Member conduct and rebuild trust in public office. Any change in the law would need to be workable for electoral administrators, fair to candidates, robust in the courts and clear to the public and, most importantly, to uphold the values of democracy that we hold dear. I am sure Members in this House will continue to engage with this most serious of issues.

5.30 pm

John Lamont: I thank all the Members who participated in this important debate, particularly the hon. Member for Birmingham Northfield (Laurence Turner), my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) and the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister). All Members made very valid points, particularly both the Members from Northern Ireland—the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim and the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood)—who are obviously acutely aware of the challenges of having terrorists operating in their democratic institutions. I apologise to the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim; I totally forgot that Martin McGuinness had been convicted. Of course, anybody who is convicted of a terrorism offence should not be allowed to stand for office.

I appreciate the Minister's response and her initially positive style, but I am a bit disappointed with her conclusion. This is such an important principle: people who want to destroy our democracy, who want to pull

the rug from under us and who have gone to great lengths to bring down everything that we in this place believe in, should absolutely not be allowed to stand for election, whether that is for local government, the Scottish Parliament, the Welsh Assembly, the Northern Ireland Assembly or the UK Parliament in Westminster. If they have ever held those fundamental views about bringing down the very pillars of what our country believes in, they absolutely should not be allowed to stand for Parliament. I was disappointed that the Minister could not quite bring herself to say that.

Yes, there are challenges around overseas convictions, but we employ very clever drafters for our Government; they can come up with wording to get around that to ensure that those who have been wrongly accused of something overseas are not debarred from standing for election. Yes, we have disqualification rules, but we should be able to extend them further to ensure that terrorists—those who want to destroy our country and the institutions we in this place guard and protect dearly—are barred from standing for Parliament.

I hope the Minister and her Government will reflect on today's debate and on what the petitioner and all those who signed the petition put forward. I thank Richard Donaldson again for bringing this petition forward, and all Members who have taken part.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 759385 relating to disqualification from election candidacy for terrorism convictions.

5.33 pm

Sitting suspended.

Ceramics Industry

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

6 pm

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 764785 relating to support for the ceramics industry.

It is a pleasure, as ever, to see you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. Before I get going, I declare that I am a member of the general, municipal and boilermakers union, the GMB.

It is a particular pleasure to introduce this debate as a ceramics MP, and I add my full-throated support to the petition and its aims. My constituency of Lichfield, Burntwood and the villages is home to Armitage Shanks, a company that for more than 200 years has been manufacturing bathroomware in the village of Armitage, from which it takes its name. The identity of the village is inextricably tied up with the company, but, sadly, my constituents will fully recognise the petition's characterisation of a struggling ceramics sector, because like so many of our British ceramics businesses, Armitage Shanks has been suffering, despite the best efforts and hard work of its brilliant staff.

Earlier this year, the firm—now owned by Villeroy & Boch, a German manufacturer—was forced to close one of the kilns at its site in a bid to keep the business internationally competitive. That closure has had a real impact on the community, with 100 jobs lost as a result, and it is a reminder that when our heritage ceramics brands are struggling, it is about not just our country's manufacturing history and the heritage of the areas that support those businesses, but present-day jobs, skills and livelihoods. I have visited the Armitage site multiple times in recent months, and the concerns that I have heard over and over again from workers there and from their union, the GMB, fully echo the petition.

The job losses at Armitage Shanks are, sadly, just one example of the pressures that the sector faces. In 2025, we lost two ceramics firms in Stoke-on-Trent, Royal Stafford and Heraldic Pottery, a blow that went right to the heart of that city's identity. Last month, the final pieces of pottery rolled off the production lines at Denby in Derbyshire, which was a sad moment for many people, especially my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth). In March, the iconic British brand, known around the world for quality manufacture and design, entered administration. Its collapse has also led to more than 100 skilled workers losing their jobs.

Thanks to one of those workers, Hayley, we are here to debate this motion. I am very glad to see her in the Public Gallery today. I congratulate her on her first week in a new position that she found elsewhere, but I am sure she would have liked to go to it in rather better circumstances. I am sure that I speak for all right hon. and hon. Members in the Chamber when I say that British ceramics is richer for retaining her experience and passion in the industry.

Hayley's petition could not be more timely. We met ahead of the debate to discuss her concerns, which echo the worries that I hear from the constituents, businesses and unions in my area, and which I and other ceramics MPs gathered here today have been pressing the Government on. I am not surprised to see so many hon.

Members joining us, because almost 110,000 people signed Hayley's petition—more than 10% of them coming from just seven constituencies.

This issue is very much centred on Staffordshire, Derbyshire and Nottinghamshire, and the people in our areas care deeply about it. Hayley's petition recognises that much of the ceramics sector in our country is in crisis. As she warns, "soaring industrial energy costs" have left businesses

"at the risk of imminent collapse without urgent intervention".

Ceramics manufacturing relies on high levels of electricity and gas, and when their prices rise here in the UK, our businesses are put at a competitive disadvantage on the international stage.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving way in this debate, which is clearly important not only to his particular area, but to UK manufacturing more widely. On the challenges of energy costs, the ceramics industry has suffered similar challenges to the critical minerals sector, specifically the tin mining and processing sector in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency. Does he agree that the Government must go further and faster to replicate some of the support that has been afforded to the ceramics industry for critical minerals?

Dave Robertson: My good and hon. Friend is right to raise the importance of energy costs to industry across the United Kingdom. Ceramics, though, is the hardest industry to decarbonise. It is therefore right that the Government are looking at a specific carve-out for ceramics, especially given its geography.

Returning to the problem so ably diagnosed by Hayley, she has also offered a solution. The petition calls on the Government to urgently review the British industry supercharger—a scheme that helps energy-intensive businesses including steel, chemicals and paper manufacturers with their electricity costs. She calls for that to be extended to the ceramics sector. During the last few months, Denby has said that relief through the supercharger scheme would have saved the company, but currently, ceramics businesses are falling through the cracks of the scheme.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): As my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) pointed out, the critical minerals industry lacks wider support through the British industrial competitiveness scheme and the supercharger scheme, but so does upstream china clay production. That is a huge concern for a supply chain industry that supports many businesses represented by Members in the Chamber.

Dave Robertson: It seems like Cornwall has come mob-handed today; I am getting it from both sides. My hon. Friend is right, and that goes back to the point about reindustrialising the nation. We have heard for so long about deindustrialised areas and former industrial areas, so it is fantastic to see the Government continuing to drive the reindustrialisation of those areas to bring highly skilled, high-quality unionised jobs back to our communities, where they deserve to be.

Returning to ceramics, since this petition was started, the Government have recognised the challenge facing the ceramics sector specifically and have pledged a £120 million

package of targeted support. That funding is hugely welcome, but we all know that funding alone is not enough. A lot now hangs on the design of that scheme to ensure that the money is delivered quickly and is well targeted at the companies that most need it and where it will protect the most jobs.

Crucially, the scheme should be simple for firms to apply for. Some ceramics firms employ large numbers of people, but they do not have significant back offices that can go through a very complex and heavy administrative process to access such a scheme. Although it is important that companies are asked for the right information to support the scheme, we must not create an unnecessary administrative barrier. I and other hon. Friends in the Chamber will continue to work on this alongside the GMB, other unions and the Government. We must ensure that that funding helps bolster and secure this industry for the long term rather than kicking the can down the road.

That brings me to why supporting this sector is so important—all of us in the Chamber know this, but I never miss the opportunity to remind a Minister. Ceramics manufacturing goes to the heart of identity in our counties. So many ceramics firms take their names from the towns, villages and areas in which they are based, and they have made those places famous around the world. I spoke to one hon. Member who had used an Armitage Shanks toilet in Samoa. That is a powerful form of soft power, if Members will excuse a rather crude pun.

Ceramics manufacturing jobs powered our economies. Stoke-on-Trent is literally known as the Potteries, and if I had not mentioned that, I am not sure I would have been allowed to leave the room. Just as the closure of mines struck at the identity of the towns that supported them, including places such as Stoke-on-Trent, deindustrialisation has hurt our communities.

Ceramics speaks to a proud tradition of world-class manufacturing in our counties, but it is not just about the past; it is about the present and the future. It is about providing jobs for people where, at the end of the day, they have the satisfaction of looking at a pallet of whatever they have produced and knowing that they have made something. It is a proud tradition that we should not allow to pass into the past.

To support that soft power, those iconic British brands need to know that they have a supporter in our Government. I would like to see our public procurement work much harder to make sure it is championing the best of British ceramics—actually, the best of international ceramics, because the very best of international ceramics comes from the midlands of the UK, and I will defend that hill until there is no breath left in my lungs. It is entirely possible for our public procurement to be used to support ceramics. It would be fantastic if every embassy were stocked with ceramics made in Britain. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] Again, other ceramics MPs are behind me. Every public building should also look at whether it can support British-made ceramics in its sanitaryware—and the list goes on much further than that.

I will also draw attention to the private Member’s Bill introduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), which I support. The Bill relates to backstamping and the “Made in Britain” mark, so we can make sure that when something says “Made in Britain”, it is from Britain and it is of the high

quality that people expect. Currently, firms can import ceramics that have been made cheaply elsewhere, glaze them here, refire them and stamp them as British. Being able to support the supply chain through not only public procurement but the backstamping Bill is very important.

