Wednesday
8 July 2026

Volume 789
No. 29

HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Wednesday 8 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.

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

House of Commons

Wednesday 8 July 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Northern Ireland Questions, I should remind the House that the case involving Sir Jeffrey Donaldson is sub judice until sentencing. However, I am granting a limited waiver so that Members may discuss wider issues raised in the context of the case. Members should not speculate about sentencing issues.

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Manufacturing Supply Chain

1. **John Slinger** (Rugby) (Lab): What discussions he has had with Cabinet colleagues on the domestic supply chain for manufacturing in Northern Ireland. [900840]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): I take every opportunity to champion Northern Ireland's brilliant manufacturing sector, and whether it is Denroy, Airbus or Thales, or even Harland & Wolff, which has just announced that it is bidding for a major UK-Dutch shipbuilding deal, there is a lot to champion.

John Slinger: Does the Minister agree that the defence growth deal is a chance for Northern Ireland businesses to access the wider UK defence supply chain? What efforts is he making to achieve that?

Matthew Patrick: I certainly agree with my hon. Friend; many opportunities are arising from the defence growth deal, on which I have worked closely. Many businesses, small and large, across Northern Ireland have dual-servicing capability and they have a real opportunity here. We are supporting them every step of the way.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Ministers from the Northern Ireland Office talk rather glibly about these matters, but the lived reality of the supply chain is very different: a full international customs border that is now inflicting damage on the import of steel; tightening import control system 2 checks; a parcels border; a plants border; and £192 million spent on building border posts—all to placate a European Union to which the Secretary of State and others seem totally beholden. When will the Secretary of State actually stand up for Northern Ireland? Can we please not have the usual trite reply that it is all the fault of Brexit, when it is the very opposite? The denial of Brexit is the altar upon which our supply chains are being sacrificed.

Matthew Patrick: I worry that the hon. and learned Member is in danger of talking down Northern Ireland and its incredible business opportunities. We are here to champion it. If issues arise from the Brexit that he and others championed, we do our very best to ensure that trades flow smoothly.

Troubles Legacy: Legislation

2. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What steps he is taking to replace the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023. [900841]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): The Northern Ireland Troubles Bill will establish a reformed, human rights-compliant Legacy Commission to carry out investigations and provide answers on behalf of families who have waited too long, enable information sharing by the Irish authorities and provide, in law, safeguards for our veterans.

Sir Desmond Swayne: We were promised a substantial package of amendments and that the Bill would return to the House early in the Session. Is the delay occasioned by a pause for thought following the personal statement of the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) to the House? I certainly hope so.

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman will have noticed that the new Defence Secretary, who himself served in Northern Ireland, said on Monday:

"This Government are absolutely committed to the troubles Bill".—[*Official Report*, 6 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 15.]

The right hon. Gentleman will not have to wait too much longer—*[Interruption]*—to see the substantial package of amendments to which he refers.

Colum Eastwood (Foyle) (SDLP): Members are shouting from the Opposition Benches that people have been waiting nine months, but there are victims who have been waiting decades for this issue to be resolved. Will the Secretary of State bring the Bill forward as quickly as possible, thinking about the victims first, never mind personal statements by anybody in this House? Our strong military lobby does not seem to care about the innocent victims who have been left behind in Northern Ireland.

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend makes an important point about this piece of legislation. As we know, the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023 did not command support across all communities in Northern Ireland. How can we hope to proceed if that is the case? That is why the Government are committed to reforming, repealing and replacing the legacy Act—that is what is in the Bill. I hope that when people see the full picture they will realise that it is fair, balanced, proportionate and reasonable, and that it seeks to command the confidence of all communities in Northern Ireland.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Alex Burghart (Brentwood and Ongar) (Con): If the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill was any of those things, why did the former Armed Forces Minister, when he resigned last month, say that it remains

"remains unfit for purpose. It risks failing the very veterans it claims to protect"?

Why does the Secretary of State think that the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) said that?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) will have to answer that question, but, with respect, I disagree with him. He worked on the package of amendments during his time as a Defence Minister. In the end, we have to strike a balance, as the hon. Member for Brentwood and Ongar (Alex Burghart) is well aware. When people see those amendments, they will realise that they are fair and reasonable with regard to the protection of our veterans. Crucially, they will put into legislation for the first time protections that were not in the Act passed in 2023.

Alex Burghart: It is clear from the Secretary of State's answer that the former Armed Forces Minister quit because he could see that the Bill remains unfit for purpose and fails to protect the very veterans that it claims to protect. The Secretary of State must realise that there is no cross-party support in Northern Ireland for his legislation, and nor is there support in the Labour party for his legislation. Will he now accept that the Bill should not progress and that we should return to the legislation that the Conservatives brought forward?

Hilary Benn: I do not accept that, because all the Northern Ireland political parties were opposed to the immunity that was at the heart of the 2023 legacy Act. It had no support from political parties in Northern Ireland or from victims and survivors' organisations. That is why these changes have to be made, and that is why the Government will proceed with this Bill.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Back in March, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) travelled to Belfast to address the Alliance party conference. In his speech, he warned that

"it is too easy for the powers-that-be to write their own rules and cover up".

He was talking about the need for a Hillsborough law, which he said at the time

"is currently stalled in Parliament due to an unacceptably wide carve-out for the security services."

We on the Liberal Democrat Benches are deeply concerned that exactly that issue now confronts veterans, who, under this Government's draft troubles Bill, are exposed to investigation and prosecution while the state that gave the orders shelters behind similar carve-outs. Will the Secretary of State confirm whether he will support the Lib Dem amendment to the Bill requiring that any decision to block disclosure on national security grounds is referred to the Intelligence and Security Committee to ensure proper parliamentary scrutiny?

Hilary Benn: We will come to debate that amendment, along with all the other amendments that hon. and right hon. Members have tabled, when we get to the Committee stage. The judgment in the Thompson case was absolutely clear—it was also referred to by the Dillon judgment—that the ultimate responsibility for protecting national security rests with the Government. That is a long-established principle that has support on both sides of the House. At the same time, I have made it clear that I wish to see the maximum possible disclosure, consistent with that requirement that falls on Ministers.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that, given the legacy of our past, two Governments are involved. Was he concerned, as we were, that Sir Declan Morgan shared with the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee two weeks ago his concern that he will not have access to unredacted intelligence material from the Irish Government? There is nothing in the Government's draft legislation or the amendments due to come before this House that would change that around. Is the Secretary of State further concerned that the chief operating officer of the Northern Ireland Office said that day that she would take that point back—to whom we do not know, because she is the chief operating officer—but today has written to the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee to confirm that nothing in the Secretary of State's amendments or the Irish Government's legislation would satisfy Sir Declan's requirement for access to unredacted material from the Irish?

Hilary Benn: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the Irish Government published on 8 June their legislative outline, entitled "The General Scheme of the Legacy of the Troubles Bill 2026". That is intended to fulfil the commitment that the Irish Government gave in the joint framework to co-operate to the fullest extent possible with the commission. The right hon. Gentleman is referring to the position today in the light of the Dillon judgment, and I happen to agree with him. Now that the Dillon judgment has made it quite clear that the commission, even in its current form, is compliant with the European convention on human rights and capable of carrying out investigations, I hope that we will see co-operation in response to the requests that the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery is making of the Irish Government.

Gavin Robinson: That is an answer to a question, but it is not really the answer to my question. I want to hear from our Secretary of State a full-throated recognition that there is a deficit, that Sir Declan needs access to the unredacted material, and that the Secretary of State will secure agreement from the Irish Government for such a change. Does the right hon. Gentleman not recognise that, as we stand here today in July, no remedial order was put before the Lords by the end of June? That deadline has passed. With no progress before the Irish assume the European presidency, which apparently was another deadline that needed to be met and has passed, and with no summit on 22 July, there is no chance that the Secretary of State's troubles Bill will become law in 2026.

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman makes a powerful argument for why the troubles Bill should be passed, because it will enable precisely the information sharing with the Irish authorities that he and I want to see, and that all the people in Northern Ireland who are still waiting for answers would like to receive. That is one of the central arguments for proceeding with the Bill.

Community Cohesion

3. **Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on community cohesion in Northern Ireland. [900842]

5. **Navendu Mishra** (Stockport) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on community cohesion in Northern Ireland. [900844]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I regularly meet the Northern Ireland Executive and the Police Service of Northern Ireland to discuss a range of issues in Northern Ireland, including community cohesion. However, given the recent serious disorder, there is a problem that needs to be tackled.

Marsha De Cordova: The scenes we witnessed in Belfast last month were truly horrific. The knife attack was an abhorrent act, and I pay tribute to the courage of those who intervened to help, but what followed in the days afterwards was equally disturbing. Innocent people were targeted because of the colour of their skin, families were literally burned out of their homes, and businesses were attacked. Does the Secretary of State agree that overt racism and violence has no place on the streets of Belfast or anywhere in our society, and that those in positions of authority and influence should stop inflaming tensions and legitimising racism and prejudice?

Hilary Benn: I do agree with my hon. Friend. The attack on Mr Ogilvie was truly shocking, and there was no justification whatsoever for the racist thuggery we witnessed on the streets of Belfast in the days following. I met nurses and doctors from a hospital in Belfast, and some of the nurses described to me how, because of the colour of their skin, they were too afraid to leave the hospital at the end of their shift, while others discussed whether they should leave in the back of a colleague's car covered in a coat or in the boot, because they were afraid of the thugs who had taken control of the streets. The fact that that happened on the streets of our United Kingdom in 2026 should give us all cause for deep concern.

Navendu Mishra: I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. What assessment has he made of the level of online co-ordination during the recent unrest in Belfast, and what discussions has he had with the Police Service of Northern Ireland and other security partners about addressing that issue?

Hilary Benn: That was, of course, an awful feature of what we saw. One of the things I learned in my discussions was that those from the far right had taken a list of houses in multiple occupation in Belfast—a list that, in the interests of openness, was properly available on the Belfast city council website; the council has now taken it down—and used it to try to target houses during the racist violence. There is a clear obligation on social media companies, set out in the Online Safety Act 2023, and there is an obligation on Ofcom to enforce that Act, because there is no doubt that part of the violence was fuelled by that kind of online hatred.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Secretary of State is plainly taking this very seriously, which is very much to his credit. Can he say what points of agreement and dissent there were in the discussions that he and his Ministers are reported to have had with the party leaders in Northern Ireland, and what actions the UK Government undertook to advance in order to try to reduce the possibility of these dreadful scenes—which, for many of us who lived through them, are reminiscent of the 1970s in Belfast—happening again?

Hilary Benn: The right hon. Gentleman raises a really important point, and I am grateful to him for his question. We all have a responsibility—political leaders have a responsibility to call out what was witnessed for what it is and not mince our words, and as I have already indicated, social media companies have a responsibility to ensure that such material, if it is illegal, is not available on social media sites. I pay tribute to the police and the community organisations, who did an extraordinary job on the night of the 10th to find shelter for people who had been burned out of their homes. Parents also have a responsibility; if someone's son comes back at 11 o'clock at night wearing dark clothing and smelling of smoke, a parent might ask, "Where have you been and what have you been doing?"

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Community cohesion is important, both racially and politically. Everyone accepts that political leaders and others have to be cognisant of what they say and what they do, and whenever we are all remembering our dead, as we do, no one denies republicans the right to remember their dead. Does the Secretary of State agree, however, that if a political leader, such as the First Minister—Sinn Féin's Michelle O'Neill—not only remembers republican dead, but lauds, praises and defends their indefensible actions, that does great harm to community cohesion?

Hilary Benn: Northern Ireland is a society, as the hon. Gentleman knows better than most, that has been undergoing profound change since the signing of the Good Friday agreement 28 years ago. As the famous lines go, we have a shared history, but not necessarily a shared memory. The progress we have seen is because Northern Ireland society has been working to move beyond that. One of the people I met who was there on the night of the violence said that we now have "another other" in Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman will be familiar with the traditional divisions, but there is now another other: the ethnic minority population of Northern Ireland, who are terrified about what is happening. We do not want to add to the troubles of the past by not being clear how unacceptable it is to see that on the streets of Belfast today.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): Community cohesion is deeply threatened by the violence and menace that took place on the streets last month, which included deliberate orchestration and paramilitary flags and trappings that now fly as bold as brass from lampposts in my constituency and in many others. We can no longer pretend that loyalist paramilitaries are not a national security threat. Cohesion is also threatened by a sheer lack of delivery and of responsibility-taking by the Northern Ireland Executive. The Secretary of State must see the role that vetoes and structures play in that, and the moment of peril in which we may now be in Stormont. When will he convene the process for democratic reform of the institutions that a majority of people, of parties and of MLAs have asked for?

Hilary Benn: My hon. Friend is right to raise this issue, because five of the main parties have now come forward with various proposals for reform. I have said to the party leaders that I wish to meet them to discuss those proposals. Time and effort is being expended at the moment on trying to sort out the problem of the budget. On the question of the paramilitary displays and flags, the Police Service of Northern Ireland has new powers to remove them as a result of the recommendation of Jonathan Hall, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): In his first answer, the Secretary of State said that the recent disorder was a problem that needed to be solved. A fortnight ago, I arranged a roundtable in my constituency that included the Northern Ireland Housing Executive, the police, the Executive Office, the Department for Communities and many other organisations and representative organisations, including the Black Diamond Initiatives. It was apparent that they all had their strategies and their procedures, but what they did not have was a co-ordinated response. They were all looking to the Executive to pull all those organisations together. If dysfunction at the top of our Executive is not allowing that to happen, what actions will the Secretary of State take?

Hilary Benn: There is a responsibility, above all, on the Northern Ireland Executive to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland. There being no Executive in Northern Ireland for 40% of the time since the Good Friday agreement has not helped to achieve that objective. To take one issue, there is an acute housing crisis in Northern Ireland, as there is in other parts of the United Kingdom. In taking action to enable more homes to be built, one of the issues that needs to be addressed is the fact that water infrastructure cannot cope. If that is sorted out, more homes can be built.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mike Wood (Kingswinford and South Staffordshire) (Con): The attempted murder of Stephen Ogilvie in Belfast last month shocked people throughout the country. The man accused of this horrific attack is thought to have crossed into Northern Ireland illegally from the south. People from all communities are asking what more can be done to prevent people from coming into the UK illegally across that land border. Following the terrible events in Belfast last month, will the Government commit to significantly enhanced operations on the border, similar to those already run by the Republic?

Hilary Benn: We have already increased the number of operations and arrests in Northern Ireland in the last two years, in comparison with the previous period. About 1,000 people who had no right to be in Northern Ireland have been removed, including 500 who have been returned to the Republic of Ireland. The hon. Member will be well aware of the importance of the open border. Intelligence-led policing at the ports and airports under Operation Gull and visits to workplaces have resulted in more people being detained and removed.

Seasonal Scampi Fishers

4. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Secretary of State for the Home Department on the potential merits of introducing bespoke fishing visas for seasonal scampi fishers in Northern Ireland. [900843]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Matthew Patrick): My hon. Friend is a powerful campaigner on this issue. The Secretary of State and I recognise the importance of fishing industries across the United Kingdom, and the Secretary of State visited Kilkeel earlier this year with Minister Muir, where this topic was raised. Immigration changes are designed to ensure that our domestic workforce has access to good jobs, and the Secretary of State has written to the Home Secretary about the issue.

Alison Hume: Unfortunately, jobs at Whitby Seafoods, the country's largest supplier of scampi to caterers, remain at risk. That is because, as the Minister knows, about 70% of crews operating out of Kilkeel who catch the nephrops, or scampi, are foreign workers who will no longer qualify under the new visa rules from the end of this year. While efforts to hire more domestic workers are under way, a small number of bespoke seasonal visas could save the scampi industry. Will my hon. Friend redouble his efforts to work with colleagues to secure a solution and protect those jobs in both Northern Ireland and Whitby?

Matthew Patrick: As I have said, we have written to the Home Secretary about these issues, and I am sure that my hon. Friend will be making her case very powerfully as well. It is our duty to work with businesses across the UK to ensure that they are ready for these changes. We want our fishing industry to thrive, and we want people here to benefit from those good jobs.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Owing to the severe financial impact of the restricted skilled worker visas, family-owned trawlers in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel face a perfect storm, alongside fuel costs and the newly imposed Isle of Man transit barriers. The Minister knows about the issue—both the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) and I have met the Immigration Minister, the hon. Member for Dover and Deal (Mike Tapp)—and there is a proposal that could be acceptable. Will the Minister add his support to it, to ensure that the historic fleet in Portavogie, Ardglass and Kilkeel is permanently able to fish the seas around the coast of Northern Ireland, and to ensure that our fishing sector has a secure future?

Matthew Patrick: As the hon. Gentleman will know, we totally support our fishing sector, and I am interested to hear more about that proposal. If the Immigration Minister is speaking with the hon. Gentleman and my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby, I will, of course, try to be part of those meetings to hear whatever I can hear.

Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Trade Costs

6. **Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): What discussions he has had with representatives of the logistics industry on the cost of trade between Great Britain and Northern Ireland. [900845]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I regularly meet representatives of the logistics sector and businesses trading between Great Britain and Northern Ireland—for instance, through the Northern Ireland business stakeholders group—to discuss how we can make the Windsor framework operate as smoothly as possible.

Sammy Wilson: The Secretary of State will be well aware of the importance of the logistics industry in Northern Ireland, and also of the burdens that are falling on it at present because of the Brexit arrangements, which have pushed up costs, led to delays, and resulted in many containers coming back empty from Great Britain. On top of that, we now have the added costs of a carbon tax on ferries coming to and from Northern Ireland. Does the Secretary of State recognise that this industry is important to Northern Ireland, and is being strangled by the arrangements with the European Union and the net zero policies? What steps does he intend to take to address those issues?

Hilary Benn: In respect of the EU emissions trading system, yes, we are applying a carbon charge to boat movements between Great Britain and Northern Ireland—the same charge that is being applied between Great Britain and the Republic of Ireland. The purpose of that is to ensure that the carbon border adjustment mechanism does not hit businesses in Northern Ireland, which the right hon. Gentleman would be very cross about if it were to be the case. Let me simply say this to him: if things are as bad as he suggests, why is Northern Ireland one of the fastest-growing parts of the United Kingdom economy?

Recent Disorder

7. **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on recent disorder in Northern Ireland. [900849]

11. **Janet Daby** (Lewisham East) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on recent disorder in Northern Ireland. [900854]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): I met the leaders of the main Northern Ireland political parties on Thursday 11 June to discuss the terrible disorder. The attack on Mr Ogilvie was truly shocking, but the racist violence that we saw in response had no justification whatsoever.

John Grady: The Roma have suffered centuries of prejudice and hate. Under the Nazis, they were subjected to concentration camps and genocide. Roma people have made their home in my constituency and in Northern Ireland, and should be treated with decency, yet they have been subjected to terrible racist violence in Northern Ireland. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking with the Northern Ireland Executive to safeguard the Roma community in Northern Ireland?

Hilary Benn: The single most important thing that we can all do as political leaders is to be absolutely clear that everyone who has made the United Kingdom their home lawfully should be treated with equality, respect and dignity, regardless of where they come from. That is one of the characteristics of our country.

Janet Daby: I cannot begin to imagine what the victims of the recent disorder felt and experienced, and the devastation that it has brought upon their communities. My Labour values are about respect for others, and about treating people fairly and justly. This act demonstrated none of them. Will my right hon. Friend please say what is being done to rebuild and restore every aspect of these communities, from dealing with their trauma to ensuring their protection and restoring the loss of possessions?

Hilary Benn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for what she says, and I agree with her. There was terrible disorder in Ballymena last year, as a result of which a number of steps were taken to bring the community together. It was noticeable that the recent disorder that we saw in Belfast was not replicated in Ballymena. That is an example of communities working together to build trust and respect, and we need to see a lot more of it.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State accept that while there can never be any excuse for criminal disorder, there is equally no excuse for a border policy that leaves Northern Ireland exposed? How many more incidents will it take before he and this Government deal with the open border with the Republic of Ireland, which is being exploited daily? When will they put in place measures to protect our citizens from illegal immigrants?

Hilary Benn: I hope the hon. Lady will recognise that the common travel area, which is more than a century old, is of great benefit to the citizens of the United Kingdom and the Republic of Ireland. Many people in Northern Ireland live their lives across that border every single day. Anyone who suggests—I know that she is not doing so—that there should be immigration controls on that border is not being realistic, and it would not be the appropriate action to take. As I indicated in answer to an earlier question, we are increasing immigration enforcement activity across the United Kingdom, including in Northern Ireland, as a result of which 1,000 people have been removed in the two years since the election, including 500 who have been returned to the Republic of Ireland.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Will the Secretary of State join me in commending the officers of the PSNI, who have responded to the recent disorder with professionalism and integrity? Does he agree that they deserve the very best support, including a modern, high-quality training facility, and can he give the House an update on when that is going to be funded?

Hilary Benn: I join the hon. Gentleman in thanking and praising the brave officers of the PSNI. My hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick) and I visited the officers at Strandtown police station, who dealt with the disorder when the bus was set on fire on 10 June. More than 40 of them were injured, and we wish them a speedy recovery. I know that the hon. Gentleman is a doughty advocate for the new training centre, and I look forward to discussing the matter further with him.

Mr Speaker: Happy birthday to the Leader of the House.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900916] **Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 8 July.

The Deputy Prime Minister (Mr David Lammy): I have been asked to reply on behalf of the Prime Minister, who is attending the NATO summit. Working with our allies, we are strengthening Europe's role in the alliance, which remains the cornerstone of our national security. Yesterday the Prime Minister met with the Prime Minister of Norway, and I am sure the House will join me in wishing good luck to the England team ahead of the world cup quarter-final.

This week, we mark the awful anniversary of 7/7, a day when people travelling through London on a bright summer morning had their lives ended and changed forever, including my best friend James Adams. We remember all those affected by those terrible attacks, and we will always stand against terrorism.

The Labour party also pays tribute to Sir George Howarth. He was a champion for Knowsley, a distinguished colleague and a wonderful gentleman. We will miss him deeply, and our condolences are with his wife, Julie, and his family.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Paul Holmes: I entirely associate myself with the Deputy Prime Minister's opening and personal remarks.

The Prime Minister and the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) are both proud football fans. Given that the Deputy Prime Minister clearly thinks the Prime Minister has always been match fit, how does he feel now that his own MPs have given the boss the red card and brought on a left winger to get them out of the relegation zone? *[Laughter.]*

The Deputy Prime Minister: That is not bad for someone who represents a premier league side, but two years since the election, the hon. Member still needs to engage with the facts about the Tories' failed period in government. His colleagues now accept that. The former Treasury Minister, the former Communities Secretary, the former Health Minister and the former Immigration Minister—and that is just the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick)—wrecked the country and helped wreck the Tory party, and now wants to do it all over again with Reform.

Q2. [900917] **Jeff Smith** (Manchester Withington) (Lab): In three weeks' time, Greater Manchester residents will have the chance to vote for Labour's brilliant candidate, Bev Craig, to be their next mayor. I have worked with Bev for many years, so I know her strong record as a leader and what an outstanding mayor she will be. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join me in welcoming Bev's pledge to extend free travel on public transport to all 11 to 18-year-olds, so all our young people in Greater Manchester can have the independence to travel to the work, education and leisure opportunities they deserve?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I agree with my hon. Friend: Bev Craig will be a brilliant mayor for Greater Manchester. I am proud that Labour is putting power over bus services back in the hands of local leaders. This Government have extended franchising powers, capped fares and invested to deliver better services, and we are ensuring that children can enjoy free bus travel this summer. I am sure my hon. Friends will want to get behind Bev in Greater Manchester so that we can defeat Reform's divisive candidate and drive forward the agenda under a new mayor.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I echo the right hon. Gentleman's tribute to Sir George Howarth and pass on my party's condolences to his friends, family and loved ones. I also echo his support and encouragement for the England football team in their forthcoming match against Norway. Of course, I also echo his words about those people murdered on 7/7, and their friends and their families, and I pay tribute to the emergency services that did so much on that day.

Will the Deputy Prime Minister apologise to the victims of the rapists, sexual predators and paedophiles that he is planning to release early?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am delighted to welcome the shadow Housing Secretary to the Dispatch Box. He, of course, could have been doing that job every week if he were better with numbers. He was the Foreign Secretary in the Government who botched Brexit, the Home Secretary in the Government who decimated neighbourhood policing and one of the shortest serving Education Secretaries in our history.

The right hon. Gentleman asks about a very serious issue, and every decision we have taken has been based on public safety and delivering justice for victims. Let us talk about the context. The last Labour Government built 28,000 prison places. We are building 14,000 by 2031, and we have already delivered 3,200. The Tories closed 23 prisons: Gloucester—closed; Shrewsbury—closed; Portsmouth—closed; Holloway—closed; Northallerton—closed. And what is it now? A block of flats. That is why we have to have an early release scheme and why we passed the Sentencing Act 2026, and we are putting in community powers locally to make sure that we protect the public.

Sir James Cleverly: The right hon. Gentleman makes a joke about the use of figures. Let me give him a figure: 50,000 prisoners released early in just two years on his watch. I am genuinely shocked that, when given the opportunity to apologise to the victims, he very publicly failed to do so. Let me remind him what this is about. Let me quote Fiona Goddard, a victim of grooming gangs who has been brave and open about how his policy will impact her:

> "Finding out that they may be released early has completely set me back. I have barely left the house. I feel constantly anxious, frightened and unsafe. I can barely sleep".

That is the impact his policy is having on victims. He refuses to apologise, but why is he pursuing a policy that he must know is both wrong and dangerous?

The Deputy Prime Minister: This is a very serious issue and the right hon. Gentleman is experienced in this House. He knows that while he was Home Secretary, the Conservative Government had an early release scheme that let out 10,000 offenders—10,000. They had six schemes within a year. They had a scheme that they announced on 6 June 2023, another scheme on 17 October 2023, another scheme on 8 March 2024, another in April, another in May and another in June—all before the election. That is why the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), it is rumoured, called the election in the first place. They left a system with just 83 empty cells. That is what the previous Justice Secretary inherited when she came into office.

That is why we had to pass the sentencing scheme. The right hon. Gentleman has not said what the Conservatives would do now to fix the system. Of course we think of every victim. That is why we are notifying victims and are in discussion with all victims. I sat, last week in my surgery, with a victim of grooming gangs. All of us want to see offenders locked up. That is why we must have prison capacity.

Sir James Cleverly: The right hon. Gentleman talks about 10,000 early releases over 14 years of Conservative government. The Labour Government have released 50,000 in two years. He knows it is wrong—he is a good man. He must know that it is wrong to release 5,000 serious criminals, including rapists and paedophiles. Not only does he know it is wrong, but his party knows it is wrong—not one of the 400 Labour MPs voted to support the Government's policy in the vote last night. They know it is wrong and the country knows it is wrong, but he insists on pursuing it anyway. If he will not change course, will he at least make this guarantee: that not one rapist or paedophile will be released early later on this year?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman has not proposed what the Conservatives would do if they were in office. They released 10,000 under four different schemes, with no impact assessment when they released them, no victim contact when they released them, and no warning. They did it on the sly.

Let us be clear: we have more probation officers, while the Conservative Government cut probation—decimated it—because of Chris Grayling. We have invested £700 million in probation. We are rolling out the largest programme of tagging in our history. We are forcing offenders to stay boxed in certain areas, rather than where victims are. We are creating alcohol, pub, football and driving bans. We are implementing income reduction orders. We are expanding chemical castration for sex offenders. None of that happened when they were in power.

Sir James Cleverly: I think the Deputy Prime Minister will look back on this exchange and be shocked by how it is coming across: no apology to the victims; and no guarantee that paedophiles and rapists will not be released early. We all know that releasing dangerous criminals on purpose is wrong, but not content with doing that, he is hellbent on releasing dangerous criminals by accident. Last year, in response to my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), the Deputy Prime Minister claimed that Labour had got a grip of accidental releases, yet we now know that there have been more accidental releases in the last two years than in the entirety of the last Parliament. I will give the Deputy Prime Minister another chance: will he apologise to the country for his abject failure to keep prisoners in prison, where they belong?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I have got to say, this is rich coming from the right hon. Gentleman. The Conservatives had 14 long years in power; they wrecked neighbourhood policing—he was Home Secretary; prisons were at bursting point—that is why they called the general election; and they let out offenders in secret—and that why we have the Sentencing Act 2026, which passed through this House and the House of Lords. We are getting thousands more bobbies on the beat, toughening up probation—they decimated it—and we have to have the space to lock up dangerous criminals. That is why we passed the Sentencing Act.

Sir James Cleverly: It is the dangerous criminals that the Deputy Prime Minister is letting out early. So he refuses to apologise to victims, and he refuses to guarantee that sexual offenders and rapists will not be released early. Another thing that the country, and indeed this House, knows instinctively is wrong is his personal crusade to scrap trial by jury. We know that it will not clear the backlog, we know that it undermines fundamental British freedoms, and we know that the legal profession is united against it, so will he now admit that it is wrong, and will he commit to reverse his proposals to scrap trial by jury?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Let us be clear: there is no proposal before this House to scrap trial by jury. The right hon. Member needs to do better and get on the detail. There is a threshold change. Margaret Thatcher made a change to jury trials. David Cameron made a change to jury trials. The vast majority of criminal cases in this country are dealt with by magistrates—again, which the Conservatives cut. We are restoring the magistery, so that they can do more. We are investing in our courts—the Conservatives ran our courts down. We are modernising our courts, we are introducing digital ID, and we need reform.

Sir James Cleverly: The Deputy Prime Minister talks in glowing terms about what he claims to be doing, but what we are actually seeing this Government doing is stripping money from where it is needed and squandering it on the welfare bill, which has ballooned by £20 billion this year alone. He talks about getting over the detail, but here is a simple detail for him: when I was Home Secretary, we had more police officers than at any point in British history. Since Labour taking over, that number has dropped by over 2,000 officers.

At the Dispatch Box last week, the Leader of the Opposition highlighted this Government's failure to defend us internationally. Today, I have highlighted the Deputy Prime Minister's failure to defend us domestically. If the soon-to-be Prime Minister—is he in the room anywhere?—does not want to be complicit in the Deputy Prime Minister's failure, he should come out and condemn the plan, not just hint that he opposes it. If this Labour Government cannot protect the citizens of this country, either domestically or internationally, then what on earth is the point of them?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman insists on proving that he cannot count. We lost 16,000 police officers when the Conservatives were in power. The British people have not forgotten what they did to our country. After two years of this Labour Government, I will compare our record with theirs every day of the week. Their record is the biggest fall in living standards in recorded history; our record is the biggest upgrade to workers' rights in a generation. Their record is wrecking our criminal justice system; our record is bringing down violent crime. Their record is millions of people stuck on NHS waiting lists; our record is cutting NHS waiting lists at the fastest rate in history. Their record is cutting defence—the right hon. Gentleman was a reservist—and hollowing out the armed forces; our record is the biggest boost to defence funding since the early 1990s. Their record is plunging hundreds of thousands of children into poverty; our record is lifting half a million children out of poverty. I will take our record over theirs any day of the week.

Q4. [900919] **John Grady** (Glasgow East) (Lab): The Family C official report, about the most depraved sexual abuse of children, identifies serious failures by Glasgow city council and other bodies. The report says that one child victim

"banged on the windows shouting at the health visitor not to leave",

but this was treated as "streetwise", instead of a desperate cry for help. Staff described the same child with contempt, saying that the child's behaviour was "nasty" and interfering. The children desperately needed compassion, love and safety, not contempt. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the council must accept robust, independent scrutiny of what has happened and independent scrutiny of the implementation of improvements?

The Deputy Prime Minister: This case involves horrific offences against vulnerable children. I know that all Members of this House will join me in paying tribute to the victims, who have shown remarkable bravery in coming forwards. It is evident that these children were failed dreadfully, and Glasgow city council must urgently act on the recommendations of this review. I know that my hon. Friend has written to the Scottish Government to request an independent inquiry, and the SNP should consider that request with the gravity that it deserves.

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

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): I associate myself and my party with the Deputy Prime Minister's tribute to Sir George Howarth, and his remarks about the 7/7 bombings and all those who live with the consequences of that terrible day.

I wish England good luck for Saturday evening. As the UK braces for its seventh Prime Minister in a decade, I also thank the Deputy Prime Minister for our exchanges and wish him well in whatever role he may have next.

The hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) used to say, "Leave means leave." But it seems that his latest stunt is to leave this place just so that he can return as a fully-fledged Member after not just one referendum on his behaviour, but possibly two. Will the Deputy Prime Minister join the Liberal Democrats in urging the Chancellor to delay the hon. Member's resignation until the investigation is complete, so that the good people of Clacton have all the facts before they cast their votes? Failing that, will he support our "Clacton clause", so that, even once the hon. Member ceases to be an MP, the investigations can continue?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Well, everyone can see that the Reform leader is just trying to distract from the fact that he is up to his neck in sleaze. He has serious questions to answer and he cannot run away from them. Labour is not going to be part of this circus. I hear it is the people versus the establishment: the City trader, Putin-admiring, professional politician who is pals with crypto billionaires versus Count Binface. There have been unqualified joke candidates in the past—let's see what the people of Clacton decide.

Daisy Cooper: It is clear that it is a two-horse race. *[Laughter.]*

On a more serious and very sombre note, MI5 has defended in court an agent who they knew to be openly misogynistic and obsessed with violence. He used his position to coercively control his girlfriend, Beth, and attack her with a machete. To add insult to injury, MI5 gave false evidence to the court. Will the Deputy Prime Minister use this opportunity to offer Beth a full apology on behalf of the Government, and will he use his position to bring back next week a full Hillsborough Bill, which covers the security services, so that we can pass the law before the summer recess?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Member raises a very serious issue. I will arrange for Beth to meet the Security Minister to discuss the matter in detail. The hon. Member also mentioned the Hillsborough Bill, and I am confident that it will be before the House in the coming days.

Q5. [900920] **Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): The Deputy Prime Minister and most of us in the House have been victims of AI-generated fake news, also known as deepfakes. They mislead the public and disrupt our democracy. BBC news coverage and coverage from other news channels is also being AI manipulated to tell untruths. Will he, alongside MPs from across the House, support my amendments to the Representation of the People Bill, which would force anything that is AI created to be labelled as such, stop the production of deepfakes of ourselves and colleagues, and protect the UK from these destructive tactics, used by foreign states and others who wish to weaken our democracy?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right that our protections must keep pace with evolving threats such as deepfakes. I know that she has been in discussions with Ministers on the issue. We will look at her amendments closely. We are absolutely focused on protecting our democracy against foreign interference.

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): Our politics needs fixing fast. The broken, outdated first-past-the-post system has clearly failed to deliver stable government. We urgently need to rebuild trust in our democracy and ensure that everybody's vote counts

equally. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree with the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) that proportional representation is an idea whose time has come? Does he also agree with me and Members across the House that that time is now, before the next general election?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am very pleased that the hon. Member raises the issue of votes and democracy. But I have got to say this to the Greens: during the local elections, a Green councillor in Lewisham described me and the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), as "coconuts". The Green party looked the other way, kept the candidate in post and rewarded them with the council job—I am not making this up—of cabinet member for healing. The Greens could start the healing process by stopping such racist language.

Q6. [900921] **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): This week marks the second anniversary of our Labour Government. Two years on, my constituents enjoy greater rights at work, and thousands of workers are now better off, thanks to increases in the national minimum wage. Thousands of children have been lifted out of poverty, and tens of millions of pounds in pride in place funding have been given to communities that were previously left behind. Shipbuilding on the Clyde has been secured through the Norwegian naval deal. Billions of pounds have been invested in Faslane, as well as new youth hub, which is set to open—

Mr Speaker: Order. I think the Deputy Prime Minister can answer that now.

The Deputy Prime Minister: I commend my hon. Friend for the difference that he has made and for his hard work to bring Pride in Place funding to his constituency. He lists an amazing record in two years, and we have got three more to go.