Wider than that, we need to come back to the supercharger. Ceramics is an energy-intensive industry. It relies on high inputs of electricity and gas, but electricity prices in the UK are higher than in many of our competitor countries. That takes a toll on the industry and means that the supercharger scheme is so important. Entry to the scheme is based on what is known as a SIC—standard industrial classification—code and the categories that the Government use to classify businesses and identify what they do. The SIC codes in use for ceramics are not currently eligible for the scheme, but, worse still, because of the way the scheme is funded, ceramics businesses are being levied to subsidise other high-energy businesses—because if businesses do not receive the supercharger, they pay for others to get it.

Ahead of the debate, I met with the industry association Ceramics UK, the GMB union, the Trades Union Congress and Energy UK. One concern was that SIC codes are not necessarily being properly applied. The number of ceramics businesses that the Government count is far higher than the number that the sector recognises. Hopefully that is good news for Ministers, because if we can get the codes altered correctly, we will see that there are fewer ceramics businesses in need of support, which will help to reduce the headache in the Treasury.

First, we can look at tightening up the SIC codes, then we can extend the supercharger to those codes. We can then ensure that the supercharger scheme is properly funded by the Treasury and not by other businesses, so that general taxation can support these jobs. Beyond the supercharger, which is undoubtedly vital for ceramics, the Government have committed and recognise that the industry needs tailored support. I ask Ministers to look closely at the specific pressures that the sector is facing.

As well as high electricity inputs, ceramics uses a huge amount of gas. Although the cost of gas in Britain is internationally competitive, prices are highly volatile because of a lack of storage in the United Kingdom. If we could look at supporting gas storage or some other mechanism to smooth peaks and troughs in gas pricing, it would help ceramics businesses with their long-term planning and help to them look at their decarbonisation processes, too.

On decarbonisation, hydrogen gas is a promising alternative, but hydrogen kiln technology requires further investment and if we cannot pipe gas in, there will be serious supply problems. Some ceramics manufacturers run their kilns 24/7/365, and the idea of hydrogen being brought in by lorries just does not stack up. We can use the revenues from carbon levies to support the transition and protect manufacturing jobs both today and for the future.

I have gone slightly over the amount of time I was aiming for, and many other hon. Members are eager to make the case for the industry, so I will draw to a close. I reiterate my thanks to Ceramics UK, the GMB, the TUC and Energy UK for meeting me, to Hayley for spurring today’s important debate, and to every single one of the workers who go out day after day to produce fantastic, high-quality ceramics—some of the best in the world—right here in the UK.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. There is a lot of interest in this debate, so I am imposing an indicative time limit on speeches of four minutes, an exemplar of which will be Sir Gavin Williamson.

6.14 pm

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my constituency neighbour, the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), on securing this debate. As one of probably a few Members of Parliament who have worked in the ceramics industry, this is not just about jobs for me; it is about who we are, identity and what it means to make something tangible and real that can make a difference to our economy. It contributes £2 billion to our economy, including £600 million worth of exports from a country that, sadly, exports too little.

The situation we are in is a tragedy. Ceramics is not just cups and saucers, plates and bowls; it is the tiles on our homes and the bricks. I have some amazing ceramics businesses in my constituency, whether that is Dunoon, Lucideon, AMRICC and, of course, Ibstock, which makes the iconic Staffordshire blue brick. It is crazy that we are in a situation where bricks are being imported into this country from India, Turkey and the Netherlands, and British manufacturers employing British people and providing British exports are being priced out of the market.

The core issue here is energy costs—energy costs first, second and third. It would be disingenuous of me not to thank the Government for the action that they have taken to support the ceramics sector, but we will continue to see a decline in ceramics unless we address that core issue of energy. The Government have taken important steps to address it. The supercharger is important, but the reality is that only 10% of ceramics businesses are able to apply for that, for the simple reason that gas is not included, or not in the way that they are able to access it.

Some 86% of the energy costs for ceramics manufacturers come from not electricity but gas. That is not through choice; it is necessary in order to make the product. They are not sat there thinking, “I don’t want to do the transition to electricity;” they cannot make that transition and, as the hon. Member for Lichfield rightly pointed out, hydrogen will not be able to come to the rescue and save those jobs.

I am conscious that many people want to contribute, so I come to my ask of the Minister. I know that he is incredibly knowledgeable and passionate about this sector. I urge him to look at setting out a timetable for a review of extending the supercharger so that it can cover gas costs. If he is unable to do that and we are unable to get the support required, more British businesses will sadly go under; more British manufacturing businesses will no longer be manufacturing or exporting, and firms from across the sea will step into that gap. That is not something that anyone wants to see, whether in Staffordshire or across the United Kingdom.

6.18 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) on presenting this debate, and my

constituent Hayley who brought the petition. I draw attention to my declaration in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests that I am a member of GMB.

While the petition speaks to the wider issues facing the ceramics sector, it was set up following the devastating news that Denby Pottery, the largest employer in my constituency, was entering administration. The nearly 110,000 signatures—3,900 of which are from Amber Valley; I thank my constituents for signing it—are a testament to the national significance, rich history and enduring popularity of Denby Pottery, handcrafted using clay from the very site on which the company was founded. Throughout its 217 years, the pottery has remained committed to local craftsmanship, even as its competitors offshored production to mass-produce goods more cheaply. That commitment has inspired extraordinary loyalty, with many in the local area having worked there for decades and even generations.

However, despite its world-class reputation, Denby Pottery struggled financially. It had previously been through administration, and more recent global shocks in energy markets faced further pressure on manufacturing costs. That is why I worked with Hayley to produce the petition, which calls for the ceramics sector to be included in the British industry supercharger scheme.

In the months that followed, I met repeatedly with Ministers and officials and raised Denby Pottery’s situation directly with the Prime Minister. He committed to a full review of the supercharger scheme across all sectors. But understanding the need for a more immediate intervention for Denby Pottery and the sector more widely, the Chancellor acted decisively and announced a bespoke package of £120 million for ceramics.

I thank those who worked tirelessly to produce this, including Ceramics UK, GMB Union, colleagues here today and the Treasury, as well as the Minister for Industry, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), and the Secretary of State for Business and Trade.

Heartbreakingly, in spite of that support, we now know that investors were unable to view Denby Pottery as a viable business proposition, so I am refocusing my efforts towards fighting for a different future, working with Government, the administrators, local businesses and any future purchaser of the site to maximise opportunities for good quality jobs in Amber Valley. Alongside that, I am clear that Denby Pottery’s heritage must be preserved. The onsite museum told the story of more than two centuries of innovation and industry. I commend the excellent work being done by Linda and others to ensure that the collection will be enjoyed for generations to come.

Denby Pottery has many legacies, ranging from the nationally significant to the deeply personal: its heritage, its skilled and committed workforce and the pottery itself—treasured, gifted at weddings and passed down through generations. Today, its legacy must live on in the lessons learned from its closure and the changes that it catalysed, so that other ceramics companies can continue and thrive.

I therefore urge the Minister to continue working with industry to ensure that UK ceramics manufacturers can compete on a level playing field. That includes insulating the sector from unfair competition, such as the dumping of heavily subsidised products from overseas markets.

The public want to back overseas business and manufacturing, as illustrated by the incredibly moving scale of the support for the #SaveDenby campaign. I pay tribute to the campaign led by my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) for clearer country of origin labelling, and I hope the Government support his private Member's Bill.

To any potential purchaser of the Denby Pottery brand alone, I say this: if your produce is not made in Denby, using clay extracted from the ground in Denby village and hand-crafted by the people of Denby, then regardless of the name stamped upon it, it will never be recognised as true Denby pottery.

6.23 pm

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), my good friend and colleague on the Petitions Committee, on his excellent introduction to this debate. He talks about the wares of Armitage Shanks; I would venture to suggest that Armitage Shanks products are seen in some of the great houses the length and breadth of the United Kingdom.

One may wonder what a Member from the north of Scotland doing on his feet on this debate. There are two ceramic companies in my constituency: ANTA in Fearn, owned by Lachie and Annie Stewart, whose products can be seen in Dumfries House—a place not unfamiliar to His Majesty the King—and Highland Stoneware in Lochinver, which is owned by Mr David Grant, whose wares can be seen in Balmoral. We are very proud of that.

My point is that these companies actually teach vital local skills that would not otherwise be taught, create jobs in some of the remotest areas of the United Kingdom and provide a tourist product, which is absolutely crucial when it comes to visitors. When people, including right hon. and hon. Members, come to my part of the world in the north of Scotland, they should come and see ANTA's fine ceramics in the village of Fearn. They should come and see Highland Stoneware in Lochinver. They will not be disappointed. We would not dare to compete with Stoke-on-Trent in terms of quality, but we are very proud of what we do.

I am going to keep my contribution very short, but I want to make one point. It is not really pertinent to the Minister, but those fledgling and now grown-up companies would not have come into being had it not been for a key decision taken by Harold Wilson's Labour Government in the 1960s, which was to put in place the Highlands and Islands Development Board. This was to encourage enterprise in some of the remotest parts of the UK and to halt and reverse the depopulation that was the curse of some of the remotest parts of Scotland. It was a great success story, and I give credit where it is due.

However, that success story is not what it once was. This is a political point, but under the stewardship of the present Scottish Government the Highlands and Islands Development Board, now Highlands and Islands Enterprise, is a shadow of what its parent once upon a time was, which is a great pity. Although that is not the responsibility of the Minister or indeed the UK Government, I give due notice that this is a matter I shall continue to raise in future. Thank you very much, Dr Murrison, for your forbearance.

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): That was commendably brief, although not everyone will get in at this rate. I shall have to impose a three-and-a-half minute indicative time limit.

6.26 pm

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) for participating in this debate. He demonstrates something that we have tried to make clear throughout our lobbying: this is not a Stoke-on-Trent issue. Yes, we are the spiritual home of the pottery industry, but there are ceramics manufacturers in most parts of this country making something beautiful out of dirt, essentially, and turning clay into art. The fact that he was able to share that story is very helpful in articulating the points we are trying to make.