Q3. [900918] **James McMurdock** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Ind): Over the past week, rules and regulations have come understandably under sharp focus, but even more important than rules and regulations is the law. On that topic, I believe there are a number of things that everyone in the House can agree on and feel proud about: phrases such as "without fear or favour" and symbols such as Lady Justice wearing a blindfold. However well-meaning the National Police Chiefs' Council and the College of Policing may be with their programmes such as the race action plan, we have seen some very high-profile cases where faith in police has been shaken by what appears to be two-tier decision making. May Isb ask, in good faith, what the Deputy Prime Minister can do to reassure people that "without fear or favour" will always be maintained?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I say to the hon. Gentleman that everyone is equal before the law. That is the foundation on which the openness, tolerance and generosity of this country rest. Let us be clear: there is no two-tier justice in this country. The hon. Gentleman was elected as a Reform Member of Parliament and clearly aspires to become one once more. Given reports that concerns were raised with the National Crime Agency about the £5 million gift to the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), he should be asking where did the money really come from?

Q7. [900922] **Noah Law** (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): I am deeply grateful for what the Prime Minister has helped us deliver in Cornwall in the past couple of years, whether that is free breakfast clubs, urgent capital funding for GP surgeries or the Kernow industrial growth fund. *[Interruption.]* However, what has held us back at various points—besides the chuntering from the Opposition side—completely unnecessarily, I would argue, is something to which the answer is patently obvious to all in Cornwall: the question of who should be the masters of Cornwall's strategic destiny. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that the answer to this question must always be Cornwall? Will he make time for the Government to lay the statutory instrument required to make Cornwall once and for all a strategic authority, so that when my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) comes in, we can ensure good growth in every postcode and the reindustrialisation of Cornwall?

The Deputy Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is right to champion the huge potential of Cornwall. We are absolutely committed to devolution and putting power in the hands of local leaders. Conversations with local authorities such as Cornwall are ongoing, and we will confirm next steps as soon as possible. I know that Ministers will be happy to update him.

Q8. [900923] **Dr Roz Savage** (South Cotswolds) (LD): My constituency is the ninth most sewage-polluted constituency in the entire country, with thousands of hours of sewage pouring into the Thames, Avon and Coln, but that metric of hours conceals the truth. It does not convey the actual volume, and clearly a trickle is very different from a gush. Will the Deputy Prime Minister arrange for me to meet the relevant Minister on requiring water companies to report on the volume and concentration of sewage discharges, as well as the number of hours?

The Deputy Prime Minister: The hon. Member is right that we inherited record levels of pollution, and we are determined to tackle that and clean up our waterways. We have acted by banning unfair bonuses, introducing jail time for lawbreaking bosses and unlocking £104 billion of private investment to rebuild vital infrastructure to deliver cleaner waters, and we also have the clean water Bill. Of course I will arrange for her to meet the Minister.

Q14. [900929] **Cat Eccles** (Stourbridge) (Lab): Stourbridge is famous for many things: the glass industry, Jude Bellingham—[Hon. Members: "Hear, hear!"]—Robert Plant and, most importantly, the Stourbridge shuttle, the UK's shortest railway line at just 0.8 miles, or 1.3 km for those who prefer metric. It links Stourbridge Junction with Stourbridge Town. Despite its small size, it achieves an impressive 99.6% reliability compared with the west midlands average of 64.4%. One of my highlights as an MP was unveiling a shuttle car named after local legend George, the Stourbridge station cat, whose global social media following made him a beloved fixture at the junction. Today marks the start of "Shuttle Shorts", a short film festival celebrating the journey. The shuttle shows how community railway can improve local mobility. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that Pre Metro's ambition to introduce a VLR—very

light rail—service between Stourbridge and Brierley Hill is a valuable opportunity for Great British Railways and that local businesses should be supported to do this?

The Deputy Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement about the future: it is coming home. I echo my hon. Friend's sentiments on Jude Bellingham. Not only is he making Stourbridge proud, but he is a source of pride for the whole nation.

In Great British Railways we are seeing the biggest overhaul of our railways in a generation. We will work with all partners, such as local authorities and local businesses, to drive investment, support economic growth and deliver a better service for her constituents.

Q9. [900924] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): Constituents in western North Shropshire were delighted when road investment strategy 3 was announced, because a roundabout at the desperately dangerous Llynclys crossroads came a step closer as part of the national safety programme. However, with the announcement that the defence investment programme will be funded by cuts to transport programmes, will the Deputy Prime Minister reassure my constituents that the national safety programme will not be cut? Will he consider using the Liberal Democrat idea of defence bonds to fund the defence investment plan so that critical security projects such as those in transport are not put at risk?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We are raising defence spending to keep this country safe in an increasingly volatile world. That does require tough decisions, and the Department for Transport will set out £700 million-worth of savings from roads funding, but we will consult on the next road investment strategy and set out decisions in due course. I reassure the hon. Lady that safety would come first.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): Ruth Ellis was the last woman to be executed in this country. Her case serves as a haunting reminder of a time when our justice system ignored the realities of domestic abuse and coercive control. In the decades since, members of Ruth's family and supporters have campaigned unwaveringly for her to receive a posthumous pardon. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that their courageous campaign and the terrible lessons of Ruth's case must strengthen the Government's resolve to free women from devastating cycles of abuse?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. I have the honour to say that His Majesty the King has accepted our advice to grant Ruth Ellis, the last woman to be hanged in the United Kingdom, a conditional pardon. [Hon. Members: "Hear, hear."] While the pardon does not claim that she was innocent of killing David Blakely, it replaces the death penalty with a sentence of life imprisonment to recognise a profound injustice in this exceptional case. I know that her grandchildren, Laura Enston and Stephen Beard, are in the Gallery with us today. We hope that this pardon brings a measure of peace to Ruth Ellis's family, who have carried the weight of what happened to her for over 70 years.

Q10. [900925] **Mr Gregory Campbell** (East Londonderry) (DUP): The Government have said that higher taxes are needed to fund rising welfare spending. In Northern Ireland, my party's Communities Minister is taking action to reduce welfare fraud and error. Discussions were held between the Treasury and the Department that would have allowed Northern Ireland Departments to retain a share of any savings to invest directly in public services, but those proposals were blocked by Sinn Féin. Will the Deputy Prime Minister ensure that the incoming Prime Minister will look at that approach again so that we can tackle benefit fraud and protect taxpayers' money as well as delivering real benefits for communities across all of Northern Ireland?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I know that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is discussing the budget at this very time. Tackling fraud and error in the welfare system is a priority for the Government, which is why we passed the Public Authorities (Fraud, Error and Recovery) Act 2025, giving the Department for Work and Pensions more powers to stop fraud in its tracks, recover money lost and prevent overpayments.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): Yesterday, I was proud to host members of Basingstoke's Nepalese community here in Parliament, including a number of Gurkha veterans. One of the issues we discussed was Gurkha pensions, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Aldershot (Alex Baker) for all her work on that—I have been proud to work alongside her. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that it is time to resolve the long-standing issue of Gurkha pensions, recognising the service and sacrifice of Gurkha veterans to our country?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. We owe a profound debt of gratitude to the Gurkhas who have served this country courageously. We are listening to the needs of the community and already improving access to healthcare and community support. Ministers have met veterans and the Government in Nepal for constructive discussions on pensions, and those will continue. I will be happy to ensure that my hon. Friend is kept updated.

Q11. [900926] **Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): Coughlan's Bakery, which was founded in 1937, has announced the closure of all its stores, five of which are in my Reigate constituency. The reasons given by Sean Coughlan include recent employer national insurance and business rate hikes. That much-loved family business, which has survived a world war and multiple recessions, has not be able to survive this Labour Government. How many businesses need to go under before this Government learn that they cannot tax their way to growth?

The Deputy Prime Minister: We are backing business with the lowest corporation tax in the G7, we have delivered the small business plan with the largest crackdown on late payments in 25 years, we are bringing down costs for businesses through five major trade deals, we have secured £365 billion in private investment since the election and unemployment is down, with over 400,000 more people in work than this time last year.

Mr Speaker: Final question.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): Last month, I had the opportunity to host the Southbank Centre in my constituency for its 75th anniversary. It is one of the many centres that I am proud to have across Vauxhall and Camberwell Green. The House may know that the Southbank Centre was built as part of the festival of Britain in 1951, which successfully saw people come together to share their identity after the ruin of world war two. Seventy-five years on, sadly, the world is a more divided place. Recently, we have seen two far-right marches—one went through my constituency—leaving many members of the community feeling afraid. There is hope, however, as we see the world cup bringing people together, showing the power of culture and sport. Does the Deputy Prime Minister agree that now is the moment to continue to invest in the things that bring us together, just as the Government did in 1951?

The Deputy Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her tireless work in this area. She is absolutely right that we must stand united against those who seek to divide us. Our social cohesion action plan sets out how we will tackle extremism, bring communities together and restore national pride, and we are providing local communities with up to £1.7 million to insulate them against the threats to social cohesion.

European Entry and Exit System

12.42 pm

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Department, what measures the Government have put in place to ensure that in the coming holiday season, travellers and business freight are not delayed at our ports, our international railway stations and our airports as a result of the imposition of the European entry and exit system.

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Alex Norris): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his important question. The entry-exit system is an EU scheme and its implementation is the responsibility of the European Commission and participating member states. This Government have been working closely with the EU, member states and industry to understand the impacts, particularly for the juxtaposed border controls at the port of Dover, at Eurotunnel and at St Pancras, and to advocate for the pragmatic use of the flexibilities available within the legislation to minimise disruption for UK citizens.

The Government have supported all three juxtaposed ports to ensure that they have the right technology and processes in place to make sure that EES registration runs as smoothly as possible. That has included providing £3.5 million of funding to each one to help them make changes to their infrastructure and purchase the equipment they need to ready their sites for EES. It is not unusual to see queues at the Kent juxtaposed ports at peak times due to the unique geography, and that has been the case prior to EES. However, we want to minimise its impact.

On the late May bank holiday weekend, both Ministers and officials engaged with French authorities to ensure that arrangements were in place to handle large volumes of traffic. This resulted in assurances from France that it would have adequate staffing levels and clear escalation plans in case of severe disruption. These arrangements were made use of on 23 May, when the French police aux frontières employed flexibilities available within the regulations to alleviate congestion on the road network. I and my officials and ministerial colleagues across Government are actively engaging with France and the EU to make similar arrangements ahead of the summer period. The Department for Transport continues to support the Kent and Medway resilience forum, which has tried and tested plans in place to manage disruption to the road network in Kent.

For passengers travelling to Schengen countries by air, EES registration will take place at their destination. It will not take place in UK airports, and queues in EU member states are for those states to manage. However, this Government continue to engage with the Commission and relevant member states to advocate for the pragmatic use of the EES flexibilities allowed to avoid delays for passengers. We are also engaging with our European partners on the use of technology, such as the EES app, to move elements of registration away from the border. We continue to encourage travellers to check with their travel operator before departing so that they know when to arrive and are aware of any possible impacts on their journey.

Sir Roger Gale: As the Minister has indicated, over the spring bank holiday there was chaos at Dover, at St Pancras and at the channel tunnel because of the failure of the EES. The French authorities were quite simply not prepared or able to implement the facilities properly. Based on bookings for the coming season, which starts in 10 days' time, the authorities are now predicting that there could be 12-hour delays to passengers and therefore to freight, which affects our businesses. That is simply not acceptable. Will the Minister, before it is too late, approach the French authorities again and suggest that a waiver must be put in place before the holiday season starts so that we do not again face the chaos that we faced in May?

Alex Norris: I recognise that it is a shared goal for ourselves, for locally affected Members of Parliament and for the French to ensure that we do not see scenes of huge queues. We know the impact that has on individuals and on businesses. The right hon. Gentleman talks about making more efforts, and I can assure him that we will be doing this on a daily basis, as we already are, both with France and with the Commission. We have pushed on this fundamental point. This is a complex scheme in operation, and when volumes peak shortly, the fundamental question will be the prioritisation of flow or of compliance with the scheme. We are pushing heavily, as we will every day between now and then, to ensure that the French use the flexibilities available to prioritise flow. That is what I want, it is what he wants and it is in everybody's interest.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): The right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) is quite right to highlight this challenge and the impact on Kent when these queues build up, and of course the impact on British people trying to get out through Dover, Folkestone and other places. I want to ask the Minister what can be done for British holidaymakers coming home who have been stuck at airports for hours and missed their flights because of the airlines needing to get moving under working time directives. I am led to understand that fingerprints are required on entry but not on exit from the Schengen area, yet many of these delays are being caused because airports in different countries are making holidaymakers provide fingerprints again, as well as the much easier face recognition. Could the Minister pick this up, please, and tell me what is happening?

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the Chair of the Select Committee for that characteristically thoughtful question. As she would expect, a lot of ministerial focus is on juxtaposed ports as they involve things that happen on UK soil and have an impact in UK communities. Nevertheless, we want our travellers to have the best possible experience wherever they are. The checks in Schengen countries are a matter for them, but as I have said, we are engaging with all countries, not just France, to ensure that a proportionate and sensible use within flexibility is made. My hon. Friend and other colleagues will know, too, about the changes that we are making with our own e-gates, including lowering the age involved, so that passengers who have had a difficult journey out have the smoothest arrival back on to UK soil.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale) for securing this important urgent question. Anyone who has travelled or spoken to those who have tried to use the new European entry-exit system understands why the scale of the challenges over summer is so great, and despite all the problems, it has now been reported that a separate new online system to preauthorise entry to the EU will be delayed until next year. That is a pitiful response, indicative of the problems facing so many UK travellers, and there is nowhere near the urgency needed to address the problems facing the EES as we enter the summer holidays. As the president of Airports Council International Europe recently expressed, politicians should

"stop pretending...that EES is working just fine. It is not."

That delusional attitude among EU colleagues is not acceptable. With the EU telling representatives of the travel industry that a full suspension of the system is not needed and not possible, the Government must stand behind the interests of British travellers. For instance, there appears to be a ridiculous situation in which a facility built in Dover cannot be activated until the technology for the kiosks, which is the responsibility of the French authorities, is working.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands, who chairs the Home Affairs Committee, is right: it is time to "apply maximum pressure" before chaos arrives at the border at Dover. Will the Minister detail what conversations the Government have had, and what pressure they will apply? Have they asked for a temporary suspension, relaxation or phased use of EES checks at periods of exceptional congestion? Given the increased traffic, what have the Government done to strengthen plans in case queues spill out of Dover or Folkestone? It is in all our interests to ensure that people can get through border checks quickly, and it is time to ensure that that happens.

Alex Norris: I am grateful to the shadow Minister for his questions. As I said at the beginning of my remarks, I share his point about the importance and impact that preauthorisation can have. We want that to become the norm, and as I said, we are engaging with member states to encourage them to take up use of the EES app. He asked about the intent of our colleagues in the European Union, whether in the Commission or in member states, and I do not detect a lack of intent. They are keen to engage with us, and we engage with them frequently. They want this system to work, and it is important that it does. It is a good thing that our neighbour wants good security arrangements, and we benefit from that too—we certainly have that level of engagement.

The hon. Member talks about full suspension, and as I said yesterday to the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands in the Home Affairs Committee, I would not set that as the goal and aspiration because I do not believe it is deliverable. What we delivered in May, and what we will seek, is that when we get to peak times and the system is clearly not managing flow appropriately, we need the right flexibilities in place on the ground for staff to make changes that prioritise flow. That is my priority. The hon. Member talks about the facility, and I say gently that of course that facility cannot be used until the technology that it is based on works. We want that to be the case as soon as possible, but that is not a business for us. We have made the money available so that the infrastructure is there. We have delivered on that element, but the technology is clearly taking time to stand up.

The hon. Member talks about pressure, and we are engaged at all levels of Government. In the Home Office, the Home Secretary has engaged with her counterpart and with the Commission, as have colleagues from the Department for Transport, including the Secretary of State, and the Minister for the Cabinet Office, and we are raising these issues on a daily basis. On contingencies, let me take this opportunity to say what a good job the Kent and Medway Resilience Forum has done on this. I am a big resilience forum enthusiast: those are local people making direct local changes to improve their community under pressure. There is also the Dover traffic assessment protocol and Operation Brock. Those arrangements are in place, and we will work with people so that they make the best operational decisions they can along the way.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Last week I visited the port of Dover with the Home Affairs Committee, to see those operations in action. Given that this is an EU entry-exit system, we must face the fact that this is an inevitable consequence of Brexit, and we have to make it work. The best solution to the challenges facing our constituents this summer is sustained engagement—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Sorry about this. Can the hon. Members for Faversham and Mid Kent (Helen Whately) and for Perth and Kinross-shire (Pete Wishart) stop the little argument on the Back Benches?

Chris Murray: The best solution to managing those challenges this summer is sustained engagement with the French, at leader level, Cabinet level, ministerial level, and working official level, so that the police aux frontières have a delegated responsibility to let flows through. What discussion will we be having at every level with the French, using the better relationship we have struck, so that our constituents and British holidaymakers trying to get a holiday abroad this summer, do not face the consequences of Brexit, which will be missed flights and long queues?

Alex Norris: Sustained engagement with the French is crucial, and it is happening at all levels, be that ministerial, senior official, or operationally, to ensure that prioritisation of flow. This is not something that has just started, and neither is it coming to its end. We are in that constant position and have been for many months, even before the EES started its operations, and that will continue. I say gently that it is not just the French but all EU member states. At some point this summer our constituents will end up in all those different member states. I want them to have the best possible experience, so we are also having those engagements.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): It is now 10 years on from the Brexit referendum, and in the words of the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), where

[Max Wilkinson]

are we? We are here, stuck in queues at the EU border for hours at a time, because he and his acolytes forced a damaging Brexit on this country. It is interesting to note that the Conservatives have come to the Chamber today complaining about the consequences of the Brexit deal that they negotiated. The Brexit plan of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), implemented by the Conservatives and unresolved by this Government, has left British holidaymakers in this position. Indeed, the Government are guilty not just of failing to plan, but of political and diplomatic failures that have let down holidaymakers. We are already seeing reports of queues of up to five hours—what a way to start our holidays.

What immediate steps is the Minister taking to mitigate disruption? Will he seek an immediate meeting with the European Commission so that contingency measures can be put in place to protect passengers as a matter of urgency? Will the Government drop their red lines on Europe, and commit to joining the single market and customs union? Not only would that reverse the damage done by Brexit and get our economy back on track, but it would mean that we—*[Interruption.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Sorry, but you've gone way over your one minute. I think your border queue has just gone. I call the Minister.

Alex Norris: To address the point about Brexit, we must be clear—for example, the Republic of Ireland, which is outside Schengen, also has these challenges, so the idea that reversing to previous arrangements would change that reality is tricky. There is a fundamental choice here, as real practical measures will affect the hon. Gentleman's community and those of many right hon. and hon. Members, and lots of British holidaymakers. We can choose to use our efforts and leadership collectively to have conversations about the past, or we can work together to ensure that those people have the best possible experience. That is what we are doing, and why we are engaging with France and the Commission. That is the best approach, rather than having global conversations about things that do not really go anywhere.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): I travel on the channel tunnel twice a year, and the carrier knows that, in case of evacuation, one passenger in my vehicle is a wheelchair user. The information that comes from the carrier is poor, and my concern over the summer months ahead is about how that continues. People will have to get out of their vehicle for the first registration check, and for some vulnerable users that will cause a huge disturbance on the journey. The pre-registration service is available, but my concern for many people travelling over the summer is about how much information is currently given to them by the carrier. What are the Government doing to work with carriers so that people have as much information as early as possible to help them on their journey?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend makes an exceptionally important point about vulnerable users. Operation Brock and the Dover traffic assessment project give scope for the KMRF to stand up contingency plans to make movement for domestic travel easier, because the last thing we want is for people, particularly vulnerable people, to be in cars for long periods of time.

On my hon. Friend's point about communications from the carriers, we work closely with the carriers and they are working hard, as are the ports. My message to travellers would be to check in with the advice they are getting from the carriers, particularly on how long to give themselves. They should not change their travel plans, but they should engage to ensure that they arrive on time. I am a sinner on the Eurostar because I leave things as late as possible, but that is not a prudent approach at the moment. Instead, travellers should check in with their carrier to get the best up-to-date information. I will undertake to have conversations with carriers to ensure that things are as good as possible, in the spirit he suggests.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The Minister must think he is having déjà vu after our exchange at the Home Affairs Committee yesterday. I implore him once again to make every endeavour and to use his best offices with the EU Commission and the French to try to get them to understand that we cannot wait for there to be delays; we have to anticipate switching off the system. The Port of Dover, Eurotunnel and others have extraordinarily intelligent and complex ways of forecasting flow. Will they look at those flow forecasts and use them to decide when to put measures in place, not wait for the delays to start?

Alex Norris: That is an excellent point. Ahead of the May bank holiday, we demonstrated that we were able to use that rich sense of who is coming—it is not a surprise—and to plan for when the system needs flexibility, particularly for PAF officers. We did that for the May bank holiday and we are doing it again now. We are having conversations to give flexibility in the service of the goal that we all want to see: the prioritisation of flow.

Ben Coleman (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for all that he is doing to sort out this mess. Does he agree that the queues and delays facing British travellers under the EU's entry-exit system were entirely avoidable? Had Britain kept its seat at the table, we would not be subject to these to checks at all, we would have had a voice in the system design and roll-out over the past five years, and we could have made it work better. Instead, just as with steel and electric vehicles, we find ourselves on the receiving end of decisions rather than shaping them. Does he agree that is precisely why we need an ambitious new partnership with the EU, so that Britain can genuinely take back control and British people's European holidays do not start and end in chaos?

Alex Norris: I share some of my hon. Friend's analysis, but not all of it. If we are dealing in counterfactuals, which I am usually loath to do but this one is quite entertaining, if we were within these arrangements, a Minister—probably me—would be at the Dispatch Box being pressed, quite rightly, by right hon. and hon. Members, who would be saying "Is your system going to work? Is it going to stand up?" The reason I know that is because that conversation is happening in every EU member state. I encourage colleagues away from the idea that a single counterfactual change in our

history would mean that we would have no issues with travel at our ports, because the evidence does not bear that out.

However, I agree with my hon. Friend wholescale about having a close relationship with the EU. Whereas our Conservative colleagues spent a lot of time thumbing their noses at our neighbours, which is never in the interest of the British people, we have a close partnership on data sharing and more, as I told the Home Affairs Committee, so that we work as well as possible with our neighbours to ensure flows of travel and to secure borders.

Helen Whately (Faversham and Mid Kent) (Con): Every holiday period, Kent and my constituency of Faversham and Mid Kent is brought to a standstill, and that has become much worse with the introduction of the EU entry-exit system, despite the fact that our ports and Eurotunnel have invested in the technology. I understand that it is not working because the French have not managed to get it to work. I disagree with the Minister that everything is fine when Operation Brock is on—Operation Brock is terrible for my area. However, I agree with his point that this has nothing to do with Brexit. I hate to break that to the Liberal Democrats and others who have being trying to make that argument, but the problems have nothing to do with Brexit. The situation could be horrific this summer: imagine people, including children and elderly people, and potentially pets, waiting in their cars in this heat for around 12 hours. It is a disaster. I implore the Minister to involve the Prime Minister—and, most likely, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), as this could happen under his watch—in the negotiations with the EU to suspend these checks in advance, not to wait and see, so that we can stop these queues happening?

Alex Norris: It is important to recognise, as I did at the start, that these queues are not new, but the entry-exit system risks being a compounding factor. I too look at the weather and think that I would not want people, including vulnerable people, and pets to be stuck in cars for long periods of time, and we absolutely recognise that. I agree that the operations that I talk about are not a panacea—they do not make queues disappear—but they are about pragmatic ways, in challenging circumstances, of trying to make things better for people, which is a good thing. The resilience forum does a good job with that and we will work alongside it to deliver that. On the hon. Lady's point about engagement, I hope that she has heard that our approach is not to wait and see—it has not been in the past and it is not now. We want to plan ahead of time so that PAF staff can make flexibilities to prioritise flow.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): In Scotland, the holiday season has already started. I understand why the Minister has rightly focused on the connection with France, but people in Edinburgh South West are concerned about there being real issues in Portugal, Spain, Italy and Greece when it comes to delays at airports. Is the Minister speaking one to one with those countries to ensure that, at the very least, we are aware of what the challenges could be?

Alex Norris: It is reasonable for the House and the Government of the day to have a real focus on the juxtaposed ports, because the issues happen on UK soil and have impacts in UK constituencies. My hon. Friend is right that our constituents will go to all EU member states and, I would be willing to venture, they will travel to all ports in all EU member states at some point over the summer period. I do not want to see them delayed there, have their holidays ruined or to have a less enjoyable time. In the spirit that he suggests, we have talked to the European Commission and we have talked to member states individually. We have a rich sense individually of not just where every member state is, but where each port is, so that we can impose on them the clear view from the British people that they want flow prioritised, and that is what we are doing.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Will the Minister point out to the European Union that, because we have a common travel area with the Republic of Ireland, and because the Republic of Ireland is not applying any of these checks on British citizens going to and coming from Northern Ireland or direct from the United Kingdom, there is actually an open border between the European Union and the United Kingdom, so they might as well allow the same access through Dover rather than trying to impose all their rubbish on the United Kingdom? On the suggestion that this is all the fault of Brexit, this did not exist when we left the European Union; this is a result of a decision that the dysfunctional European Union is inflicting on travelling British citizens for its own reasons, not for any practical benefit.

Alex Norris: There is a lot in the hon. Gentleman's question. I would slightly challenge the assertion that the CTA is an open border. If an individual crosses that border into the UK, they have to have a reason for being there. They have to have real leave and they are subject to enforcement activity if they do not. I would not want anybody, whether they are connecting into the EU or anywhere else in the world outside the CTA, to have the idea that any of our ports are an open border. I want to know who is coming and who is going: that is in our nation's interests. On his final point about there being no practical benefit, it is not for me to make the EU's arguments for it—it can do that for itself—but given the conversations that we have in the Chamber about the flows of people across the European Union and then to the UK, it is really good thing that the EU wants to have borders where it knows who is coming and going, because that plays an important part in ensuring that we have a safe border. I think that is a good thing.

Mike Reader (Northampton South) (Lab): As an MP who represents a constituency at the heart of the golden triangle, with one in five of my constituents working in logistics, this issue comes up regularly, including most recently with Steve Deveraux from BSI Transport, who explained to me the costs and the red tape that the current entry system creates. Will the Minister set out what assessment his office has made about the economic impact of the new system on HGV drivers and hauliers, and what measures the Department will take to support that sector going forward?

Alex Norris: My hon. Friend raises an important issue. On HGVs, there is degree of ease because the majority of HGV drivers are European nationals and

[Alex Norris]

are not subject to the same degree of checks, so that makes things flows more easily. That does not help if they are in the queue, but it helps to ensure that they do not cause the queue. On his point about the checks themselves, the good thing about the scheme is that once people have done the check, they supposedly will not need to do it again for three years, so things will get easier over time. We are looking at the impacts on the economy and the ordinary lives of the British people. Our clear message is to prioritise flow, and that is why we are having those conversations in that way.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I thank the Minister for all his efforts in trying to sort out a Tory mess. As a fellow Kent MP, I like and greatly respect the right hon. Member for Herne Bay and Sandwich (Sir Roger Gale), but is it not a bit cheeky to ask the Government of the day to sort out the mess that the Conservatives voted for? Will the Minister ask the Conservative party to respond with regard to creating the problem that he is having to sort out?

Alex Norris: I have always taken the view that I get to do the answers, but I do not get to do the questions as well—you know that well, Mr Speaker. I will seek to address whatever is put to me to the best of my ability. The hon. Gentleman is right; I spend a lot of my time clearing up the mess made by Tory predecessors, but I am not necessarily sure that this is one of them. However, there are plenty of other messes, including the rampant use of hotels that they allowed, small boat crossings in their entirety, and plenty more.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his answers so far. This is a hugely important issue for residents and businesses in my constituency of Harlow, not least because we have an international airport on our doorstep. I am a big believer in co-operation, and I know that when we co-operated with our French allies in the '60s, the result was supersonic. What is the Minister doing to work with our French allies and other European countries? I do not seek to repeat the arguments of the past, but it is hugely important that we co-operate with our European allies to sort out this situation.

Alex Norris: Along with me, my hon. Friend holds that most exalted status of being a Labour and Co-operative Member of Parliament. By instinct, I am the same as him; in anything in my life, I have never found that a problem with my neighbour, whatever its nature, got better by shouting rather than by co-operating. That is the spirit of our engagement at the moment. I believe that is the best approach going forward, and that is what we will continue to do.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Haulage, agricultural and fisheries firms in my constituency are heavily reliant on Dover, and delays, particularly to seafood, are disastrous—the value of the cargo disappears practically overnight. I am a member of the Business and Trade Committee, and when we visited Dover I was delighted to see £40 million-worth of infrastructure on our side of the short strait. The reality is that the difficulties lie on the far side of the short strait. Is it not time that, rather than warm words about an EU reset, we had the French ambassador in for an interview sans café?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman is testing my GCSE French—maybe I will be found wanting in that regard. On his first point, we absolutely accept that for some products, time is absolutely crucial. That is why the ports have put their money where their mouth is, but we have also put the British people's money into that, because it is important for his constituency and for all of us to ensure that British seafood thrives. That is the right thing to do. I do not his approach is the most effective way of engaging. Rich conversations are happening on a daily basis, and it is better that we do that, rather than summoning the ambassador or anybody else. Our approach with France and with the Commission is better.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): There are clearly significant challenges to work through, and that is not unusual with large-scale technology adoption, as we know. I welcome the fact that the Government are working hard to find the trigger points where measures will be reduced or suspended for periods to try to keep queues to a minimum.

There are two areas that I think the Government could do a bit more with. They could do even more to promote the official "Travel to Europe" app, which might help with some of the delays. Will the Government also ensure that perishable goods have prioritised access at ports? That is particularly important for fish exports and other short-life produce, which is critical to our economy.

Alex Norris: The nature of who is driving short-use freight can make that easier, but there is a challenge in terms of prioritisation. As I have said to colleagues, there is a very good reason for the prioritisation of vulnerable individuals in cars for long periods of time, and there is flexibility in KMRF's plans. There is a real challenge in finding that, because many if not most people have a good reason to move through at the quickest possible pace, and we want everybody's flow to be as good as possible.

The hon. Gentleman makes a really important point about travel information. We need people to avail themselves of that information at early points, particularly the amount of time that they need to leave, in order to plan their travel.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It should not have come as a surprise that the system is a complete disaster. In the previous Parliament, the European Scrutiny Committee, which I served on, was looking at this very issue and at many of the steps that could have been taken. However, on taking office, this Government abolished the Committee, so scrutiny was not carried through to preparations for implementation. One of our suggestions for the transitional period before the three-year rule took effect was to provide off-site units where people could have their fingerprints taken under supervision. That would have cut queues at those juxtaposed ports. Why did that not happen? Why was that suggestion not taken up? Will the Minister put it to the French Government that that could be a solution?

Alex Norris: I might contest the idea that we do not do very much European scrutiny in this place. That would be very difficult to say, because I do not recall ever standing at the Dispatch Box without talking about the European Union—it seems there are some colleagues who seek to talk about nothing else. We do have the chance to look at these plans adequately.

On the point about off-site infrastructure and similar matters, the issue is not with the infrastructure available. We can have the best infrastructure available, but if the technology that pulls through to it does not work, the system will not work. My absolute belief, which the hon. Gentleman will get to challenge in due course, is that when that tech is operational, the infrastructure will be in place and in the right parts of the ports, but we need the tech to work before we can properly test that.

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): Despite the unholy alliance between the Minister and Members on the Tory Front Bench, this issue is clearly a product of Brexit. I visited Dover with the Home Affairs Committee last week. Dover has invested more than £40 million in infrastructure, but the software is not working, and there will be chaos unless the EES is suspended this summer. This is a Brexit dividend, but will the Minister emphasise to the French that, rather than enjoying the schadenfreude, they should know how much their economy will be damaged by the chaos that will ensue?

Alex Norris: On the point about alliances, I have always taken the view in this Chamber that if I agree with somebody, I say that I agree with them; if I disagree with them, I say that I disagree with them. It does not really matter which party or what part of the UK they come from. That is in the interests of all our constituents.

The hon. Gentleman has heard my answer to the point about Brexit. Whatever the well-meant and different positions we may hold, I know for certain that if we went tapping on the windows of people in queues to say, "By the way, do you know that this is about Brexit?", they would not consider that a suitable or sufficient answer from their leaders.

I do not recognise the point about the French and schadenfreude. I have not heard that in this debate, and it is certainly not the view of the Government. We always see these things as shared challenges with our neighbours. We have what we think is a very important way forward, and we are having conversations with our neighbours.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I echo the point made previously about the Scottish holidays having already begun and the need to focus on holiday hotspots, if I can use that expression, such as the Spanish and Greek islands, to ensure that travel is made as easy as possible for Scottish travellers. May I raise the issue of coach travel? Many people travel by coach. What assessment has the Home Office made of the impact of the EES on not just passengers but coach drivers?

Alex Norris: The point about Scottish holidays has been well made by colleagues. We can model volumes relatively accurately, because we know who is and is not on holiday and who has and has not booked holidays. We have prepared throughout for different spikes, particularly around different events. I was worried—forlornly, it seems—that Manchester City fans would not be able to get to the champions league final. I am sad to say that, as it turned out, we did not face that particular challenge.

The right hon. Gentleman's point about coaches is very important in terms of both passengers and drivers. It is a heavily regulated profession, which means that there are hard and fast rules about what drivers can do. Coach companies are well placed, because they routinely travel on these routes—it is their business. We are having conversations with all sorts of transport carriers about preparation and planning.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Yesterday, in a session of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, Mr Eddy Montgomery—a senior Home Office official—revealed to my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) that this Government are focusing purely on the ports. A senior official has confirmed that this Government are concerned only about the ports and about who is coming into Great Britain, not Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree with that, given all that has happened in Northern Ireland with regard to illegal immigration?

Alex Norris: The hon. Lady may or may not have had the chance to see from the transcript or, indeed, the video that I was on the subsequent panel for that session. That is not the view of the UK Government; the point being made was that we have significant levels of immigration enforcement for the common travel area. There have been over 2,600 visits since the general election, and more than 1,000 people have been removed from the UK as a result of those visits, 500 of them back to the Republic of Ireland—we take that enforcement very seriously. Of course, for very good reason, we focus on all of our ports as a point of challenge, but that enforcement activity happens across Northern Ireland, not just at the ports. We take an intelligence-led approach to Northern Ireland, and we always will, because we do not want to see the CTA abused.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Further to the excellent point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dumfries and Galloway (John Cooper), the Minister will no doubt be aware that Bridlington is the lobster capital of Europe, and therefore any delays at Dover have a serious impact on our vital export market. However, I want to address the wider issue of tourists this summer. Does the Minister agree that other countries—such as France, Spain and Portugal—should follow the lead of Greece and delay the implementation of the EES system until such time as it is fit for purpose?

Alex Norris: I commend Bridlington's lobster industry. I have to say, that was a new one to me, but let me correct that error at the first possible opportunity. Lobster is, of course, the ultimate time-sensitive seafood product—I am stretching my seafood knowledge to some degree—and we are therefore very aware of the impact on Bridlington's seafood industry.

I agree with the hon. Gentleman about member states using their flexibilities. The conversations we are having—with France, but also with the Commission and across EU member states—are about using flexibilities to prioritise flow. I think all colleagues would agree that that is the right thing to do.

Pete Wishart (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): Mr Speaker, it is the 10-year anniversary of Brexit, but you would barely know it. There have been absolutely no celebrations whatsoever—no carrying of the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage) shoulder-high down the mall, no celebrations of how we spent that extra £350 million per week—but here we have it, the Brexit birthday present after 10 years: a miserable start to people's holidays and our business being disrupted. Scotland did not vote for Brexit. Scotland wanted nothing whatsoever to do with Brexit, so why are Scottish holidaymakers getting caught up in this situation, and what is the Minister doing to alleviate it?