I congratulate Hayley for starting the petition. I declare my membership of the GMB and my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for ceramics. I want to put on the record my thanks to Rob Ffello from Ceramics UK as well as Sharon Yates and Chris Hoofe from the GMB for their sterling work in leading the campaign that has got us to this point. As was said by the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), the industry employs 20,000 people. It is worth £2 billion to the economy, with £600 million-worth of exports. That makes it bigger than the fishing industry, yet the country's emotive connection to it is not quite as great, so we still have work to do.

I am grateful that my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) picked up on my Ceramics (Country of Origin Marking) Bill. I genuinely believe there is a market around the world for quality ware made in the UK. We know it from Portmeirion's advancements. They tell me about markets they are looking at, potentially bringing work back to the UK. Some companies in Stoke-on-Trent talk about where they export, and the value of that export, because of that mark on the bottom that says "made in Stoke-on-Trent". I hope the Minister can continue the constructive conversation that we have had so far to see how we get that Bill over the line in this Session.

We are a city that looks at our history and we take it very seriously. I am proud to have the tile manufacturer H&E Smith in my constituency. It makes tiles for London Underground and is celebrating its 100th year. I have Emma Bridgewater, which makes incredibly well-known stoneware, and I have Portmeirion. I have Halcyon Days that makes giftware for the House of Lords shop. The city also gave this place Duchess China and, of course, Minton tiles are made about a mile from where I live. That is the history that we have contributed, but the sector has so much more to offer.

We cannot make steel in this country without refractory grade ceramics. We cannot build houses in this country without the bricks. I say to the Minister, like my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee), if we are to have Homes England subsidise the building of homes in this country, can we please mandate that it buys British bricks with that subsidy? It would be a huge benefit for taxpayers' money to go into a British industry to protect British jobs using a British product.

[Gareth Snell]

There are also advanced ceramics that we use for defence, for nuclear and for medical technologies, which are leading the way in which we treat people, the way we defend our country and the way that we do some of that green technology advancement. As the Minister and I have often discussed, decarbonisation should not mean de-industrialisation, and the ceramic sector is a clear example of where, if we get it right, we can show that it works for that proof of concept.

Finally, I want to briefly talk about the carbon border adjustment mechanism. CBAM is an issue. We have to get that right. It potentially puts the ceramic sector at risk. We are in danger of carbon leakage, yet that is not recognised as part of the scheme. As my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) mentioned, the dumping of Chinese ware is a problem. Will the Minister look at how the Trade Remedies Authority considers the calculations for injury? Will he also make sure that ceramics are included in the supercharger scheme, which we discussed on Thursday during the Adjournment debate, to protect those jobs for the future?

Several hon. Members rose—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. I am calling the Front-Bench spokespeople at 6.58 pm—so do the maths, folks.

6.30 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for opening this debate. It is fitting that that was done by a good, loud and honourable Staffordshire voice—it could be no other way. Like him, I declare an interest as a proud member of the GMB. This debate is personal for those of us who call Staffordshire—the best county in England—our home, so I thank Hayley for allowing us to debate this issue.

Newcastle-under-Lyme and north Staffordshire are at the heart of the British and worldwide ceramics industry—they always have been, and they always will be. I welcome the ceramics industry support package, which contains £120 million of real and meaningful support for businesses such as Silverdale Bathrooms and Ibstock Brick in Chesterton. We fought hard for that support, hunting as a Staffordshire pack—with a little bit of Derbyshire and Leicestershire thrown in, alongside the mighty union movement and Ceramics UK, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell) said. I thank the Minister, who has been a real champion and a solid ally in this effort.

For generations, people in my community in Newcastle-under-Lyme have produced the very best British products, with skill, smarts, experience and talent. Their work has powered and fuelled our local and national economies. There will be a theme in all the speeches in this debate: we welcome the £120 million, but we want to know that that package of support will be made speedily and widely available. There will be asks of the Government to step up properly and ensure that this age-old and successful industry is protected and to ensure that we train and equip our young people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and across our country with the skills necessary to enter and thrive in this most important industry. There will be the important demand that our communities should no longer be ignored, forgotten or left behind.

As I say, team Staffordshire hunts with all parties as a pack, and that can be seen in this debate. For too long, our communities, home to the ceramics industry, were let down and left behind by the powerful few. We are here to change that, and change that we will.

I am the third generation of my family to call Staffordshire home, and I have seen up close the powerful impact the ceramics industry has had on our part of the world. I can see its potential to do so in the future but we need to act. Out of all the sectors that once powered and thrived in our industrial heartlands, ceramics has been left behind, despite having built our homes, schools and hospitals. We need urgent action on energy bills and the costs associated for businesses in the ceramics industry. We need to ensure that the industry is at the heart of our trade agenda, and we need to redouble our efforts to ensure that we buy British every step of the way. That is why I brought my “back British bricks” Bill to Parliament, and I will continue to push that agenda.

The most important point that we must all remember is simple: the ceramics industry can flourish, thrive and continue to lead the world, but that requires the state to act. We are not asking to be bailed out or to get the same level of commitment that other industries have received in recent months. The growth potential of this industry is massive in communities like mine and in our national economy, too. I ask the Minister to remember that now and in the months and years ahead, because we will not be going away and we will not stop making the case for the ceramics industry, which has brought such pride and opportunity to communities in the industrial heartlands like mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

6.33 pm

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. Ceramics are who we are in north Staffordshire; they are in our DNA. They are in the bottle kilns on our skyline and the names above our factory gates, and they are literally in the hands of the people I proudly represent. Yet for years, people in our communities were told the same story: that the industries that built our city belonged in the past and that globalisation meant that towns like ours simply had to accept decline while investment flowed elsewhere.

In May, this Labour Government tore up that narrative when they announced the £120 million supporting growth package. That happened because our Labour Government listened to me, my north Staffordshire colleagues and the GMB union. I pay particular tribute to Sharon Yates, a GMB member who is in the Gallery. She was absolutely integral to winning that support.

In my constituency, we know better than most about what is at stake because we have lived it. In less than two years, three fantastic companies in my constituency have faced an uncertain future. At Moorcroft, I supported workers at risk of redundancy alongside Sharon, and I am not too proud to say that my emotions got the better of me as I listened to the worries of the 30 workers in that room who had collectively amassed over 800 years of craftsmanship, skills and talents between them. At Royal Stafford, we did the same—again, hundreds of years of skills and talents were at risk. Those meetings were tough and emotional, but they reaffirmed to me the importance of why we had to keep fighting for our

pots: if those companies are allowed to go, with them will also go the skills and talents of our workforce. More recently, Burleigh, the country's oldest Victorian pot bank, was at risk following its owners, Denby, falling into administration.

Out there, people know that our industry needs protection and that it has a future. Step forward Will Moorcroft, the founder's grandson; Cornishware, which has stepped in and taken over the Royal Stafford site; and Christopher Bailey, who transformed Burberry into a global fashion brand and has amassed a team of investors to keep Burleigh's kiln firing. The prize is now long-term sustainability and an industry that stands permanently on a level playing field.

I have two specific questions to pose to the Minister. I recently met with a number of smaller ceramics companies in my constituency. They are incredibly pleased with the support package. However, can the Minister confirm that all companies, both large and small, will benefit from the £120 million package? Will he also please come and meet with those companies in my area? Secondly, the Government can do more to support our local companies by ensuring that the UK Government, and their Departments and embassies around the world, buy British. Will the Minister consider extending plans for procurement so that Stokie plates, cups and saucers are the only ones we see when we flip them over?

I am grateful to the Minister because he understands the sector. We will keep fighting for more, as we always have. Ceramics is who we are, and our story is far from finished.

6.36 pm

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank all the people who signed this petition and commend the hard work done by my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) and all who fought hard for Denby and our ceramics industry.

In Stoke-on-Trent South, factories such as Wedgwood and 1882 Ltd have crafted bespoke projects for centuries. Duchess China produces the cups and saucers used here in Parliament, Susan Rose supplied tableware for No. 10 and Caverswall China crafts pieces for Buckingham Palace. It is no wonder that so many of my constituents take great pride in working in the Pots—I see that we have pottery workers here today, including my constituent, Sharon Yates, who created the potter's pledge led by the GMB. I encourage all to sign it to combat the issue of fakes and dumping.

Since being elected, I, along with all my colleagues, have repeatedly raised with Ministers the importance of the ceramic sectors in north Staffordshire. That was to safeguard not only our tableware sector and proud potters' heritage, but the strategic value of advanced ceramics, which I am pleased to see are now included in the British industrial competitiveness scheme.

Regrettably, companies have faced real challenges: Brexit disrupted trade; there has been an influx of imported knock-offs; and energy prices have shot up following the war in Ukraine and the closure of the strait of Hormuz. The petition asks that ceramics be included in the supercharger scheme, and that is an understandable ask, but it does not solely answer all the challenges faced by the sector; nor does it address the future

sustainability and the need for transition to low-carbon alternatives. That is why I have previously asked the Government to introduce what I dubbed an "industry energy innovation fund" for gas-intensive industries. As well as funding the capital investment for new technology, whether electric, biofuels or hydrogen kilns, such a fund would provide grants or loans to companies to explore process emissions reduction, artificial intelligence-enabled process optimisation along with processes to recover waste heat and improve energy efficiency.