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman has heard what we are doing—engaging with our partners across member states and the Commission to make sure they prioritise flow over compliance, which is the right thing to do. He raises important points about Brexit, which come up frequently in our discussions. As he may well have heard me say, I deal with challenges on a daily basis that result from the decision the British people took, such as access to data and information that we are doubtlessly missing, which we are seeking to add back as part of the UK-EU summit. I am just not sure that this situation fits into that category, because we would be having this conversation in some form either way.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is clear that the delay to the UK-EU reset summit—it was initially scheduled for July, but has now been delayed till October—has not cancelled the problems which that summit was, at least in part, designed to address. Might the Minister suggest an interim emergency summit to deal explicitly with this issue, bringing together the French and the European Commission to try to resolve it before we hit peak summer season? If he is willing to organise that summit, could he also raise the case of UK hauliers, who are reporting inconsistent scanning of their exit from the Schengen area and real fears that their 90 in 180-day entitlement will artificially run down as a result? That is going to have a profound effect on our economy.

Alex Norris: The hon. Gentleman perhaps ascribes to me greater power than I have with regard to convening international summits. This issue is being considered outside of that process, anyway—these conversations are happening every day. I also know that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will meet her European counterparts next week and that the EES is on the agenda for that meeting. That work is going on.

I am concerned to hear about the inconsistent scanning, which I know has a profound impact on businesses and workers. If there are examples, I would be very keen to look at them, to make sure people are not being affected in ways they should not be.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister very much for his positivity in his answers—he always tries to calm us when it comes to these questions, fairly successfully. While the Home Office scrambles to prevent chaos at English ports, what specific, targeted measures is the Minister putting in place at our Northern Ireland seaports—such as Belfast and Larne—and at our airports, to stop this EES loophole turning Northern Ireland into a magnet for illegal, untracked transit into the rest of the United Kingdom?

Alex Norris: It is important to say that of course, there will not be EES checks at those ports; the only EES checks taking place on UK soil are at the juxtaposed ports I have talked about. Nevertheless, I am very interested in the travel arrangements and good holiday arrangements of the people of Newtownards and the rest of Strangford. It is really important that when they get to their destination and when they come home, they are able to flow through, and we are having conversations with all member states on that basis. Similarly, the hon. Gentleman will have heard about the changes and flexibilities we are introducing with regard to our domestic e-gates, to make sure that when his residents get home, they can get through their ports more quickly.

Maritime and Coastguard Agency

1.25 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD) *(Urgent Question):* To ask the Secretary of State for Transport if she will make a statement on the management of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency and proposed changes to payments made to coastguard rescue officers.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for tabling this urgent question on what is an incredibly important matter. I welcome the opportunity to set out the Government's position on the remuneration of coastguard rescue officers, and I want to begin by recognising the extraordinary contribution made by CROs across the United Kingdom. For generations, His Majesty's Coastguard's coastal response has depended on people from local communities who choose to serve, often alongside full-time employment and family life. The reason we are here today is that the model had to change.

For years, when people signed up as volunteers, they had their expenses covered and an offer of hourly pay—which they did not need to claim—in recognition of the incredible service they undertook and the impact it had on their personal life. A Court of Appeal judgment has clarified that this payment overwhelmingly shifted what many considered to be a volunteer relationship into a work-wage bargain, and that this in turn conferred worker status. Everything we have done since has been to respect that judgment, understand what we do next, and allow CROs to continue fulfilling their vital public service and retain operational capacity.

There is no perfect solution, but ultimately, the volunteer model was judged at the time to be the better outcome for the service. That was the judgment reached by the MCA, which—as experts in search and rescue—took into account a variety of factors including profiles of incident types, geographies and organisational implications, as well as a survey of CRO sentiment and legal analysis, with which it made a recommendation. That recommendation allowed CROs to retain volunteer status, with the aim of protecting flexibility and the ability of people to serve alongside their primary employment. Careful consideration was given to options, including legal position, the operational implications and the wider organisational impact.

I have heard the concerns of the CRO community about this change. That is why the next stage of the process—the engagement sessions that were due to take place this week—have been postponed while I carry on working with CROs, trade unions and colleagues across the House. I will reflect on what has been raised in these discussions and consider how our coastguard volunteers can be recognised in the long term. Volunteering has been at the heart of His Majesty's Coastguard's response for over 200 years. It enables individuals to serve their communities alongside their primary employment, maintaining choice and flexibility. I remain grateful to all members of the Coastguard Rescue Service for their unwavering commitment to their communities and people in distress around the UK coastline.

Mr Carmichael: Through you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I thank Mr Speaker for allowing me the opportunity to ask this urgent question today, and I thank the Minister for his answer. As he knows, last week, we had more than 30 Members in Westminster Hall for a debate on these changes. I am pleased to hear that as a result of his intervention, the check-in meetings were postponed, and that the matters are now under full consideration. Is the Department considering the possibility of legislative change to deal with this problem? The House goes into recess at the end of next week, so can the Minister give the House an undertaking that those check-in meetings and this process of change will not be resumed during the recess, and without a statement first being made to this House?

Since last week's debate, I have been contacted by a number of full-time officers who have described to me a toxic management culture within the agency. I have been told of at least three whistleblowing complaints that were made to the Department in March. Despite the passage of time, the whistleblowers remain unclear about the progress of their complaints. Can the Minister give me some reassurance that those whistleblowing complaints will be properly and speedily investigated, and that a proper and independent investigation will now be initiated into the management culture within the Maritime and Coastguard Agency?

Finally, information obtained under a Freedom of Information Act release indicates that responses to the MCA's own survey show that almost 40% of CROs would either reduce the number of call-outs to which they respond or leave the service completely. That contradicts what Members of this House were told by the MCA. Can the Minister please explain why this information was not disclosed voluntarily by the agency? Will he now fully disclose the outcome of that survey?

Keir Mather: May I begin by thanking the right hon. Member not only for his championing of CROs, but for doing so in such a fair-minded, open and constructive way? I will respond substantively to some of the points he has made. On parliamentary scrutiny of prospective changes or working through options for the future of CROs, I make the commitment to him that Members of Parliament will be updated fully on any changes and on the next steps. During the Westminster Hall debate on this issue, he made the important point that MPs need to be allowed access to CROs to have meaningful conversations about what they think the future of the service should look like.

The right hon. Member asks whether survey data was used to inform the judgment that was made. I can confirm to him that survey data was one constituent part of a package of advice in regard to an operational recommendation by experts at the MCA about what the future model should look like. That was used alongside impact assessments and modelling. He raised this in his contribution to the Westminster Hall debate, but if he has further information about how CROs believe this change will impact them, and about the reality for his rural constituency and the island communities that he represents so fulsomely, I strongly encourage him to share that with me. I reiterate that I want Members of Parliament to be able to play a full role in representing CROs throughout this process.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): I declare my chairmanship of the all-party parliamentary group for volunteer rescue services. I inform the House that,

[Torcuil Crichton]

along with my hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume) who chairs the all-party parliamentary group for coastal communities, we are holding a joint evidence session for CROs next week, so that they can come and tell their stories to parliamentarians. When I spoke to my CROs in Stornoway and across the Western Isles, their message was one that I hope has been received by the Minister: pause the consultation, listen to CROs and hear about the vital role that they play as a fourth blue light service. The role is about not just coastal rescue, but delivering carers and emergency workers to the elderly in time of need. Can I also have an assurance that he will keep CROs fully informed about the process and come back before Parliament goes into recess to ensure that we are fully informed?

Keir Mather: I have already made a commitment to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) to keep the House fully informed about any next steps that are taken, but my hon. Friend raises a broader point about how CROs have been engaged throughout this process. There are some fundamental truths that I keep coming back to. One is that remuneration takes place because it allows CROs to carry out the work that they do. They do not do it for the money, but it allows them to carry out this vital public service. Another truth is that it is not always possible to reflect the scale of the contribution that CROs make. I was in Southampton the other day and spoke to around 15 CROs. They were talking about the system not recognising when they take the van for an MOT or douse down the equipment after somebody has been rescued from mud. Ultimately, it is about fairness and recognition, and that is what I want to do my level best to inject into this process.

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

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) on securing this urgent question, and Mr Speaker on granting it. There is deep concern across the whole country about the Government's decision, which particularly affects our coastal communities. That was demonstrated clearly by all Members in the Westminster Hall debate last week, during which the Minister said that he would reflect on what he had heard. He has repeated that today, but from the answers he has given so far, I suggest that he reflects a little harder and with more urgency.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight East (Joe Robertson) for his tireless work in highlighting these issues. The problem is not speculative; the data revealed by *The Times* from the MCA survey is clear: this change will decimate the coastguard. The survey showed that across all regions, between 25% and 58% of those who responded said a volunteer model would lead them to quit or reduce their hours, including 56% in the south-east and southern England regions, which cover the busiest stretches of coastline in the UK. A decrease in the number of coastguard officers of this scale would put people's lives at risk. It is that simple.

Despite knowing that this decision was coming for months, there appears to have been a complete failure by the Department to appreciate and anticipate its impact. Why is that? Why was the impression given that even though it was a tough decision, the coastguard would be able to carry on as normal and there was sufficient support for the changes? Can the Minister explain who within the Department and the MCA knew about the revelations in *The Times* this week? Why was the MCA allowed to share information with Members in what can only be described as a questionable manner? The data is the data; it is not part of some sort of package.

The first responsibility of Government is to protect the public, but in this matter I fear that they have failed. As we look ahead and approach the height of summer, protecting our waterways is critical, so will the Minister answer a simple question: what will he do urgently and immediately to solve the problem?

Keir Mather: On what I am doing personally to solve the problem, the reason that those consultation sessions are not going ahead this week is that I am honouring the commitment I made to the House last week in the Westminster Hall debate in responding to the number of concerns expressed by Members of Parliament about the operational implications of the decision that was taken. The right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) raised serious concerns and questions were asked about parliamentary engagement with CROs. Allegations were made that MPs were not granted proper access to engage with CROs prior to the decision being taken. Those things are all of serious concern to me, and that is why this pause has gone ahead.

I question what the shadow Minister says about the data standing alone in the operational judgment that was made. I reiterate that a package of measures enables us to make a decision. It is based on impact assessments, operational evidence and the surveys that he references. The surveys only form a constituent part of that process. The salient point remains that it is right to reflect on the concerns that have been raised across this House and to consider long-term options that will ensure that CROs feel valued and that operational capacity is retained in every part of the United Kingdom, including our rural areas. That is what I am committed to doing.

Alison Hume (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I declare my interest as co-chair of the APPG for coastal communities. I recently met coastguard rescue officers from Ravenscar who are seriously concerned about the future of the service. These CROs bring decades-long experience and routinely respond to complex call-outs in my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby, including, sadly, those involving suicide. As my hon. Friend the Member for Na h-Eileanan an Iar (Torcuil Crichton) has mentioned, we are holding an evidence session next week in Parliament. May I invite the Minister to attend and hear at first hand from CROs about their fears for the future?

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for her doggedly determined support for her CROs. She is absolutely right to do what she is doing. I would be pleased to engage with the evidence sessions that are taking place next week, and I look forward to seeing the findings from them. She is right to point to the fact that CROs have decades of experience. I spoke to a CRO in Southampton just the other day who had served, including through the MCA, for the best part of 50 years. We

cannot afford for that experience to slip through the cracks. She also mentions that CROs often have to respond to the most tragic of circumstances, when unfortunately it has not been possible to save people. Remuneration does not obscure that fact or make it better, but it is a way of recognising the enormous contribution that CROs make. That point about fairness and due regard for the contribution that CROs make has to run through the centre of what comes next.

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

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I sincerely thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for asking the urgent question. Highly skilled, experienced coastguard volunteers are being badly let down by the Government, and I cannot imagine other rescue service personnel being treated in the same way. No one could argue that £11 an hour was enriching these volunteers; it was merely enabling them to do their vital work. As one coastguard volunteer from my constituency put it,

"I make significant personal and financial sacrifices to be available for emergency callouts—and I didn't join the service to get paid."

Sadly, we did not need to get to this point.

Did the Minister even speak to any of the CROs to hear what impact the changes would have on them before this rushed decision was made? Will he commit himself to a full risk assessment of these damaging changes? Finally, will he confirm that the Government are considering viable alternatives, such as a statutory stipend system, passing legislation to exempt CROs from worker status, or even just embracing their worker status?

Keir Mather: The Liberal Democrat spokesperson was right to say that CROs do not do it for the money, but it is the money that makes what they do possible. He also said that £11 an hour does not constitute remuneration in the way that it might, given that we would all hope that CROs can be respected. What it does do is go some small way towards compensating for the Christmas dinners and birthdays missed, the call-outs in the middle of the night, and the disruption to family life. That is a part of the CRO experience that I think needs to flow into our decision making and that was certainly reflected to me when I spoke to the 15 CROs in Southampton the other day and learned about their lived experience of processing these changes.

The hon. Gentleman asked me about risk, about mitigating risk, and about operational certainty. I can confirm to him that operational impacts were carefully considered in the advice that was put to me, and that that modelling has been done and has informed this part of a package of data, alongside the survey information. That informs the experts in the MCA, who are there to advise on what the operational impacts would be, of the reality of the situation.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his continued engagement with me and with other Members, but given the unique nature of the role of coastguard rescue officers and their extraordinary commitment to responding at all hours in areas including my own constituency, will he ensure that the Department undertakes a comprehensive assessment of all viable options so that the Government can reach a fully informed decision that is right for both CROs and the communities, such as mine, that they serve with such dedication?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend has given me an opportunity to reiterate that CROs, their lived experience and their views on these changes must be at the heart of what happens next, which is why the meetings that were scheduled to take place this week are not taking place this week. I want to take the time to reflect on what hon. Members have told me, and also what CROs have had the opportunity to tell me about how these changes will affect them. Nowhere is that more important than in rural communities like the one that my hon. Friend represents. Let me build on that point. As the local Member of Parliament, she should be able to engage with her CROs on this matter where it is most convenient to do so—perhaps at the station itself—so that she can represent them. It is also important for trade union representation to be factored into ongoing engagement with CROs, so that we can make sure we get the details right.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): The boss of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency told MPs in person that 93% of CROs surveyed were happy with moving to an unpaid volunteer model. That was false: the survey data shows that in many areas across the UK, nearly half would reduce their hours or quit. I am amazed that the Minister has any confidence in the boss of the MCA. Will he now confirm that the decision will not take effect in September and that he will consult properly himself, and will he say if he does have confidence in the boss of the MCA?

Keir Mather: We need to ensure that the CROs who are affected by these changes have an opportunity to carry on raising their concerns, but also to raise other instances. The hon. Gentleman has argued forcefully that the worker model is an appropriate way in which to continue, and that could be true in a great number of cases, but it is not true in every case. Indeed, I spoke to a CRO in Southampton for whom it is not the case.

We need to tease out the detail of all these matters. We need to listen carefully to CROs, and we need to create the space to allow that to happen. I am not going to say specifically what options I may or may not take in the coming days, but by pausing the sessions that were meant to happen this week I am creating the space that will make it possible to weigh up those options dispassionately and ensure that we can get them right, so that CROs can continue to share their views and we can make decisions that reflect the incredible contribution they make.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Bromborough) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests and my membership of the GMB trade union.

I am sorry to say that it beggars belief that the response of a Labour Government to a court judgment confirming workers' rights should be to run in the opposite direction, in some perverse form of fire and rehire. I hope the Minister will make it clear that that is not what we stand for, and that he will do his utmost to address the situation. However, there is a wider point,

[Justin Madders]

isn't there? Too often we see ambiguities in employment status dealt with by the courts on an ad hoc basis. Is that not a reason for us to get on with our manifesto commitment to move to a single status of worker?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend has a great deal of experience in the House of making sure that workers and their rights are protected, but his characterisation of the situation at the start of his question was one that I could not reject more strongly. Changes in the coastguard rescue service operating model are the result of a legal judgment which meant that the current model could not legally continue. What we are attempting to do is maintain a system whereby CROs feel valued in their work and feel motivated to turn up and carry out their shifts, and ensure that the fairness that is inherent to that is respected and implemented. That is exactly why I have postponed those meetings this week, and created the space in which to hear from CROs directly about their concerns and to get the detail of this right.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD):The MCA has told MPs that it has data to back its claim that CROs would rather be volunteers than employees. Can the Minister confirm that those findings can be shared? This has a massive bearing on the MCA's decision, and may greatly undermine the essential lifeline that CROs provide to coastal communities like mine in North Devon.

Keir Mather: I understand that for the hon. Gentleman it is not an option to have a coastguard service that works effectively; it is an absolute necessity to protect people in his coastal community. What I can say to him is that we will continue to engage with CROs. When one of his colleagues in the Westminster Hall debate asked me what information could be shared, I made a commitment that I would go back to my officials and ask that question, and that is something that I am currently working through. However, what I have derived from this process is the need to ensure—this has been my enduring objective throughout the process—that CROs feel heard and are able to share their concerns, including through their MPs, and the hon. Gentleman has rightly allowed that to happen.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I, too, refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests in respect of the GMB, and also declare that I am a supporter of the Royal National Lifeboat Institution.

I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for asking the urgent question, and pay tribute to the lifesaving work done by our local coastguard officers, as well as the brilliant volunteer RNLI officers and those in independent lifeboats, like the one at Pett in my constituency. I also thank the Minister for stepping in and pausing this process. I agree with him that it is vital for us to review the process fully and reflect on the MCA's handling of the issue—which, in the experience of my local coastguard officers, has been pretty shocking—and to pause and take enough time to get this right for our coastal communities. Given the increase in extreme weather events owing to climate change—we are experiencing a heat wave now, we know that there will be more storms, and there might even be more sharks coming to our waters—the work of the coastguard officers is more important than ever before.

Keir Mather: I thank my hon. Friend for raising those points, and for enabling me to reflect on a question that has been raised by a number of Members: the question of about how engagement is to take place from now on. Let me make it absolutely clear that my expectation is for all engagement with CROs, whether through the MCA or meetings with Members of Parliament, to be conducted as openly and transparently as possible. I want CROs to feel able to share their views openly in all their complexity—and I found some of the allegations made last week by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland about CROs being made to feel uncomfortable about sharing their views deeply concerning.