I was delighted that the Government announced a £120 million fund to support the sector in May. Following that announcement, I asked the Chancellor to clarify that the purpose of the fund was to support decarbonisation and innovation. She confirmed that it was indeed to help the sector tackle energy costs, improve energy efficiency and create a sustainable future. Alongside Lucideon and Visk, I want to thank the Henry Royce Institute and David Knowles, along with the TUC, GMB and Russell Hall at Warwick Manufacturing Group, for working alongside me to develop proposals as to how we can deliver a sustainable, energy efficient future using this fund.

Can the Minister ensure that the consultation about the design of the fund includes experts such as those mentioned above as well as a variety of small and medium-sized enterprises and organisations including Make UK and Glass Futures, along with the excellent Ceramics UK, which has worked so hard?

6.39 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison.

As we have heard, the ceramics industry is a vital part of Britain's manufacturing heritage and economic future. It supports thousands of skilled jobs, sustains local communities, strengthens domestic supply chains and contributes significantly to our economy. These are highly skilled jobs and preserving that expertise must remain a national priority. However, like other energy intensive industries, including those in my Mid Cheshire constituency, the ceramic sector has faced significant pressure from high energy costs. Manufacturers are competing in a global marketplace while dealing with energy prices often far higher than those faced by international competitors. Those pressures have placed additional strain on businesses already working hard to invest, innovate and plan for the future. That is why tackling high energy costs and supporting the decarbonisation of energy-intensive industries must go hand in hand; those objectives are not in conflict.

If we are serious about delivering net zero while maintaining a strong industrial base, we must ensure that the transition protects jobs, skills and domestic production rather than driving investment overseas. While the ceramics industry is concentrated in places such as Staffordshire, the challenges it faces are not unique. In the north-west, energy-intensive industries are grappling with the same pressures of high energy costs, international competition and the need to decarbonise. The question we face is whether we allow those industries to decline, with the resulting impact on the communities around them, or whether we provide them with the tools they need to remain competitive.

[Andrew Cooper]

Hydrogen is one tool that can help achieve that. It offers a credible pathway to reducing emissions from high-temperature industrial processes, where electrification is not an option, while preserving the skilled jobs and manufacturing capability on which communities depend. We already see that potential here in the UK through the development of the hydrogen cluster in Cheshire. Although it is centred on the industrial clusters of the north-west and north Wales, the project demonstrates what hydrogen can achieve for hard-to-abate sectors across the United Kingdom, helping manufacturers reduce emissions while remaining competitive and attracting future investment.

Whether we can realise that potential across the wider north-west, Staffordshire and the country as a whole is now the key question because we stand at a crossroads as we await the publication of the updated hydrogen strategy. I hope that we make the right choice to bring forward a strategy that backs those of our industries for which hydrogen is the only option—crucially, wherever they are in the country and not simply by picking winners and losers.

The north-west has seen too many manufacturing sites close in recent years. We cannot afford to lose more industrial jobs, skills and investment. I hope that Ministers will publish the updated hydrogen strategy at the earliest opportunity and bring forward a hydrogen network that delivers for the communities that we represent. If we get this right, we will support not only industrial decarbonisation but skilled jobs. We will unlock private investment and help ensure that British manufacturing continues to thrive for generations to come.

6.42 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for his excellent opening speech. My remarks today will be at a slightly different level. They are focused on studio pottery—ceramics made on an individual basis, where each piece is unique and handmade. Studio pottery is growing in popularity in this country following programmes such as “The Great Pottery Throw Down”. There are thousands of makers up and down the country, and the industry is worth about £50 million in its own right.

Pottery and potters are as old as the human race; although it might not be the oldest profession, it is certainly one of the earliest. Britain leads the world in modern studio pottery, which was largely started by Bernard Leach and the Japanese master Hamada in St Ives in Cornwall. Many of his techniques came from traditional Japanese techniques and favoured an apprenticeship system. More contemporary and well-known potters such as Grayson Perry and Keith Brymer Jones have all grown from that movement.

However, making a living from pottery remains tough. The price of clay and energy have increased, and most potters earn well below the minimum wage. The Arts Council could help individual potters, specifically at the beginning of their careers. That would help nurture the industry, while a reduction in VAT on clay would help small producers. Furthermore, the way HMRC treats apprenticeships and mentoring needs a more creative attitude to help the industry. In Stroud, there are long-running potteries such as Lansdown Pottery and the

newer Stroud Pottery. The Clay Loft in Nailsworth provides studio space and tuition for this very popular art form, while Stroud markets provide an excellent place to sell the pots.

Linsey Farnsworth: My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech about the importance of continuing the skills and heritage of the pottery industry. Will he join me in congratulating Fran, Kate and Daizy? They were employees of Denby Pottery and recently set up the Potter’s Nook in Ripley, where people in my constituency and beyond can go to learn the skills needed in the pottery sector.

Dr Opher: Developing young potters is essential for the ceramics industry in general, and particularly for studio pottery.

As a GP, I know that the therapeutic effects of clay are well documented. I introduced arts in my surgery in 2001, using ceramics and clay, led by Karen Hilliard, to relieve stress in patients. I also pay tribute to Jeremy Steward and Petra Reynolds, who work at Wobage pottery and have remained an inspiration. I cannot finish without mentioning my daughter Martha, who makes a living selling her unique pottery in Stroud market. Although she will never be rich, she continues to inspire me and many around her with her functional and exquisite ceramics.

This country should be proud of its world-famous studio pottery industry, which brings employment and joy to so many people. We must do all we can to support that industry and its people.

6.45 pm

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) on securing this debate and on his opening remarks. His strength of feeling and that shown by the petitioners, including nearly 800 in my constituency, demonstrate how important the ceramics and manufacturing sector remains to communities like mine and across the country. I would like to declare that I am a proud member of the GMB.

The Government have rightly identified advanced manufacturing as a strategic priority for their modern industry strategy. Manufacturing accounts for nearly 15% of the east midlands economy, a greater share than in any other region in England. The £120 million support package for the UK ceramics industry is a welcome example of this Government backing manufacturing in the midlands. Over 450,000 people are employed in manufacturing across the east midlands, including a significant portion in the ceramics industry. These are not just jobs; they represent generations of expertise, craftsmanship and industrial knowledge that have been passed down through families and communities of working people across generations.

Broxtowe still bears the scars of the industrial decline. Parts of Eastwood, a former coalfield community, have never recovered from the loss of traditional industries and the secure jobs that they provided. Broxtowe remains a home to major manufacturers, including Reckitt in Beeston and Cauntton Engineering in Moregreen. Yet in meetings with both those companies, they highlighted

challenges shared by manufacturers across the country: persistently higher energy costs and the challenge of decarbonising industrial processes while remaining competitive. Those pressures are being felt now. Without action, we risk seeing further investment in jobs being moved overseas.

We must ensure that British manufacturers are not placed at a competitive disadvantage. If we are serious about retaining high-value industrial jobs, businesses cannot continue to face energy costs significantly higher than those of their international counterparts and competitors. We must ensure that the infrastructure needed for industrial decarbonisation is in place. Many manufacturers are ready to electrify their operations but are held back by constraints in local electricity networks and grid capacity. The ceramics industry has rightly highlighted those issues, but the lessons apply across the manufacturing industry. I urge the Minister to consider expanding eligibility for energy cost relief for manufacturers that fall outside the existing schemes and to support investment in local electricity networks and grid capacities to enable industrial decarbonisation.

By supporting energy-intensive industries and providing the infrastructure they need to invest, we can protect skilled jobs, strengthen our industrial base and deliver growth in communities that have waited far too long for their share in prosperity.

6.48 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for opening the debate, which has been a useful opportunity for us to talk about ceramics. I am also a member of the GMB. I thank Hayley for the petition, which was inspired by Denby Pottery, and the 504 constituents who signed it. For more than two centuries, Denby has represented the very best of British craftsmanship, with high-quality products, skilled jobs and a reputation recognised across the world. It is such an iconic brand for the east midlands. It is up to us as representatives to keep championing our local manufacturers now and for the future. I know of the work that my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth) has done with Denby.

North West Leicestershire has a proud industrial heritage. Manufacturing remains the largest sector of employment locally and we are home to major ceramics employers such as Ibstock Brick. Brick is a key part of the sector. I have three Ibstock Brick sites and have been greatly pleased to meet with people from them on several occasions. The bricks are quarried and fired directly in North West Leicestershire. We create bricks and material used across the country that last for hundreds of years. In recent years, Ibstock Brick told me, imported bricks have made up about 20% of the UK brick market, and yet we already have the capacity to supply enough bricks for British homes for the future. When we talk about concern about ceramics, we need to ensure that we also put that in the context of industries that ceramics directly supports, one of them being construction.

North West Leicestershire has about 4,000 people working in the construction sector, as well as being the national headquarters of a number of prominent house builders. We need to use the industry strengths that we

have right on our doorsteps—British bricks building homes, so the family can thrive alongside our industry. Will the Minister in his response set out how we can ensure that UK brick manufacturers are not only supported in the challenge they face as an industry, but given the tools to help our house building and industrial targets? The support they need is on energy costs and energy transition. Every home built creates a job, but it also creates jobs for those businesses that help create a home, filling it with pots and crockery such as Denby and sanitaryware as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield.

The petition is right to highlight the importance of protecting not only the jobs, but the skills. Once specialist manufacturing skills are lost, they are incredibly difficult to rebuild. We must ensure that future generations have the opportunity to pursue rewarding careers in British industry. I also want to make a nod to Furnace Lane Pottery, a local craft potter based in Moira. Such potters are important to the sector. The Government's industrial strategy rightly recognises the importance of manufacturing, but the ceramics industry needs targeted support, so I ask the Minister two things: will he ensure that the £120 million gets to those businesses as quickly as possible, setting out a timetable in his response; and how will Government work with industry, trade unions and local communities to ensure that British ceramics has a strong future?

6.52 pm

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I declare my interest as a member of GMB union, and of Unite, which represents so many of the china clay workers in my constituency. That is one reason I welcome so warmly this Government's £120 million package for the ceramics industry. I particularly welcome the £60 million of backing for capital investment in energy efficiency and decarbonisation, and the further £60 million to help manage rising costs. That is decisive support for a sector that has every right not just to survive, but to thrive in a changing world in which Governments have an absolute obligation to ensure a smooth transition.

In this world, protecting the supply of china clay is vital to insulating supply chains for not just ceramics, but construction, advanced manufacturing, technology, aerospace and defence. Domestic production is only truly protected for any industry when the whole supply chain is. In my constituency, upstream producers of Cornish china clay are part of the foundation of the ceramics sector, directly and indirectly employing thousands of local people in Cornwall. It is our strongest current mining industry, serving as a big granitic bridge between our industrial heritage and the mineral products of the future.

I will take a moment to thank the Minister for his excellent leadership in this sector, and for his lucid understanding of those supply chains and the fact that minerals represent quite clearly the biggest Cornwall-specific growth engine in the years ahead. I thank him for his work, with his Department, to help unlock the potential of that key industrial cluster for us. May I ask him, however, whether he will confirm that upstream producers, including those that extract china clay, will be eligible for the support? Can he provide me and my constituents with some clarity on when those decisions about who

[Noah Law]

receives the support will be clear? Will he outline what steps he is taking for an industry with high energy costs upstream—again, ineligible for BICS, the British industrial competitiveness scheme—and facing not only the huge challenges of foreign dumping practices but, in many cases, significant environmental and legacy pension liabilities due to the labour-intensive nature of its workforce? What steps is he taking to ensure that we put that industry on a more sustainable footing?

6.54 pm

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the petitioner on securing 109,000 signatures, as well as the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) on introducing it.

I thought that when I had written a speech about bricks, I would be the only Member to talk about them, but then I noticed that the hon. Members for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) and for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) were present and realised that I would definitely not be. Bricks are the nation's favourite building material. They are durable, beautiful and woven into every constituency across the United Kingdom. In any of our constituencies, we can walk past beautiful brick-built homes and terraces built to last—many of them more than a century old, still standing, loved and lived in.

That concerns the first point I want to make to the Minister. A recent report published by Create Streets set out a serious issue about how we measure carbon in new homes. The standard assessment assumes that the building will last only 60 years. As we know, bricks do not last 60 years. Assess a brick over a realistic lifespan—120 years or more—and they perform significantly better on whole-life carbon. By baking in a 60-year assumption, the standard systematically makes bricks look higher carbon than they are and favours materials that look low carbon on day one but may need significantly more maintenance, replacement or even demolition early in the planning process. The short-termism of that standard is penalising one of the most durable, repairable materials that we have. This cost is being placed on factories. According to reports, domestic production has fallen from about 2 billion bricks not many years ago, to 1.3 billion in 2024. That is a 32% reduction in just a few years.

The sector supports thousands of skilled jobs and is worth more than £1 billion. We have seen some brick factories closing already, and if more follow, we must make sure that we do not simply import bricks, adding risk to the supply chain and transport emissions while hollowing out our British industry. That, unfortunately, is being made harder, not easier, for British manufacturers. The UK is already the single largest importer of Indian bricks, and the trade agreement that the Government have signed with India will take away the remaining protected tariffs on those bricks imported to zero.

Gareth Snell: The hon. Gentleman rightly points out the Indian trade deal. He is right about the environmental and economic impact, but there is also the social impact. Too many factories making those bricks over in India and Pakistan are using what we would consider modern slavery and indentured labour. Additionally, efficacy

surely ought to be at the forefront of any decision that the Minister makes about how we build houses in this country.

Mr Reynolds: The hon. Gentleman is correct about the social impact, with modern slavery used in bricks coming from outside the United Kingdom. The Business and Trade Committee recently heard about how, although the Modern Slavery Act 2015 was a good start and had the full support of the House, the declaration requirements within it are not strong enough. A company can import things potentially made by modern slaves and satisfy the requirements, so we need to see a new piece of legislation to ensure that companies cannot import items that they know or feel have been made using slavery.

We must also ask what the British public actually want to see in buildings. In visual preference research, bricks were preferred by 60% of the population when asked to compare two proposed buildings: one made out of bricks and one not. That is very clear across age, gender, religion and political affiliation. We are trying to build more homes, but pushing developers away from building with the material that the majority of the British public want to live in.

Brickmakers are caught in the same energy trap as all the ceramics sector. Firing clay takes enormous heat, and that heat comes from gas, but because the Government's flagship energy relief policy is designed around electricity, gas-intensive makers are largely excluded. The same industry is squeezed from multiple directions: a penalising carbon standard is undervaluing its products, we are shutting out suppliers in the United Kingdom and favouring suppliers overseas, and then there is the energy-intensive issue.

I have four questions for the Minister. First, will he work with colleagues across Government to review the 60-year reference period for whole life carbon assessments and adopt a longer, more realistic lifespan so that we do not by accident create a de facto ban on bricks? Secondly, will the Government commit that sustainability standards will not rule out quality, durable, repairable materials that people love? Thirdly, will the Minister support cleaner brick production here at home rather than importing bricks from overseas, which sends the jobs and the emissions abroad? Fourthly, will the gas-intensive brick and ceramics industry finally be given the proper support that it needs via the Government's supercharger scheme, so that its firms can compete on a level playing field? Bricks are not relics; they are well used, beautiful, durable, repairable and genuinely part of what makes Britain great. We should be building more homes and neighbourhoods that last for our children and our grandchildren, and stop penalising the material that does exactly that.

7 pm

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): It is an honour to follow such an interesting speech about bricks. I congratulate Hayley and the other petitioners, the Petitions Committee and the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for bringing this important issue into Parliament; it has been a really interesting debate. It is fair to say that the efforts of the petitioners have made sure that the concerns of workers, manufacturers, suppliers and the local communities that depend on the ceramics industry have truly been heard in Parliament.

It is clear that the ceramics sector faces several existential pressures including, in particular, high energy costs, as well as burdensome regulation and rising labour costs. We have heard a range of valuable contributions from Members, and the importance of the industry, not just in Staffordshire but in many other parts of the UK, has truly come across. I was fascinated to hear about Scotland, Cornwall and Stroud, and about a number of businesses in the ceramics sector. It was very welcome to hear from my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson), who made a powerful contribution on behalf of a sector in which he has first-hand experience of working.

We have learned that the ceramics industry is not simply another manufacturing sector. It is a source of highly skilled employment, a proud part of our industrial heritage and a significant contributor to our economy. For generations, the British ceramics industry has been recognised all around the world for its quality, craftsmanship and innovation, but it is clear that the industry faces particular challenges because it is particularly energy intensive. The high temperatures that kilns need mean that the industry cannot simply find, at short notice, alternative sources of energy, or switch on and off when prices fluctuate. The industry is uniquely exposed to very high energy costs, and the recent challenges facing some of its well-known firms should serve as a warning.

The supercharger scheme is a sticking plaster on the damage that has been caused by the Energy Secretary's net zero policies, which have driven up the cost of energy and piled that cost on to businesses. The net zero costs that the Government have imposed on businesses have meant that the Government were required to introduce a £120 million subsidy for the ceramics industry.

Andrew Cooper *rose—*

Noah Law *rose—*

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I will not give way, given how tight we are for time.

I hope Members will welcome the fact that the Conservatives have a clear and credible plan to cut energy bills, reduce regulation and lower taxes. We have a cheap power plan that will cut household energy bills by £200 a year and cut electricity bills for businesses by 20%. That could save ceramics businesses a large amount of money. It would save the average restaurant £5,500 and the average pub £1,100. We would achieve that by axing the carbon tax in full, including the UK emissions trading scheme and carbon price support.

We would also scrap the renewables obligation certificate scheme, which would free up money that is currently used to fund the payments through general taxation. We would back the North sea and get Britain drilling again, unlocking home-grown energy and generating an estimated £2.5 billion in additional tax revenues each year.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Lady give way briefly on gas?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I am very tight for time, but if the hon. Gentleman insists.

Gareth Snell: We have heard a lot from the hon. Lady's party about its cheap power plan. Is it her intention that gas drilled from the North sea would be specifically ringfenced and sold at a below-market price to sectors such as ceramics in Stoke-on-Trent and throughout the country, so that they can benefit, or would that gas still be sold to them via the international market?

Dame Harriett Baldwin: It would mean we would have to import less from countries outside the UK because we would have our own supply. I do not want to intrude on arguments within the governing party, but I will call out the fact that it does not make sense to leave our own gas in the ground. The policies I have been outlining are precisely the ones that energy-intensive sectors such as ceramics have been calling for. If we are serious about protecting the British ceramics industry, we need to act now to cut the cost of industrial energy.

I will ask the Minister a couple of questions. We have heard a bit about the challenge in respect of imports, so it would be interesting to hear from him what representations the industry has made to the Trade Remedies Authority. Will the Government support the cheap power plan that would cut business energy costs, and therefore abandon the ideological policies that are driving proud sectors such as ceramics into decline? The future of a great British industry, and all the livelihoods that it supports, are too important to ignore.