Let me reiterate that I will be making it clear to the MCA's leadership that that is how I want them to approach this engagement. It includes ensuring that MPs and trade unions play their full role, and I hope that my hon. Friend can do so.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): This House has the capacity to criticise, but it also has the capacity to be fair. The Minister probably finds himself between a rock and a cliff face in a situation that he did not make himself. That does not absolve the MCA from the criticism that has rightly been levelled at it earlier today.

Mine is one of those peculiar constituencies that have both a north coast and a south coast. Those two coastlines are served by dedicated volunteers who go out in all weathers to save lives, and I have heard from some of them. It is quite clear that unless this situation is resolved swiftly, those people will be lost—and if they are lost, they will not come back. Obviously I cannot speak for others on these Benches, but I will back whatever measure the Minister seeks to take in order to ensure that there is a timely resolution to this issue, so that we do not lose good people.

Keir Mather: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his remarks. I share his view that we cannot afford to lose the level of experience that we have within the MCA and the CRO community. I, too, heard the scale of concern that he so ably references and has experienced among his own coastguard volunteers. It is critical to recognise all the work that CROs undertake that lies outside the call-outs they receive. They do an enormous amount of work, which is not fully recognised and needs to be. On treating them with due respect and esteem, it is essential that we figure out a way forward that allows us to do so. The right hon. Gentleman has picked up the necessity to do that, and it is certainly my intention that that will inform whatever comes next in this process.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): I am very grateful to hear that the Minister has engaged with coastguard rescue officers in Southampton, which is typical of his diligent manner and his approach to difficult issues like this. I invite him to interact with my constituents who are part of the Plymouth coastguard rescue team, who tell me harrowing stories of supporting the ambulance service and the police—sadly, too often

with suicide-related issues. It is an unbelievable service and, yes, CROs deserve remuneration, but they also deserve a lot more recognition. Will the Minister agree to speak to those constituents of mine?

Keir Mather: I would be glad to speak to my hon. Friend's constituents, and he raises an incredibly important point: very often, CROs are not only discharging the responsibilities that we would expect of coastguard rescue officers; they are increasingly filling in the gaps for other emergency blue light services that, for whatever reason, are not able to get to people in time, or are thinly stretched and require CROs to step up. That requires them to go beyond the operational requirements that we would expect of them. This process is not just about recognising the incredible service that they contribute within the envelope of what is expected of them; they go beyond that every single day. My hon. Friend explains the issue well, and I would be happy to engage with his constituents.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): In my discussions with coastguards in Torbay, they have shared the full spectrum of their activities. One of the most disturbing and harrowing is the recovery of dead bodies—not only where humans or pets may have gone over the edge of a cliff, but where people have died from drowning. That may be an accident or a suicide, and it will leave emotional scars on the officers. Does the Minister agree that choosing not to financially compensate people who undertake work that many of us would find really difficult is nothing short of an insult?

Keir Mather: The hon. Gentleman speaks powerfully about the contributions that CROs make in the most tragic and emotionally traumatic circumstances. We need to do a number of things, including building a system that allows us to retain operational capacity so that we can keep people safe in our water, and granting CROs, and the MCA more broadly, the resilience to be able to carry out their meaningful work. We also need to treat CROs with the fairness, dignity and respect that they require. He is right to say that remuneration allowed us to do that. We are now dealing with the consequences of the Court of Appeal judgment to process how we move forward, to make sure that fairness and due respect continue into the future. I hope that he can continue to hold me to account as we do so.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for his engagement on this issue. Coastguard rescue officers are an essential part of our emergency response and are much supported by people in Ayrshire, and I put on the record my thanks for their dedicated service. My hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Irene Campbell) and I are very worried that coastguard services in north Ayrshire are facing a crisis if they are not able to claim compensation. I am pleased that the Minister has postponed further meetings and is working with unions, but will he do all he can to resolve this issue, so that our coastguard rescue officers can continue to perform their essential service?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully about rural and island communities in Scotland, and about the impact that coastguard services can have. From speaking to CROs in Southampton, I am cognisant of the principle of demotivation, and I am deeply concerned about its implications. A CRO said to me that this is ultimately about fairness—the money is not anything to brag about, but it is fair recognition for what they do. I do not want any CRO to feel devalued, or to feel less motivated to turn up to a call-out, because of decisions that have been made. That is why it is so important that, with regard to the engagement that is happening next week, we take a beat, take some time to reflect on what CROs are saying, and try to find an equitable solution. I am sure that my hon. Friend will be part of that process.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I help the Minister answer the question he was asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), who is on the Opposition Front Bench? The answer is that the law is an ass and the law should be changed, as the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) said. How can it be that the law is interfering in a perfectly happy relationship between coastguard volunteers and the MCA? The law is an ass, and that is quite clearly the view of the coastguards I met last week in West Mersea in my constituency.

Keir Mather: The hon. Gentleman is a far more seasoned Member of this House than I am, so I will leave it to him to opine on whether "the law is an ass" is parliamentary language or not. It is incumbent on the Department to deal with the legal reality that has been created as a consequence of the judgment. It is also right to say that the volunteer model that exists for CROs, with hourly remuneration, is rather unique with regard to how volunteering works, and it therefore requires a bespoke response. I can assure him that I am weighing up options for the long-term future of CROs to ensure that recognition can take place. There is a potential primary legislative route that I want to explore, which involves a carve-out, but it would take a lot of time to do; it is very legally complex, and it has other implications that go beyond the Maritime and Coastguard Agency. I very much respect and thank the hon. Gentleman for his urgency, but I have to take these decisions dispassionately and with full cognisance of their implications.

Dame Nia Griffith (Llanelli) (Lab): My dedicated volunteer coastguard rescue officers are absolutely vital to the safety of the public along the very long coastline all around my constituency. Can the Minister tell us what response he expects the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to give to the formal written request by the GMB union for collective bargaining purposes and voluntary recognition?

Keir Mather: I have already been very clear from the Dispatch Box that I do not just want, but expect, the Maritime and Coastguard Agency to allow trade unions to play their full role when it comes to working with CROs to articulate their vision of what they want the future of the service to be. I do not feel that it would be appropriate for me to comment on negotiations between a trade union and an employer in the way that my hon. Friend expects, but I am very clear that trade unions must be allowed to play their full role in this process.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for bringing forward this urgent question. My constituents in South Queensferry, where we have a lifeboat, have written to me in great numbers to say that they are concerned about the coastguard service. The service in South Queensferry is unlike many of the others that have been mentioned. It is not rural or in the highlands; it is largely suburban. It patrols an area under three very large bridges, and the CROs have to deal with a lot of tragic incidents. The coastguards there have told me that they are concerned about what might happen as a result of the changes. Will the Minister come to my constituency to hear what they and the community have to say as we hit peak tourist season?

Keir Mather: I am very happy to engage with the hon. Lady's constituents on this matter, and I thank her for so robustly defending them in this House. She is right to say that we have spoken a lot about the importance of CROs to rural, island and coastal communities. She brings an incredibly important perspective on the implications for cities, especially as we look towards the summer period and peak tourist season. She is right to point to the fact that this will build as an issue over the summer. When the changes were originally announced, they were due to be implemented in September, but that is not to say that I am not cognisant of the fact that there could be implications if people feel demotivated and unwilling to attend a call-out before then. It is really important that we take the time to re-engage with CROs, such as those in her constituency, and to talk about the long-term options.

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): Fleetwood and Lytham have been officially recognised as the two busiest coastguard stations in the UK, and I place on the record my thanks for their amazing dedication to keeping our people safe. Will the Minister reassure the House that the GMB union and volunteer coastguards will be fully consulted at all stages, and that communities like mine in Blackpool North and Fleetwood are not going to be put at risk?

Keir Mather: The safety of the public and the operational capacity of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency are of the utmost importance to the Government. CROs feeling that they are respected and able to play their full part in this process will facilitate that, and that is what I am determined to achieve. My hon. Friend is right to push me on the question of trade union involvement, and my expectation is that trade unions should play their full role in representing their members.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Last week, I met Paul Greenwood of the Selsey coastguard, one of a team of CROs who cover my constituency. The Court ruled that coastguards can be workers when paid for duties; it did not order Ministers to scrap payments. Can the Minister tell me what lawful alternatives were considered, why the impact assessment has still not been published and whether he will publish the MCA survey? Will he pause September's change while considering an approach that will not risk gaps in emergency cover when people in coastal communities such as mine dial 999?

Keir Mather: I have been very clear from this Dispatch Box that I am tasking my officials with determining what information can be released in relation to the hon. Member's questions. It is critical that MPs are able to engage fully in this process and hold me to account as they do so. As I said at the start, ultimately we had to comply with the judgment passed down by the Court of Appeal. That mandated the need to change the current system, because if we had carried on implementing it, we would not have been compliant with the law. The question now is what comes next and what the long-term options are, and I am committed to exploring that with Members from across the House.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a GMB member.

I recently met coastguard rescue officers in my office, and they told me how they respond in all conditions and at all hours. They drop everything to save life, and providing that public service often leaves them out of pocket. Can I ask the Minister to consider all options, including carving out an exemption when it comes to HMRC? Can I take this opportunity to encourage all CROs to join the GMB union, so that it can care for their needs, particularly given the recent concerning allegations in a national newspaper about the MCA, which I believe is not being straight with the Government? Can I also ask the Minister to thank the coastguard rescue officers in Bournemouth East for all they are doing to save life?

Keir Mather: Coastguard rescue officers in Bournemouth East carry out an incredible service on behalf of their local community and their country in keeping the public safe, and we thank them deeply for their service.

I can confirm to my hon. Friend that we are looking at a range of options for what comes next. He must play his part in that process, alongside trade unions. I reiterate that I want CROs to feel they can fully and frankly contribute their views about the implications of this decision, especially now that there is more time, which allows them to properly consider the full range of how this may impact them, alongside primary employment and other considerations. I would encourage him to share that with me, and let us all collaborate in this process to make sure that the voices of CROs are heard.

Graham Leadbitter (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituency has coastguard rescue services operating in Nairn, Burghead and at Gordonstoun school. One constituent who works for a local team told me:

"After September, the cost would fall entirely on myself or my small business employer—this is not right",

and that the

"changes will force me to no longer be available for call outs during working hours".

They also said that they

"don't do this role for financial gain, but the small amount of remuneration enables those of us who are employed to respond to emergency call outs without suffering a financial loss during a cost of living crisis."

Will the Minister give an assurance on two points: that the changes will not be made until we are collectively

satisfied that these volunteers have been treated fairly, and that a life-or-death emergency service will not be diminished as a consequence of the changes?

Keir Mather: The situation that the hon. Gentleman describes of a CRO in his constituency is exactly what I want to avoid. He is right to point out that, like a number of the CROs I spoke to the other day, some are small business owners, and we appreciate how hard they need to work, often with small margins, to keep their businesses running. That takes us back to the point that the level of remuneration is not something to brag about, but it does allow CROs to do their job, and it is incredibly important that we are cognisant of that.

I am very keen to facilitate all of us having an opportunity to play our role in engaging with what comes next. It goes back to the point I made to the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) about ensuring that MPs are kept up to date on all of the latest steps in this process and that they can play their full role in holding me to account, so that we get this right for CROs.

Alan Mak (Havant) (Con): Hayling Island coastguard rescue team provide a vital service in my south-coast constituency. They fear that the MCA's proposal will have a massively detrimental effect on local recruitment and retention, particularly from the island. How will the Minister ensure that CROs are properly consulted? Will he come to Hayling Island and meet the CROs who do this fantastic work?

Keir Mather: I thank the hon. Gentleman for being such a champion of the CROs in his constituency, and I am very happy to engage with them if he would be willing to facilitate that.

Making sure that CROs can share their views fully and frankly is incredibly important to me. I am attempting to facilitate that by making it very clear that my expectation is that the MCA leadership should give CROs the space to engage fully with me, their local Members of Parliament, their trade unions and their local leadership, so we can get a clear picture of their views about how these changes may impact on their operational ability and we can all work together to find an equitable solution to this challenge.

Caroline Voaden (South Devon) (LD): I have four coastguard stations in South Devon—Kingsbridge, Dartmouth, Brixham and Bigbury—and hundreds of volunteers, many of whom have written to me with their concerns about these changes. The Kingsbridge team have been out 34 times this year. Last Friday night, they were called out at 1 am and spent all night rescuing three people from a vessel that had got stuck in the mud. These people wake up in the middle of the night to go out to rescue strangers they have never met.

The Minister says he has considered several options, but have the Government done a full risk assessment of the resilience—the long-term resilience—of the service if these changes go ahead? If so, will they publish it? Has he considered changing the law so that the call-out charge is classified differently with HMRC? CROs could then continue as volunteers while continuing to be remunerated for their dedicated service.

Keir Mather: When I was in Southampton a few days ago, the intricacies, the difficulties and, ultimately, the horribleness of mud rescues were explained to me. The hon. Lady very powerfully makes the point that it is difficult for people who are not active CROs to understand the level of commitment required to carry out this dangerous work in the service of people they have never met.

On changing the law and legislative carve-outs, I have been quite clear that, while there are options to facilitate this, they are not a quick fix. Such options will not give CROs certainty in the moment, but they have been considered. On operational risk, I can confirm to the hon. Member and reassure her that impact modelling based on data was carried out by the MCA to inform the recommendation. Robust contingency plans do exist across the search-and-rescue capability of the coastguard and other services to enable them to respond to people in distress across the United Kingdom. We do not want to get into such a situation, however, and that is exactly why I have said what I have said to the House today.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Hunstanton coastguard rescue officers I have met responded to 150 emergency shouts last year, and the small payment helped them to perform this role for locals and visitors alike. However, with 50% of officers in East Anglia saying they would quit or reduce their availability, is the Minister really prepared to take responsibility for the risk to public safety, or will he now simply stop these changes from coming into effect in September while we work on a long-term solution?

Keir Mather: We need to work through this process strategically and methodically to ensure we are taking the right decision based on data and the lived experience of CROs. I have paused the engagement this week to allow us to more clearly get a better read of this situation, and that will inform my approach.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion Preseli) (PC): First, I thank the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) for securing this important urgent question. I have spoken to coastguard rescue officers from Ceredigion Preseli in recent weeks, and they all share common concerns. The first is that as many as half of their colleagues in the coastguard service will reconsider their position should this new proposed model come into effect. Secondly, and just as importantly, there is the impact on partner emergency services. Given the MCA leadership's statements about the operational impact of these changes, could the Minister ensure that the assessments and the modelling are made public, so that we can properly scrutinise them and have confidence that we understand the consequences of this decision before it comes into effect?

Keir Mather: The hon. Gentleman points to the important fact that the MCA CROs conduct their work alongside other emergency services and full-time employees of the MCA, and we need to take all those operational impacts into account. In response to another question, I said that I have instructed officials to determine what can be shared in relation to this process, and I will have more to say on that in due course.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I am sure the Minister will join me in paying tribute to the team at the Maritime Rescue Co-ordination Centre at Bridlington, who keep people safe all the way from Northumberland down to Suffolk across 250 miles of coastline 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

The proposed changes to make CROs unpaid is just one of the problems facing the MCA. National issues include recruitment and retention, understaffed teams in high-pressure environments working long hours, leading to stress and sickness, and pay that is not commensurate with other emergency services. Will the Minister ensure that the agency is appropriately resourced, but also that it is putting that resource into the right place to ensure our frontline teams have the tools they need?

Keir Mather: The hon. Gentleman will know that my constituents and I are no strangers to Bridlington—a wonderful place to visit—and the CROs who work there to protect us must be given the tools they need to carry out their vital work. The broader review of the MCA will look at exactly the questions the hon. Gentleman raises. I will ensure he plays his part in that process, so that we come to the right answers.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): As the Minister knows, my west Cornwall and Isles of Scilly constituency has almost 150 miles of coastline. In an earlier answer, he said that the model has to change, but it does not need to be trashed. He referred to the fact that the remuneration arrangements for CROs are bespoke, but so are the arrangements provided to special constables and retained firefighters. Surely the Minister and his colleagues can find a model that meets the legal obligations and remains a bespoke remuneration system for CROs?

Keir Mather: The hon. Gentleman is right to point to the fact that there are a number of operative models for volunteers. I can assure him that I am looking at the long-term options to ensure that the CRO volunteering model is respected. We had an exchange in Westminster Hall about how the retained fire service model creates implications, but I understand that he is just pushing me to have a broad lens on what the solutions might be and I thank him for doing so.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): On 2 January, Grace and Sarah Keeling and Mark Ratcliffe tragically lost their lives in the sea at Withernsea. Through that day and late into the night, coastguard rescue officers fought in the most terrible conditions to save lives. They did so out of duty, not for remuneration.

When thousands and thousands of people go to the coast this summer and onwards, how can the Minister ensure that they can continue to rely on courageous coastguard rescue officers in future, as they have been able to in the past? I appreciate what he has said today, but will he show even greater urgency in recognising the need to make this change? September is just weeks away and the people we rely on to do this heroic work deserve quick answers.

Keir Mather: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising the tragic case of Grace, Sarah and Mark. My condolences to their families. He is right to say that this is not a theoretical question. We have an urgent need to address this issue now to ensure that CROs can do what we need them to do, which is carry out this phenomenal public service, and to retain safety and operational capacity across the country. He encourages me to go further and faster, and I have heard his call.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): The CROs I have spoken to in Selsey in my constituency do their job out of a real sense of duty. Many of them have done it for many years. It is not actually at all about the remuneration, but the reality is that some of them will have to take on additional paid work if they lose the very small amount of money given to them by the Government to recognise their value. Will the Minister please come to Selsey, which is an isolated coastal community, to talk to my CROs so that he can see not only the brilliant work they are doing, but the value that they bring to the community?

Keir Mather: I have no doubt about the contribution that CROs in Selsey make, and I would be happy to engage with the hon. Lady's constituents on this issue. She raises the particular issue that for rural communities the impacts might be felt especially keenly. That is why it is critical, as we continue to engage with CROs—I will continue to do so across the country—that we do so with the geographic lens she describes to make sure we can pick up all the operational complexities about what future options could mean.