7.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank everybody who has contributed to the debate. I am sure that those observing from the Public Gallery will have seen that there is huge support in Parliament for the ceramics industry, for its communities and for its jobs. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for securing the debate, and to Hayley for organising the petition. I am sure that many of the petitioners will have been following the debate and will have heard the support for the sector from Members, as well as from Ceramics UK and the GMB trade union.

There were a number of speeches on several issues, and I will endeavour to address them all, but if I could sum up the debate in one line, it was probably put most succinctly by my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee): "Thank you for the £120 million—can I have some more?" To which I have a short answer: "You're welcome—and I want to do more." I will talk a bit about what that "more" might be, and address some of those issues, because I do recognise that more needs to be done.

It is important to recognise the pride of the communities we have heard about, because the ceramics industry is integral to the history and heritage of so many communities throughout the country. Staffordshire is the home of the ceramics industry, but it spans the whole country: we heard that it includes the china clay pits in Cornwall and extends right up to communities in the north of Scotland. There is also a diverse range of subsectors: bricks, pipes, tiles and tableware, of course, and advanced technical ceramics, with many applications in sectors such as energy, defence, medical and technology. I am

[Chris McDonald]

most grateful today for the application of ceramics in air conditioning filtration systems—I thank the industry for that.

The ceramics industry is represented in some great traditional and heritage tableware. It is very much possible to value things not only for their utility but for their beauty, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher). I am quite a fan of traditional Staffordshire stoneware. I also have a very special Dunoon mug with a Union Jack on it, and I want to let those in the Public Gallery know that I use it every morning for my first cup of tea.

We heard about bricks from my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme, and from the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), about the lifetime assessment of bricks. To be clear, I am very aware of the disadvantage in respect of bricks with a short lifetime assessment. I have bricks in my house that are over 200 years old and still doing sterling service. I am interested to hear more representations from Members throughout the House on that issue.

We have of course talked a lot about ceramics, but my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell) made a much wider point about manufacturing in her area of the east midlands. The issues facing ceramics are also faced by manufacturing industries around the country: high energy costs, the import of cheap goods and challenges with decarbonisation. The challenges have been exacerbated by the geopolitical instability due to the invasion of Ukraine and the conflict in the middle east, which has put pressure on our energy prices.

The ceramics industry has continued to demonstrate resilience, and the people who work in the industry have demonstrated resilience, but I was very sad recently to learn of the closure of and job losses at Denby Pottery. I worked closely on that issue with my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth), and she represented the community so well in this place. There was also the closure of a tunnel kiln at Armitage Shanks. I pass on my personal sympathies to all the workers, families and local communities that were impacted by events at those firms, as well as at Royal Stafford and Heraldic Pottery.

Manufacturing has now ceased at Denby Pottery, and the administrators were unable to find a buyer. My officials at the Department for Business and Trade worked diligently with the administrators to take the process forward. The Government's priority now is to ensure that all affected workers are given the support they need. I commend Fran, Kate and Daizy and wish them every success with their new venture. I realise that my words may sound somewhat clinical to the workers and communities who are so rightly proud of Denby, so I want to take this opportunity to say how sorrowful I am that Denby has closed and that those workers, and others in the local community, can no longer work there. That is why I am so determined that we will fix some of the problems with the underpinning of the business environment, not only for ceramics but for other parts of industry.

So many Members mentioned the ceramic industry support scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley thanked many people involved in the creation of

that scheme—our right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer played such an important role—but she was not able to thank herself, so I thank her on behalf of us all. I wonder whether the scheme would have been brought forward so speedily were it not for her work. It is important to recognise the scheme as a great vote of confidence by the Government in the ceramics industry. We are determined to work with the industry to provide support with decarbonisation, and I thank all my parliamentary colleagues who have advocated for it.

A number of Members raised issues relating to the design of the support scheme. My hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) raised issues around eligibility, consultees and so on. I reassure them that we are determined that the scheme will have the maximum eligibility to enable firms to win support for both capital and operating expenses around their decarbonisation, and to make that decarbonisation makes sense as well.

This is perhaps an opportune time to firmly put down some of the myths around Government policy pushing up the price of electricity. Of course, that is not the case at all. After the previous Government, the UK was left in a position of high electricity costs, both for industry and for domestic consumers, because our electricity market is dependent on the price of gas.

The cheapest form of electricity we have is solar, the second cheapest is onshore wind and the third cheapest is offshore wind. That is why the Government's clean power 2030 mission is designed specifically to give this country a strategic and competitive advantage in electricity price from the 2030s onwards. It is particularly challenging to manage the period from now to 2030, because during that period our electricity is still set to a great extent by the gas price. For economic reasons alone, and to ensure that we have a competitive business environment, we need to work through that.

Dame Harriett Baldwin: I want to ask the Minister about the auction price that the Energy Secretary set today for offshore wind, which I understand is £120 per megawatt-hour. That sounds very high to me.

Chris McDonald: This replays some of the conversations we have had on the Floor of the House. Ultimately, it is important to remember that the prices we are quoting take into account both the capital and operating costs. Our existing gas fleet would also require renewal if it was to continue beyond the mid-2030s, so there would be a capital and operating cost element for that as well.

Noah Law: Does the Minister share my disbelief that the Tories continue to trot out the line that the Government are auctioning off wind power at a high price, while simultaneously neglecting to mention the levelised cost of electricity for thermal power, which is at least as high but takes a lot longer to deploy? Let us bust that myth once and for all.

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend put it exactly right. We need to take both capital and operating costs into account. Fundamentally, the issue comes down to a belief or view—or, in my case, looking at the economic evidence and corporate finance. Is it possible to decarbonise and reindustrialise? Yes, of course it is, and that is

precisely what the Government want to do. No one in the industry is asking us to tear up climate policy—they are using the policy to invest, and have invested £100 billion since the general election on that basis.

Many people mentioned the supercharger scheme, which currently supports around 10% of the ceramics industry. Quite obviously, 10% is not 100%, but the recent uplift in the scheme to 90% compensation has benefited members. The British industrial competitiveness scheme will offer further support on advanced and technical ceramics from 2027, backdated to the current year. That will reduce electricity bills by up to £40 per megawatt hour.

Sir Gavin Williamson: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Chris McDonald: I will continue, but I will address a point that the right hon. Gentleman raised. He focused on the parts of the sector that are unable to electrify, which I am also very concerned about. Larger brick kilns and some sanitaryware items, which my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield spoke about in relation to his constituency, are difficult to electrify. The main decarbonisation options on the table are hydrogen, or biogas—that was not mentioned today but it could be a solution—but it is important that businesses remain competitive and able to raise capital until such a time as those occur.

I reassure the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge that I am focused on that issue. I am not pretending that processes that cannot be electrified can be, but the policy is to electrify first, where that can happen. However, I realise that I need to work with the brick sector and others. I am also concerned about capacity utilisation in the brick sector currently, which was mentioned by other hon. Members, because that situation, of course, makes everything much more difficult.

Many people talked about international trade. I presume that all hon. Members in the room are in favour of free trade on a level playing field basis; unfair trade was what was particularly referred to. That can be an issue of energy—overseas companies having access to energy from sources that we would not use in the UK, such as Russian gas—or, as we have heard about, some have inappropriate labour practices. When the Government decide to enter into a free trade scheme and liberalise tariffs we are always cognisant of the overall economic benefit to the country but, ultimately, we want free trade.

The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for West Worcestershire, asked about interaction with the Trade Remedies Authority, which is our means of correcting that. I am incredibly keen to continue to encourage the sector to engage with the Trade Remedies Authority. If there are any difficulties with that, I want to know about it.

Gareth Snell: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Chris McDonald: I will allow one more intervention.

Gareth Snell: Given that the Minister asked that he be informed of problems, the investigation process for calculating injury is incredibly arduous. In the last

investigation, only two companies were able to take part in the process because of the bureaucratic and cost demands placed upon them. Simplifying the process for investigation would allow more companies to participate and provide evidence, which would make the TRA's release more in line with what the sector and economy need.

Chris McDonald: My hon. Friend makes a reasonable point. The Trade Remedies Authority recently took some steps to try to speed up and reduce the cost of the process, but I understand that it is particularly difficult in a sector such as ceramics, in which there are so many small businesses—often, that is where a trade association might have a role. I will continue to work with the sector to understand the issues and to help, encourage and support companies to take cases to the Trade Remedies Authority where they feel that there are unfair trading practices. My hon. Friend thanked me in his speech for engaging with his private Member's Bill, which I assure him I will continue to do.

The ceramics industry has faced great difficulties in the business environment, as have many of our manufacturing industries. I am sure that the Government's measures to support the business environment will also support other parts of our manufacturing sector. Just as people in the potteries are proud to be potters, so people in other manufacturing areas in the country—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. The sitting is suspended for 15 minutes.

7.19 pm

Sitting suspended for a Division in the House.

7.34 pm

On resuming—

Chris McDonald: I will not detain Members for very much longer. Earlier, the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) mentioned the former Prime Minister Harold Wilson and the many great things he did, one of which was his extremely strong focus on British manufacturing. The hon. Member for Lichfield talked about the opportunity we now have for reindustrialisation. Unashamedly, I lay claim to having recently introduced that word into the lexicon, and I am delighted at how quickly it has caught on.

However, I hope people might follow me if I introduce a few more words: increasing British productive capacity; improving British productivity; and increasing our exports and our balance of trade to improve our manufacturing competitiveness. That way, we can reindustrialise, we can provide good jobs for working people and we can put pride back into working communities around the country. In the case of the ceramics industry, I am very much looking forward to working with parliamentary colleagues to ensure that it continues to be a great British industry into the future.

7.35 pm

Dave Robertson: It is a pleasure to sum up this debate, although my thanks will be a bit out of order, because I want to start with my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth). It has been an incredibly difficult year for her and her constituents.