David Reed (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): In Exmouth and Exeter East, the local coastguard rescue team covers the Exe estuary, mudflats, tidal waters and busy open coastline. It is called on when local people or visitors are cut off by the tide, trapped in mud, in difficulty in the water, or at risk of self-harm. The Minister says that a move to an expenses-only model is needed following the Court of Appeal judgment, but the House has been told that an impact assessment has already combined incident demand, survey data, demographics, employment information and financial analysis. Will he therefore publish that assessment as soon as possible, including any modelling for Devon and high-demand coastal areas such as Exmouth? Most importantly, can he guarantee that the charge will not proceed unless he is satisfied that he will not reduce coastguard rescue officer availability or weaken emergency resilience in communities such as mine?

Keir Mather: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his robust defence of CROs in his constituency and their incredible contribution to his local area. I have already confirmed to the House that I have instructed officials to determine what can be shared to make sure that he is able to carry out his role of holding me to account and representing CROs. In the meantime, I continue to the thank the CROs in his constituency, who he is such a powerful advocate for, for carrying out their essential work.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): This decision is clearly a kick in the teeth for brave people, like Chris from my constituency, who is worried that it will make the situation worse for whistleblowing rights. He challenged a bullying culture, was terminated and then denied his 20-year service medal. But this is not about money, is it? The CRO payments equate to only 1.5% of the agency's income. I understand the comments made by my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Andrew George) about on-call firefighters, but

has the Minister considered options such as the allowances paid to councillors, which do not confer any employment rights and which allow people to do the role alongside their full-time employment?

Keir Mather: The hon. Lady is right to identify the fact that for CROs, remuneration is not the reason they volunteer, but it allows them to do that volunteering work. She points to a number of options around future models. I can confirm to her that a range of options has been considered. I have paused the meetings that are happening this week to create the space to allow CROs' voices to be heard and for that conversation to continue.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): Since October last year, I have been taking part in the parliamentary knowledge scheme that relates specifically to frontline services, under the auspices of Mr Speaker. As part of the scheme, we visited the MCA and met CROs. I took part in a training exercise about rescues from muddy situations, so I know at first hand the fabulous work they do. But they are not the only voluntary search and rescue organisation out there. I know that many other volunteer organisations are very worried about the implications for them. What assessment has the Minister made of the impact on other maritime search and rescue organisations, such as the Royal National Lifeboat Institution and other independent lifeboat associations?

Keir Mather: The full impact on search and rescue capability and operational capacity has been considered through this process, but the hon. Lady is absolutely right to point to the fact that it is critical that we continue to interpret what CROs are telling us about what the impact will be, and that we rationalise that with how we project demand to flow over the summer and into September.

I missed something in the previous question. On the very serious issue of whistleblowing, may I ask the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) to please write to me about that specific instance? The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman), who I am currently answering, is right to raise these very important issues.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Minister for his answers this afternoon. I remind Members that large slogans are not appropriate and perhaps Members might do up their jacket so I cannot see any. If I had spotted the one he is wearing, I would not have called the right hon. Member for Beverley and Holderness (Graham Stuart).

Point of Order

2.18 pm

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 2 June, my hon. Friends the Members for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran), for Bicester and Woodstock (Calum Miller) and for Witney (Charlie Maynard) and I sent a letter to the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care concerning the decommissioning of important mental health services in Oxfordshire, including: the Infant-Parent Perinatal Service, the Child and Adolescent Harmful Behaviour Service, and the Family Assessment and Safeguarding Service. We invited the Secretary of State to exercise powers under the Health and Care Act 2022 to call in the decision. I am aware that there is a 20-day timeframe for ministerial responses to Members' correspondence. However, that has passed. Normally when this occurs, I tend not to chase it, but this is a really important time-sensitive case, so I seek your guidance on how we may receive a response from the Department.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. This is a matter for Government Ministers rather than the Chair, but Ministers are expected to provide timely responses to correspondence from Members. I have no doubt that those on the Front Bench will be able to pass his concerns on to the relevant Minister, and the hon. Member will have the opportunity to raise the issue with the Leader of the House at business questions tomorrow.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that His Majesty has signified his Royal Assent to the following Act and Measure:

National Security (State Threats) Act 2026

Clergy Conduct Measure 2026.

BILL PRESENTED

PUBLIC PROCUREMENT
(BRITISH GOODS AND SERVICES) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Sarah Champion presented a Bill to make provision about public procurement in respect of British goods and services in relation to social value and contract award notices; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 112).

Mental Capacity (Duty to Assess)

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

2.20 pm

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to require persons discharging functions on behalf of certain other persons to assess the mental capacity of those persons in specified circumstances; and for connected purposes.

At issue is the devastating misuse of the Mental Capacity Act 2005, which has resulted in hundreds of preventable deaths. King's College London found there were 160 of those deaths in 2023 alone.

The Bill is in honour of Christopher Laskaris, whose mum Fiona is here. Christopher was not unlike many autistic children; he was a sensitive and intelligent boy, who once asked his mum to stop on the way to school to rescue a lamb stuck in a fence. I first met Fiona when I was eight. I had stayed in my bedroom and ignored her, perhaps because I was angry that she was buying my home off my dad. My mum had died a few months after I was born, and I was a sensitive boy. Well, they moved in. Christopher grew up in my childhood bedroom, and he loved the house as much as I did.

As a young autistic man living alone in Leeds, Christopher was in danger. Despite Fiona raising credible doubts about his capacity on numerous occasions over eight years, she was never able to secure the mental capacity assessment that she needed to protect him. Horrifically, Christopher was exploited and murdered in his home by a man who had just been released from jail. Christopher was 24. Under this Bill, he would have been granted that mental capacity assessment, and he might still be with us.

I have been working with Fiona for over two years to close this loophole. We have worked on a cross-party basis, with the Government, and with ITV, which has mounted a national campaign to expose this injustice across the county. I am grateful for all of that and for the result: that the Government have committed to review and reform the Mental Capacity Act. This Bill offers an opportunity to realise that commitment.

The Mental Capacity Act states:

"A person must be assumed to have capacity unless it is established that he lacks capacity."

Too often, public officials have used that presumption to not take action, failing vulnerable people, because if a person's capacity is merely in doubt, but not yet established as lacking, then they are presumed to have capacity—and are too easily disregarded.

The Bill has been drafted by one of the most prominent mental capacity lawyers in the country, Alex Ruck Keene, honorary King's counsel. It has two key clauses: a duty to assess capacity where a person is reasonably understood to have any impairment or disturbance in the functioning of their mind or brain; and a duty to assess capacity where a person properly interested in a person's circumstances has raised a concern as to their capacity. Although those safeguards are in the existing code of practice, they are too often ignored. The Bill seeks to bring those existing safeguards into law in order to mandate compliance. It will enhance the presumption of capacity by ensuring that it is not used against people to their cost or to the cost of others.

Charlie Gooding's mum Annabel is here in the Gallery. Charlie had Prader-Willi syndrome, which, in his case, gave him a genetic compulsion to overeat. Annabel repeatedly begged the authorities for help. They repeatedly ignored her. She locked the food cupboards but she could not prevent Charlie from buying food or going to food banks. Ultimately, his weight reached 30 stone, and he ate himself to death. Charlie was 35. Under this Bill, authorities would have had to grant Annabel that assessment, and Charlie might still be with us.

Harley Watson's mum Jo is here too. Harley was 12 years old when he died, after paranoid schizophrenic Terence Glover drove a car into a crowd of schoolchildren. Glover had told the police beforehand repeatedly in 999 calls that he intended to run over and kill schoolchildren. The police knew about his paranoid schizophrenia diagnosis and his impaired judgment, yet they took no action. Under this Bill, the police would have had to refer Glover for a mental capacity assessment, which might have saved an innocent 12-year-old boy.

In 2014, a House of Lords Select Committee recognised the failures in the Mental Capacity Act. These past 12 years, Parliament has failed to act. The cost in lives lost is unimaginable. Among the hundreds of dead, Fiona lost her Christopher, Annabel lost her Charlie, and Jo lost her Harley. These three mums are here today not only in grief, but also with the highest of all hope: to save lives. I commend their courage and this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Chris Coghlan, Ed Davey, Dr Danny Chambers, Sir Jeremy Hunt, Andy Slaughter, Florence Eshalomi, John Grady, Wera Hobhouse, Liz Jarvis, Vikki Slade, Manuela Perteghella, and Ben Maguire present the Bill.

Chris Coghlan accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 29 January, and to be printed (Bill 114).

Backbench Business

Rearmament and Warfighting Readiness

2.29 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House recognises the danger that Russia's renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine poses to European and British security; further recognises the threat to the international order and the UK posed by China; also recognises the increasing uncertainty surrounding the reliability of the US as an ally within NATO; acknowledges the current shortfalls in the UK's ability to deploy a credible fighting force; further acknowledges that this lack of military capability is resulting in the coercion of Britain and its interests in the international sphere; and calls on the Government to begin a programme of rapid rearmament to strengthen the defence of the UK and its allies.

The key word of the motion on the Order Paper today is "rapid"—rapid rearmament, not eventual rearmament or rearmament with an asterisk. The reason it is the key word is that the clock is not ours to choose. Three weeks ago, before the defence investment plan came out, the Prime Minister said:

"it is our intelligence assessment, and the assessment of other countries in NATO, that there could be an attack by Russia on NATO as soon as 2030."

The deadline is not contested. Intelligence confirms it, NATO proclaims it—they are speaking of this in Ankara today—and our Government accept it. We must be ready by 2030.

That is why the defence investment plan is so maddening. I have read it from cover to cover—I am that kind of guy—and I cannot wrap my head around it. It fails the test of its own threat assessment. It does not go far enough, and what it does do, it does too slowly. Large parts of it are also unfunded. It is too little, too late, and there is not enough cash.

It is worth considering how this plan came into being. Lord Robertson, the lead author of the strategic defence review, wanted to have the DIP—that is, the money bit—as an annexe to the SDR. That is really good practice when making strategy: set out a vision, which is the SDR, and then set out the resources, which are the DIP. If a Government do not have the resources to deliver their vision, they need either to downgrade the vision somewhat or to increase their resources. The decoupling of the two documents by a year, with the vision coming a year ago in the SDR, and the money and resources just recently in the DIP, is the greatest failure of statecraft committed by this Labour Government in the two years they have been in office.

First, allow me to speak about the money in some detail. Quite well ventilated in the media is the £4.7 billion that quite blatantly must be found in the next Budget, in the autumn. Although the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has said that he intends to fund defence seriously, he has not specifically said that he will find those sums in that Budget. As the Government repeatedly tell us, defence of the realm is the most important duty of any Government. So why is £5 billion of that sacred duty in the in-tray of the next Chancellor—a person unknown at this point?

Secondly, I would like to talk about these efficiency savings—£10.7 billion of them. Speaking in this Chamber, the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), called this the oldest accounting trick in the book. If we dig just one layer below, we can see the detail: £2.4 billion of that £10.7 billion is what the Ministry of Defence calls "high maturity initiatives". I find that it is always worth really looking into what the MOD says, because the remaining £8.4 billion of that nearly £11 billion of efficiency savings is what the MOD calls "plans at lower maturity". Lower-maturity plans, Madam Deputy Speaker, is MOD-speak for "we have not worked out how to deliver those savings yet."

Thirdly, and most egregiously, is a theme that I will keep returning to: the fact that this is a DIP of two halves. The first period is from now until 2030, which is covered by the current spending review, subject to the caveats that I laid out earlier. However, the second part, which covers 2030 to 2035, has to be confirmed in the forthcoming spending review. If the future Chancellor or Prime Minister do not agree to those sums going into the next spending review—due, one assumes, in the spring of 2027—the DIP will then not exist. It will just be an unfunded piece of paper.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an excellent speech. The first four years—the near-term investment period—covers the period until the next election. The second half—the longer-term investment period—covers the next five years, all the way up to 2035. However, the DIP is a 10-year plan, so it should in fact go beyond 2035, and beyond two elections' time, to 2036, which it clearly does not, because the number "2036" does not appear once in the defence investment plan.

Mike Martin: This actually speaks to the delay. Had the DIP come out when it was meant to, in 2025, it would have been a 10-year plan, because it would have gone from 2025 to 2035. However, the Government were unable to get their ducks in a row and the DIP was delayed by a year. If we had waited for them to rejig the plan to go up until 2036, I think we might have waited until 2040 for the plan.

This is a DIP of two halves, and the really worrying bit is that most of the investment is in the second half, which is unfunded. Let me give the House some examples. In the air domain there is £27.8 billion before 2030, and £70 billion after—unfunded. In the maritime domain there is £18 billion before 2030, and £32 billion after—unfunded. In the land domain there is £19.2 billion before, and £36 billion after—unfunded. For weapons and munitions there is £11.1 billion before, and £20 billion after—unfunded. It beggars belief. Why bother publishing a plan when, by my calculations, almost two thirds of the investments that the Government seek to make are in the second half, which is unfunded?

One of the reasons that we have pulled this plan together is to give certainty to industry, so that they know how to invest.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): My concern is that the only British company offering to build an advanced jet trainer replacement for the Red Arrows Hawk jet, AERALIS, has gone into receivership because of the delay in the DIP, which means it will not assemble those lovely British jets in my constituency.

Mike Martin: I think we have all heard stories of firms such as the one in the hon. Gentleman's constituency, whether in our own constituencies or in the conversations we have as Members of Parliament who are interested in defence. It has been catastrophic for British industry, and rushing out an unfunded DIP, which is effectively what this is, has not helped. It has meant that some small capital investments, one third of the total pot for the next four years, can be made by firms. However, for anything that stretches beyond 2030, nobody can be sure enough to make that investment.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making a very accurate critique. Is he aware that the Treasury Committee, led by the redoubtable hon. Member for Hackney South and Shoreditch (Dame Meg Hillier), was looking at defence funding at lunch time today, and that in that hearing, barely an hour ago, the Chief Secretary to the Treasury admitted under persistent questioning that the Government have done no work on how to get to 3.5% of GDP on defence?

Mike Martin: All I will say is that the defence of the realm is the most serious issue for any Government.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is very kind to give way again, as he is right in the middle of unpicking the DIP thread by thread. Does he agree that we need to look at the manifest, substantial disappointment that we and everyone in uniform see in the DIP now that it has been announced, and try to reconcile that with how delayed it was? What does he think the Government were doing, given that there are so many black holes and missing spaces in the DIP? What does he think they were debating over the 11 months that the DIP was delayed?

Mike Martin: The original sin is divorcing the strategic defence review from the DIP—divorcing the vision from the resources. For the past year, the Department has been arguing first with itself about whether it can downgrade some of the things in the strategic defence review—there are a couple of instances where that has happened, which I will come on to—and then with the Treasury to get more money to fill the gap. Effectively, it wrote a vision that was far too grand for the money that was ever going to be available.

Let me turn from the money to the metal and have a look at some of the capabilities. I could give a very long speech on military analysis about which capabilities should be in or out, but I will not do that. I think it would test—*[Interruption.]* I know that right hon. and hon. Members would like me to do that; perhaps I will set up a Substack or something.

Let us look at the Royal Navy—the senior service. At the turn of this century—as someone born in 1982, I still feel weird saying that—the UK had 20 frigates. By the end of this year, we will have five. Pre-DIP, they were scheduled to go out of service in 2035. In a little-noticed line in the DIP, we are bringing forward that date. All five frigates, which have well exceeded their service date, are going in 2033. Their replacements, the Type 26s and the Type 23s, will come into service—you guessed it—in 2030-35. We therefore have old ships retiring on a fixed schedule and new ships coming in on an unfunded one. My back-of-a-fag-packet maths—probably the same quality of analysis goes into the MOD under this Government—shows that we will have three frigates in 2030, the year, according to our intelligence assessments, of maximum Russian threat against NATO. We need a frigate to protect our cables, another to get the carrier group out to sea, and another for our deterrent. According to the rule of three—for every three ships, we have only one at sea at any one time—that is nine frigates. If anything kicks off in the middle east or anywhere else, there is no contingency plan. We can see straightaway that there is a huge gap—the frigate gap, as many call it—and the DIP has made it much worse.

The picture with our current Type 45 destroyers and their replacements is not much better. Our Type 45s primarily provide air defence. One was parked in the Thames estuary to defend the Olympics in 2012 because we do not have any other air defence. They go out of service from 2035. Their replacements are supposed to be crewed common combat vessels such as mother ships. Various autonomous ships, which provide missiles, sensors or underwater and above-water support, are meant to be arranged around them. A whole fleet of different ships is therefore meant to replace the destroyers and some other elements of our Navy. That is the hybrid Navy that was much touted last week in the media coverage of the DIP.

I am totally in favour of moving towards autonomy as fast as we can. However, it is worth saying that the maritime domain, particularly the High North, is the most difficult in which to do autonomy. I have spent a lot of time at sea and I can tell hon. Members that everything breaks all the time. There is a reason why the maritime domain is the last to be autonomised. We started with air because that is predictable and quite easy to do, although the aircraft still do not fly in bad weather. We then moved to the ground stuff for picking up casualties and dropping off ammunition. However, the new ships—the common combat vessels—are simply PowerPoints at the moment, yet we expect to move from PowerPoints to power projection on the high seas in nine years with not just one class, but several classes of ships that have to work together. That seems quite risky to me. If we take what is happening to the frigate fleet and what is happening to the destroyer fleet together, it is fair to say that the DIP spells the end of the Royal Navy as we know it.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab) *rose—*

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab) *rose—*

Mike Martin: I will give way to the former Minister.

Al Carns: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, from sail to ironclad, ironclad to dreadnought, dreadnought to highly capable frigate, we need to make the next generational leap? If we find ourselves caught in programmes that deliver last year's capability, we will remove any wriggle room or space to make that jump into autonomy and automation.

Mike Martin: I agree with everything that the hon. Member has just said, and I thank him. However, all I am highlighting is that, on past performance, going from PowerPoints to ships at sea in nine years with several classes of ship seems extremely risky. Moreover, the DIP sets aside only £1.3 billion in the first funded period to set up those ships. The remainder of the

investment falls beyond 2030. I want to move to autonomy because it is the right thing to do, but that seems like an incredibly risky bet.