[*Dave Robertson*]

Throughout all the difficulty that she has faced, I have been proud to call her a friend. She is a great credit to both her constituents and this House for her hard work in this area.

I want to move on to the other contributions. Yet again, the right hon. Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson) and I have come to a debate in which we are forcefully agreeing on the same points—normal service will resume very soon. The points he made about identity and the need to increase exports are well met, and I am sure that they are common to many people in the Chamber today. The hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) rightly brought up the high-skilled jobs that the ceramics industry provides and its link to his visitor economy. But if he wants me to go that far north, he might have to take me to a distillery as well.

We can never expect to come to one of these debates and not hear the Stokies—my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell), for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner)—or my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) coming at us with the importance of ceramics to their areas, as well as its centrality to the north Staffordshire identity and economy. It was also fantastic to hear them talking about the advanced ceramics industry and its growth potential, and how the Government can support that through better procurement and action on backstamping.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) focused on jobs, skills and growth. He also highlighted the fact that the ceramics industry is not just an area that we need to help; if we can provide the right support, it can drive our economy in this century and beyond. My hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) excellently showed that these are not jobs of last resort. People want to work with their hands and they want to make things—people want to work with ceramics. It would be remiss of me not to say that we must support this industry by driving it forward and providing those high-skilled, high-quality jobs that people really want.

My hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell) importantly raised the £120 million package that the Government have announced, and she talked about the identity of place that comes with this industry. I am actually unaware of any other industry that is so linked to the identity of the place that it supports.

I would not expect to attend a ceramics debate without hearing my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) talk about bricks. Not only did she mention the importance of bricks and the jobs they bring to her area, but she highlighted the importance of the industries that ceramics support, particularly construction. My hon. Friend the Member for St Austell and Newquay (Noah Law) also mentioned the £120 million support package, and it was fantastic to hear somebody else talking about the impact that dumping has on the ceramics industry.

I give many thanks to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), for also talking about bricks. He made a really valuable point about the assessment of carbon costs, especially when we talk about the quality. He said that 120 years might be more appropriate for a brick; although that estimate might be true for an international brick, it is very conservative for bricks made in the UK, because they are of such high quality. I also wrote down a quote from the hon. Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin) as she said it: “This is not just another sector”. Everyone here today can really understand that this is not just another sector; it is recognised the world over for exactly the quality I mentioned. The hon. Lady and I significantly disagree on the myth about cuts to North sea gas, but fortunately I expect to have many more opportunities to rehearse that debate until we finally get the Conservative party to see sense.

Finally, I think the Minister will eventually become sick of the sight of us all banging down his door to talk about ceramics—I do not care. It would be remiss of me not to remark on his willingness to work with MPs. He listens to parliamentarians and turns that into action. Clearly, we are still not there with the design of the scheme, but we are not going to go away and we will keep asking for more. The Minister quoted my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme shamelessly asking, “Can we have some more?” However, we will keep banging on about this, and I know we have a partner in that fight. Hopefully, we will be able to turn our shoulders to the wheel and continue to get support in the right place for this great British industry.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered e-petition 764785 relating to support for the ceramics industry.

7.40 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 6 July 2026

EDUCATION

Key Stage 2 National Curriculum Tests

The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):

In May, year 6 children across England sat their end of key stage 2 national curriculum tests—known as SATs. Schools were expecting the results of these tests to be returned to them on Tuesday 7 July, but I am informing the House that there will be a delay until Thursday 16 July.

Pearson Education Ltd was awarded the contract to deliver KS2 tests on behalf of the Standards and Testing Agency in April 2024, and it has responsibility for all test logistics, including delivering and collecting test papers from schools, marking and returning results to schools.

The Government were told on Wednesday 1 July that Pearson was not ready to upload results to the online portal for schools and required additional time to ensure that the system is ready for schools to access.

The Government are very clear that the delay is due to issues with Pearson's systems and not concerns about the quality of the tests or the results. The test scripts have been marked and quality assured, and the standards maintenance process, which allows us to show comparison with previous cohorts, was completed on schedule on Thursday 2 July 2026. The Standards and Testing Agency is confident that it had sufficient representative data to undertake the standards maintenance process that underpins our ability to compare the expected standard of the tests from year to year.

Pearson has fully apologised for its failure to return results on time, and for the impact on schools, pupils and parents. The inconvenience that this delay will cause to school staff, parents and pupils is unacceptable.

We will use all the provisions in the contract to ensure that Pearson is held to account for its failures in delivery, and will also review all possible options for future delivery, alongside conducting a thorough review into how such a serious failing could have occurred.

[HCWS184]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Venezuela Earthquakes: UK Response

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore):

I am writing to update the House on the impact of the devastating earthquakes in Venezuela, and on the action that the Government are taking in response.

On 24 June, two major earthquakes, measuring 7.2 and 7.5 in magnitude, caused widespread destruction across several states, including the capital, Caracas, and the port town of La Guaira. Millions of Venezuelans have been affected, with current estimates indicating thousands of fatalities and over 16,000 people injured, with these figures likely to continue to rise.

The humanitarian situation in Venezuela is complex, with damage to infrastructure, disruption to health services and constrained humanitarian access compounding the challenges already faced by those affected.

The United Kingdom has responded rapidly to this crisis, working closely with international partners and the Venezuelan authorities to deliver lifesaving assistance and support to those affected. We have mobilised a £5.8 million humanitarian response package, working in co-ordination with partners on the ground to support ongoing humanitarian efforts.

Supported by the Royal Air Force, the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office deployed a 68-person UK international search and rescue team with six specialist search dogs. This highly trained team operated alongside international partners in the most affected areas, contributing to search and rescue efforts and helping to locate and assist survivors in extremely challenging conditions. Their work has formed a critical part of the immediate, lifesaving phase of the response.

A UK humanitarian field team is also currently deployed to support the response on the ground, and the UK's emergency medical team is now deploying with a fully equipped field hospital after being formally invited by the Venezuelan Ministry of Health to help those communities devastated by the two powerful earthquakes. The field hospital will deliver lifesaving primary healthcare, including maternal and paediatric services, with capacity to treat 100 out-patients a day. The deployment follows a rapid assessment by a three-person UK EMT advance team, which concluded that additional international medical support was urgently needed as hospitals struggled to cope with the scale of the disaster.

The UK is also supporting the broader humanitarian system to scale up its response, and we stand ready to support the deployment of humanitarian experts into UN agencies to bolster capacity, co-ordination and delivery of assistance. Through UK-supported funds, rapid financing has already been made available. This includes support channelled through the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies and the United Nations Central Emergency Response Fund, enabling trusted partners to deliver food assistance, healthcare, shelter and protection services. These mechanisms allow assistance to reach affected communities quickly and at scale, particularly in areas where access and logistics remain challenging.

As part of the package of humanitarian support, the UK has also supported the generosity of the British public. On 1 July, the Disasters Emergency Committee launched an appeal, and the Government have aid-matched £2 million of public donations pound for pound. The UK aid-match has now been reached, with the appeal raising over £7 million to date. This will help to maximise the impact of public contributions and ensure that additional funding reaches frontline organisations delivering assistance. Should any Members' constituents wish to assist, the most effective way to help is by donating cash through trusted organisations. There are several trusted charities and organisations providing humanitarian relief on the ground in Venezuela and more information can be found at www.gov.uk.

Alongside our humanitarian response, our consular teams are working hard to support British nationals affected. Travel advice for British nationals is updated

regularly to reflect the evolving situation. All staff and dependants in Venezuela also remain safe and accounted for and I would like to thank them for their tireless efforts and dedication over the past week.

The United Kingdom remains committed to supporting the people of Venezuela at this difficult time. We will continue working with our international partners, as well as the Venezuelan authorities, to ensure that critical humanitarian assistance supports those most in need.

[HCWS185]

Russia: Chemical Weapons

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): In February this year at the Munich security conference, the United Kingdom, together with our European partners Sweden, Germany, France and the Netherlands, confirmed that prominent Russian opposition activist Alexei Navalny was poisoned with a lethal toxin, Epibatidine, while being held in the custody of the Russian state in a Siberian penal colony. He did not survive. Epibatidine is a poison derived from the skin of a toxic dart frog found in the Amazon rainforest, far away from Russia, and only the Russian state had the means, motive and opportunity to administer this.

This is only the latest incident. Russia's willingness to develop and deploy highly toxic chemicals forms a clear and disturbing pattern. Alexei Navalny survived an earlier poisoning from a Novichok nerve agent in 2020 which he attributed to the Kremlin. In 2018, a Novichok was used in Salisbury in an attempt to assassinate the Skripals which tragically resulted in the death of a British national, Dawn Sturgess.

Following the confirmation that Alexei Navalny was poisoned with Epibatidine, the Foreign Secretary said we would

"make use of all policy levers at our disposal to continue to hold Russia to account."

Today I am updating the House on a new package of sanctions under the UK's chemical weapons regime, targeting two leading scientific and military Russian institutions and key individuals involved in the research, development and production of the lethal toxin Epibatidine and Novichoks in flagrant violation of Russia's obligations under the chemical weapons convention and biological and toxin weapons convention.

Our sanctions today send a strong message that the UK will continue to take action by exposing those within Russia's scientific and military community who are responsible for such egregious actions, deterring others from pursuing similar activity.

This package builds upon prior sanctions for Russia's use of chemical weapons on the battlefield in Ukraine.

The Russian state has demonstrated time and time again that it is unafraid to use the full range of despicable tools available to it to terrorise people, including its own citizens, and undermine democracy, in brazen defiance of international norms.

It is clear Russia did not destroy all its chemical weapons as claimed in 2017, and that it has not renounced biological weapons, as it is obliged to under the biological and toxin weapons convention. Ahead of tomorrow's

112th executive council meeting at the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons we stand ready with our partners and states parties to impress upon Russia the need to rejoin the consensus of the international community, and to pursue science for peaceful purposes.

[HCWS186]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

NHS Staff Standards

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Today, I would like to inform the House of the publication of the NHS staff standards, which will make staff experience an organisational priority within the NHS.

It is crucial that we look after the people who look after us, not only because it is the right thing to do for our hardworking staff, but because their experience directly impacts staff retention and absenteeism, ultimately affecting quality of patient care and overall organisational performance. That is why the 10-year health plan committed to developing a new set of staff standards, outlining minimum standards for employment across a range of areas in order to improve staff experience. Today's announcement delivers on that commitment and will ensure that NHS staff feel supported, valued and engaged in a positive work environment.

The new standards will focus on the areas that we know are a priority for staff. These are: supporting line management; improving staff health and wellbeing; promoting flexible working; violence prevention and reduction; tackling racism; and sexual safety.

There has been some good progress improving staff experience, including through the NHS people promise, and there are strong examples across the system where organisations have been prioritising the wellbeing of their staff. However, compliance has not been mandated, meaning the benefits have not been consistently felt across the NHS.

The staff standards aim to provide clarity and consistency, and ensure that all organisations are working to the required level. That is why the standards set out the steps that organisations should take to ensure that meaningful action is taken at board level, with clear metrics to assess performance.

Central to the standards are the accountability measures that underpin them. Implementation of the standards will be compulsory, and organisations will be measured against them in the NHS oversight framework, alongside a range of other assurance mechanisms.

While the standards have been set at a national level, they will be put into practice locally. They have been developed through close engagement with the social partnership forum, and employers and trade union representatives should work together through their local partnership arrangements to apply the standards in a way that fits local services and staff needs.

Launching the staff standards is an important step, but only the start. We will work in partnership with the SPF to refine the standards and the metrics that underpin them, to ensure that the standards remain fit for purpose and drive the changes that we and NHS staff want to see.

The accountability and assurance mechanisms, including the NHS oversight framework, will be further refined. We will also implement regular employer-level reporting, in line with the 10-year health plan commitment.

We see every day the dedication and commitment of NHS staff. I am proud to be taking this key step to prioritise staff experience and create workplaces where people want to stay and thrive.

[HCWS189]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Police Leadership Commission Report

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): I refer hon. Members to the oral statement I will make to the House today, 6 July, on the publication of the police leadership commission report.

The report is available at: www.college.police.uk/police-leadership-commission

[HCWS187]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Countering Foreign Financial Influence and Interference in UK Politics

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): Today, the Minister for Security, my hon. Friend the Member for Wallasey (Dame Angela Eagle), and I have laid and published the Government's full response to Philip Rycroft's independent review into countering foreign financial influence and interference in UK politics, which we jointly commissioned in November 2025. We did so to rigorously test the strength of our current democratic system, and to ensure that we are taking decisive action to stay ahead of a rapidly evolving threat.

We are grateful to Mr Rycroft for his comprehensive and thoughtful work. His review provides a clear assessment of a threat that is changing both in nature and in method and is demanding of a co-ordinated and forward-looking response—a response that we are pleased to bring before this House today.

Protecting the integrity of our precious democracy is a fundamental responsibility of Government. The UK already has a strong framework in place to detect, deter and disrupt foreign interference. It will be underpinned by a comprehensive programme of work to reform and modernise our elections, as well as a sustained cross-Government effort to protect our democracy and those who participate in it.

This work is supported by the defending democracy taskforce, which brings together expertise from across Government—the security, intelligence and policy communities—and beyond to co-ordinate the UK's response to hostile state activity and wider threats to our democratic processes. Through this approach, we are ensuring that risks relating to political finance are addressed as part of a broader and integrated strategy to protect our democracy and those who participate in it.

The Government's response sets out a wide-ranging programme of work to strengthen resilience across the political system. This includes measures to enhance transparency in political finance, strengthen enforcement and address vulnerabilities in emerging channels and technologies. Our approach will also ensure that those engaged in political activity are better equipped to identify and mitigate risks. For those who continue to disrupt and divide, the penalties will be very clear.

A number of these measures are being taken forward through the Representation of the People Bill currently before Parliament, reflecting the Government's commitment to acting at pace where legislative change is required. Other elements will be progressed through continued engagement, such as with the Electoral Commission, political parties and the wider electoral community, so that approaches are effective and proportionate as threats evolve. We will ensure that any measures introduced are practical and accessible, and avoid unnecessary administrative burdens while maintaining robust safeguards against abuse.

We have already announced some critical action in response to the review's findings, including addressing risks associated with overseas donations and crypto assets. We are now accepting the full set of recommendations and will continue to work closely with all our partners to determine the most effective means of implementation in areas where further development is required.

Philip Rycroft's review and this response represent an important step in strengthening the UK's resilience to foreign interference. The Government will continue to act with determination to protect the integrity of our democratic system, ensuring that it is the true voice of the British people, and their voice alone, that determines the future of our country.

[HCWS188]

TRANSPORT

National Policy Statement: Ports

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): Development of ports in England, as in other parts of the United Kingdom, is essential for supporting growth, energy resilience and energy transition. It is equally important that this development should take place with consideration for the environment, and that port facilities should be well designed with both those ends in mind.

The national policy statement for ports, which applies to England, and in Wales, to the reserved trust port, Milford Haven, sets the policy framework for decisions on nationally significant infrastructure in the sector. It continues the long-standing policy of enabling our competitive ports sector to respond in an agile manner to rapidly evolving market demands, using the Department's port freight demand forecasts—which we published alongside our consultation—as a yardstick but not as a constraint on local commercial judgments. It also updates the policy in detail to reflect the wider present institutional and regulatory framework, and the Government's priorities.

I am grateful to everyone who responded to the consultation on earlier drafts, and to the Transport Committee for its thorough scrutiny of the proposals.

Following that consultation and scrutiny, I am today, pursuant to section 9(5) of Planning Act 2008, presenting a response to the Transport Committee's report (HC 1028) on its scrutiny and to the consultation, and pursuant to section 9(8), laying before Parliament the final proposed text of the amended national policy statement for the prescribed consideration period of 21 sitting days.

Copies of these documents will be made available in the Library of each House and on the Department's website, where a post-adoption statement will also be published in due course.

[HCWS183]

SOLICITOR GENERAL

Early Victims' Right to Review: Rape and Serious Sexual Offences

The Solicitor General (Ellie Reeves): The Government are committed to improving victims' confidence in the criminal justice system and ensuring that victims' voices are heard throughout the prosecution process.

Today, I am pleased to announce that, following successful testing in four Crown Prosecution Service areas since summer 2025, this new, early review—called the “early victims' right to review”—will be extended across England and Wales from 13 July 2026 for victims of rape and serious sexual offences.

Under the current victims' right to review scheme, victims may request a review of certain CPS decisions after a case has concluded. However, where a prosecutor formally offers no evidence and proceedings are brought to an end, the prosecution cannot be restarted, even if a reviewing prosecutor subsequently reaches a different conclusion.

To address this, the CPS is piloting a new approach in RASSO cases. Where a prosecutor proposes to offer no evidence, victims will be notified before the decision becomes final and given the opportunity to request a review at that stage. If the reviewing prosecutor reaches a different conclusion, the prosecution will be able to continue. This provides an important opportunity that is not available once proceedings have formally ended under the current arrangements.

Once a victim has been told by a prosecutor about a proposed decision to end their case, the victim can decide if they want a further review by an independent prosecutor. To ensure certainty for victims and defendants, requests must be made within five working days of the victim being notified of the proposed decision, or sooner in urgent cases. The CPS will aim to complete reviews within 20 working days, although reviews may be completed more quickly where forthcoming trial dates require a faster response.

If the victim does not request a review within the specified period, the proposed decision will proceed through the usual approval process and, if approved, no evidence will be offered. In all cases which are stopped victims will continue to have access to the existing victims' right to review scheme in the usual way. Information on how to exercise that right will be provided when the CPS confirms its final decision.

This new process represents a significant step towards strengthening victims' rights and ensuring that victims of rape and serious sexual offences have an earlier opportunity to challenge a proposed decision that would otherwise bring proceedings to an end.

The pilot will be available in all CPS areas across England and Wales. Its operation and impact will be monitored and evaluated.

[HCWS182]

Written Correction

Monday 6 July 2026

Other Correction

DAME CHI ONWURAH

Regional Innovation and Growth

The following extract is from the Select Committee statement on Regional Innovation and Growth on 18 June 2026.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and the Select Committee for their report. Can she say a little more about the role of the Scottish Government in this area, and whether the Select Committee had any observations about the

relationship between the Scottish Government and the UK Government in that regard? She has referred to the role of devolution in this space, so is that relationship securing the gathering and sharing of data that she might expect and that she raised in her statement, and if not, what more can be done?

Dame Chi Onwurah: We looked at innovation in the ecosystems around Edinburgh and Aberdeen, and we found fantastic examples of world leadership in scientific research and innovation in Scotland.

[*Official Report*, 18 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 1015.]

Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West (Dame Chi Onwurah):

Dame Chi Onwurah: We looked at innovation in the ecosystems around Edinburgh and **Dundee**, and we found fantastic examples of world leadership in scientific research and innovation in Scotland.

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WRITTEN CORRECTION

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