Calum Miller (Bicester and Woodstock) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Martin: I will make some progress because I am having eyes made at me by Madam Deputy Speaker.

The DIP commits £8.6 billion to the global combat air programme, which is the sixth-generation fighter jet that we are building with Italy and Japan. Realistically, we will get the jets in service sometime after 2040. They are manned fighter jets. I ask hon. Members to cast their minds forward to beyond Putin's death—he will probably be buried by that point—and ask themselves whether, in 2040, humans will be flying fighter jets. I think the answer is no. The Minister is a former pilot, so he will always argue for humans in fighter jets, but I will present my argument.

When we dig into GCAP, we find that it is a crewed rather than an uncrewed system because that is what our Japanese partners wanted.

Amanda Martin: Will the hon. Member give way?

Mike Martin: I am afraid that I will not because I want to make progress.

We are privileging a good diplomatic relationship, which would weather the storm of our pulling out of GCAP, over military capability. We must consider whether we want manned fighter jets in 2040 or a Royal Navy right now. Do we want frigates and destroyers in the next four years? Do we want to transition effectively, in a funded way, to a hybrid Navy, or manned fighter jets in 2040?

The same story is repeated wherever we look: deep precision strike missiles are due in the early 2030s; nuclear-enabled F-35As are due in the early 2030s; putting 76,000 soldiers in the British Army to reverse the Tory cuts is an investment through to 2035. *[Interruption.]* I know that hon. Members were waiting for that—I had to get one little elbow in the ribs. Time and again, the capability that the threat demands by 2030 is scheduled for after 2030, funded by a spending review that has not happened and has been signed off by no one.

That leaves one final question: does the current Prime Minister believe his own threat assessment? If he does and he is not funding it—not putting his money, or our money, where his mouth is—that is highly negligent. Perhaps he does not believe his own intelligence chiefs' assessments and those of his partners. In that case, he should tell us. I fear that future generations will look back at this Labour Government's approach to defence with their heads in their hands.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I impose an immediate six-minute time limit.

2.49 pm

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): Everyone in this debate will rightly speak about defence spending, procurement and ammunition, and those things all absolutely matter, but I want to ask a broader question: what does warfighting readiness actually mean in 2026? For too long, we have measured military strength by the number of ships afloat, aircraft we fly or tanks we field, and those capabilities will remain essential, but recent conflicts have reminded us that wars are rarely won by militaries alone; wars are won by nations. They are won by industries that can out-produce an adversary, economies that can absorb shocks, and societies resilient enough to sustain conflict over time.

I have seen this at first hand in Ukraine. Time and again, I have met individuals whose courage is beyond question, but courage alone is not enough. Success depends on whether ammunition arrives when it is needed, whether new technology can be adapted in weeks rather than years, and whether industry can keep pace with the demands of the battlefield. The side that learns, adapts and regenerates fastest gains the advantage, and that should challenge how we think about readiness.

Warfighting readiness is no longer simply the responsibility of the Ministry of Defence. It is an industrial strategy, an energy strategy and a technological strategy. Ultimately, it is a national resilience strategy. If our energy networks are vulnerable, if our communications can be disrupted, if our supply chains depend on hostile states, if our British industry cannot rapidly increase production when conflict begins, our armed forces will inherit those weaknesses from day one of any crisis. That is why resilience must sit at the heart of our national security.

We often talk about stockpiles, and rightly so, but I think the more important question is not how many missiles are sitting in a warehouse today; it is how many missiles British industry can produce every month after six months of sustained conflict. Modern warfare consumes munitions at a pace that few of us can comprehend or imagine, but Ukraine is teaching us lessons: 7,000 to 10,000 drones flying a day; 12,000 artillery rounds fired a day; and 1 million drones, in some cases, produced over two months.

Derek Twigg (Widnes and Halewood) (Lab): I recently met a number of small and medium-sized enterprises and start-up companies that want to produce drones and autonomous systems and to integrate AI more, but they are concerned about the pace of change in the MOD. Does my hon. and gallant Friend believe that the MOD needs to start pacing up and getting on with the job of working with these companies to provide us with the sort of protection we need?

Al Carns: I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. Data is the new gunpowder. AI is absolutely critical in defence, and we should use all of our technological advantage to move faster and further than ever before. We should be bold and jump to the next generation of systems, and not wait for anyone else to lead—we should lead ourselves.

The lesson from my perspective is clear: stockpiles matter, but the ability to regenerate them matters even more. That is why I welcome the Government's commitment to rebuild munition stockpiles, expand domestic production capacity and invest in British defence industry. Those are investments not just in military capability, but in national resilience.

The same is true for technology. Ukraine has demonstrated that innovation cycles measured in months can outperform procurement cycles measured in decades. Drones, autonomous systems, software and artificial intelligence are changing warfare at an extraordinary speed, and it will only ever get faster. Readiness, therefore, means building a procurement system that can adapt

[Al Carns]

just as quickly, giving innovative British companies a route into defence and ensuring that our armed forces can evolve as rapidly as the threats they face. We have at present over 10,000 people in Defence Equipment and Support—that is, 10,000 people doing procurement. I am not saying that it is inefficient, but I am saying that bureaucracy sometimes gets in the way of speed.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that embedding that culture of innovation and iteration in the MOD is critical to ensuring that we can move as quickly as possible?

Al Carns: I completely agree with my hon. Friend. This is about cultural change as much as adopting technology. If we were to adopt even the very simplest AI models now in how we do procurement, and move on to the next generation, we would find that the system speeds up, efficiencies are made and the right kit gets into the right hands far quicker than it does now.

Ultimately, rearmament is not about preparing for war because we expect it; it is about ensuring that war never happens in the first place. The purpose of rearmament is deterrence, and deterrence rests on three foundations: capable armed forces, political resolve and the industrial capacity to sustain both. If any one of those is missing, deterrence becomes far less credible when faced with an autocratic nation with huge industrial resilience. As we discuss rearmament today, let us think beyond platforms, procurement and spending lines. The defining lesson of modern conflict is that warfighting readiness is not simply a military condition; it is a national condition.

Calum Miller: The hon. and gallant Gentleman is in a unique position to advise the House on his assessment of the DIP as published. Can he give us his view on whether the quantity of funds provided and the certainty of the period over which they will be provided are sufficient to achieve the kind of industrial step change that he is advocating in his excellent speech?

Al Carns: I have been clear, since several weeks ago, that I was not content with the funding for the DIP or the transformational nature of it. I have been really encouraged in the last couple of weeks by the speed at which it is moving. We need to move more, and I think the spending review in due course will round that off. My perspective is that we must not underestimate the level of change that is required. This is systemic within the Department and within the single services, and it has to move a quantum leap forward—no pun intended—if we are going to deliver the change that is required.

If Britain wants armed forces that are capable of fighting and winning, we must build a country that can endure, adapt and sustain them. In modern conflict, as Ukraine has taught us, the line between the military and civilian worlds has all but disappeared. That is what true readiness looks like, and that is the challenge before us.

2.55 pm

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): It is an honour to succeed the hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) in this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) who opened the debate—a very timely debate it is, too. I particularly commend the point that the former Minister for the Armed Forces, the hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak, made about this being a whole-of-nation approach, because we are preparing for war. We might actually be at war in some senses, because Russia is knowingly saying that it is conducting a war against NATO, and we are certainly subject to a hybrid war against our national infrastructure—hacking our hospitals, closing down Jaguar Land Rover and harassing our shipping. This is a very low level of war, but we have certainly been under attack from the way that Russia rations gas to western Europe as a weapon. Turning energy into a weapon, turning food into a weapon—Russia is doing the lot, and the writing is on the wall.

The Government still have not woken up to the fact that the head of NATO, and even the Prime Minister at Munich, has said that we have to be ready to fight a war—a shooting, kinetic war—against Russia by 2030. There is no sign in the implementation of policy that the Government understand the urgency of that. There are plenty of people in Government who get the urgency of this, and I met some of them with Lord Robertson earlier this week to be briefed on national resilience, but there is a deep reluctance in the Government to recognise that to mobilise for war is not about the armed forces and a few branches of Government. Armies may fight battles, but nations fight wars. If the whole nation is not galvanised to do what is necessary, to be ready for what is going to happen, and to make the sacrifices and suffer the pain of diverting resources to less popular things than the popular things that Governments tend to spend their money on, we are not ready for war.

Derek Twigg: The hon. Member is making a good and strong point. Does he agree that, frankly, it boils down to the fact that the Government must be much blunter with the British people about the nature of the threat we face?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Yes, and I think the Government have plans for that, but they keep pulling back because it is a difficult thing to talk about. The spin doctors and spads will tell their political masters, "Oh no, don't talk about that—the polling says it is terrible." I am afraid that we have to confront the polling. We have to confront the population with the ugly truth: this country is at far greater risk than it has ever been since the height of the cold war.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): On the point about communicating with the public, there is a way to do it. I visited Norway recently, and it has communicated with its population incredibly well, to the extent that it has this concept of total defence and civil preparedness, where everybody in the entire nation recognises that they have a role to play. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we can learn a lot from some of our friends and allies?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: In this paper entitled "Understanding the UK's Transition to Warfighting Readiness" that I am just about to explain briefly to the House, we refer to Norway's concept. Norway's total war

concept is being embedded in its national life and embedded across Government policy through all branches of Government.

For example, we refer in the report to the need to galvanise our universities to be ready for war, so that research and development programmes are directed towards suitable and useful capability, creating sovereign national capability and protecting those research programmes from foreign infiltration. I love having foreign students in our universities—it is good for the economy and for our universities—but we cannot have Chinese nationals at the heart of chip manufacture and design, robotics or AI systems. We have to protect our national technology from being spied on by people sent to this country to go to our universities in order to collect that information, steal it and give it to our enemies.

The context of the document, which is almost old hat even though it is only a few months old, is the changing geopolitical situation, the withdrawal of America from European security, the collapse of the rules-based international order, the failure of democratic governance models to rise to the challenge, the unpreparedness of most western democracies to be ready to confront the hybrid warfare that we already face, and our lack of adaptability. I commend the point made by the former Armed Forces Minister: there is no point in ordering a whole lot of kit that will be out of date as soon as we get to the next war. If the next war starts in the Balkans, the Baltic states or Poland, it will be about drones. The Government are moving some way on that, but we are so slow. The Ukrainians were way ahead of us in helping to protect the Gulf states while we were still sending multimillion-pound aircraft that cost £25 million an hour to fly to shoot down a drone that cost £150,000. We must adapt our industry to produce cheap, numerous capability so that we have the scale to deal with that.

We need that whole-of-society mobilisation. We need much more adaptable governance.

Fred Thomas (Plymouth Moor View) (Lab): On that point, will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: We need resilient financial systems. We need sovereign defence capabilities and sovereign critical national infrastructure. I am glad that we have stopped handing over so much of our CNI to foreign owners, but an immediate, radical transformation is required.

This document is 19,000 words drafted for me and for my friend the hon. Member for Widnes and Halewood (Derek Twigg), who serves on the Defence Committee and is a renowned expert on defence in the House, by Chris Donnelly, who used to be a Soviet expert at NATO, worked in the Ministry of Defence and finished up teaching at Shrivenham. He is a wise defence guru. If hon. Members want to know how much really needs to be changed, they should just read through these 19,000 words of analysis and recommendations.

There is a huge task, but to carry it through we need to carry the people. The SDR promised a national conversation—where is that national conversation?

Fred Thomas: On that point, will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Bernard Jenkin: There is a national conversation about who will be the next Prime Minister or whether there will be a by-election in Clacton, but there is no such national conversation about the existential threats to our freedom and democracy.

It is democracy across the western world that is failing this challenge. The autocracies are winning at the moment. We are facing circumstances where Russia may well be struggling in the Ukraine war, but that makes it more unpredictable. What will Putin do as he feels that his political support is slipping away and Russia's vulnerability is increasing now that there are petrol queues in Moscow and explosions in Russian cities? There is a growing awareness—it has even been said in the last 24 hours by a serious propagandist for Mr Putin—that this is no longer a special military operation; it is a war.

The circumstances are changing as we speak, and I am afraid that a lack of urgency is being shown by the whole House, apart from, say, the Defence Committee and the Joint Committee on the National Security Strategy. This is how we get into wars—by being unprepared for them.

We need to change our whole concept of deterrence from the old concept that somehow just having a nuclear weapon keeps us safe. No, we must have a much more flexible ability to respond to changing circumstances. What will happen when the Russians move into a Russian-speaking town in one of the Balkan states? What will we do as our soldiers start being killed? Will we start letting off nuclear weapons or will we have analogous, appropriate, flexible military capability to be able to respond and escalate at pace? Our inability to escalate is the greatest danger at the moment.

3.4 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I thank the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) for securing the debate. I was proud to join him, the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) and Field Marshal Lord Richards of Herstmonceux in creating the all-party parliamentary group on rearmament. We are discussing a topic that we all agree on: the threat that faces the country and the necessity for us to rearm.

I had hoped that the tone of the debate would have been slightly less political. I feel like we have had a little bit of amnesia as to how we have got to where we are. I do not intend to focus on that too much, but I am sure that others will make the point about the decline in the size of the Army over the past 14 years, the decline in the size of the Air Force, and about the frigate fleet—we talk about the frigate gap—and what happened to frigate and destroyer construction.

We should remember that the threat has not just arrived. There was not a meaningful increase in defence spending after the annexation of Crimea, and there was not a meaningful increase after Putin violated Minsk I or Minsk II. Indeed, there was not a significant increase in defence spending after the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That context is really important.

Mr Francois: The hon. Member is right on the funding—I will mention that later—but one important thing that did happen after 2014 was under what was then called Operation Orbital. We began training Ukrainian soldiers

[Mr Francois]

on Salisbury plain, because they knew what was coming—and, I think, perhaps so did we. We will talk about the money in a minute, but the training of Ukrainian troops in Britain did start fairly shortly after 2014.

Tim Roca: I agree with the right hon. Member, but I am not sure whether his point is relevant to the one I was making about the broad context of defence procurement. There has been great cross-party consensus on what we are doing with Ukraine, and we should ensure that that continues.

I also want to comment on the defence nuclear enterprise. Under the DIP, we will be spending £45 billion over the forthcoming period on the incredibly important nuclear deterrent. It is right that we do that, but that amounts to 25% of the defence budget. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) is in his place. The other week, I was reading his arguments at the time of the coalition Government, urging them to press ahead with the renewal of Trident, which they did not do. That cost us many years and has cost us many billions of pounds that we could be spending today on conventional forces. It means that we have tired Trident submarines heading out to sea beyond when they should be doing so, and we have crews on extended patrols of 150, 200 or 250 days. That is the cost of the decisions made at that time.

I want to talk a little about ensuring that we do not fall into Russia's trap. Of course, there is a significant threat from Russia, which is both conventional and hybrid—

Sir Bernard Jenkin: Will the hon. Member give way?

Tim Roca: The hon. Gentleman did not give many interventions to Labour Members. If it is relevant, I will be happy to take it.

Sir Bernard Jenkin: I happen to agree with the hon. Member about the failure of the coalition Government to make progress with the deterrent, but there were many of us complaining about that at the time, including my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis). Indeed, as shadow Defence Secretary in the early 2000s, I was complaining about the cuts in defence spending that were then being made as we went to war in Iraq and as we went to war in Afghanistan. I very much welcome the hon. Member's bipartisan approach, but rather than pretending to be bipartisan, and making oblique references to what happened under previous Governments, he should be bipartisan, and then we would all get on much better.

Tim Roca: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his advice. If he gives me time, he may find that comes later in my speech.

We should not allow Russia to make us talk ourselves into a place of weakness. As the then Deputy Chief of the Defence Staff put it to the Defence Committee,

"If the British Army was asked to fight tonight, it would fight tonight."

Our readiness is not where we would want it to be, but that is not the same as saying that Britain is defenceless. I am not trying to be complacent; I am just making the point that we have excellent armed services and excellent people in uniform, and we should not talk as if those things do not exist. What we are saying is that we need more.

In Ukraine, we have watched a country that is considerably smaller than our own, with far fewer resources, resist Russian aggression with extraordinary determination. We have to remember that Russia's greatest weapon these days tends to be psychological. It wants us to believe that it cannot be beaten, that resistance is useless and that despite four years of attritional warfare and 1.4 million casualties, it somehow remains an unstoppable European military power that could overwhelm Britain and her allies, but it is not.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making an excellent, well thought-out speech. He talks about the weapons that Russia is using. Will he also reflect on how we need to be alive to its use of disinformation on social media and the internet as weapons? We need to be alive to that. I look across to the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), who I talk to regularly about the importance of the BBC World Service. Does my hon. Friend appreciate that that service is vital to the defence of this country as well?

Tim Roca: My hon. Friend makes the point well. Indeed, in a recent interview my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) talked about how the recent attacks on Iran had destroyed a huge propaganda apparatus, which had contributed to 3% of total nationalist propaganda for Scottish separation from the United Kingdom. It is an important point.

Following on from that, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak made the important point about strength being a foundation of deterrence. We are trying to deter war, not just by having capable armed forces but by having industrial capacity, well-stocked armouries, cutting-edge technology and a properly funded plan—because the stronger we are, the less likely conflict becomes. Every capability we field, every production line we expand and every drone we manufacture add to our deterrence, and that is incredibly important.

At the beginning of the debate we talked about the credibility of getting to where we need to be. To be straightforward, it is my belief that we need to reach 3% of GDP by 2030. That is the minimum needed for us to show that we are committed to our plans and to our NATO allies in having the capabilities that we need. In fairness to the Government, they have made significant progress and we will be at 2.7% in 2027-28, which is the highest defence spend in three decades. The defence budget will also be 27% higher in real terms than it was at the start of the Parliament. Those are significant commitments that need to be recognised, but unfortunately, I am worried that they do not meet the strategic moment that we are at.

The pace at which Russia might reconstitute, the lessons that are emerging from Ukraine over technology, the threats in the far east to our allies and our interests, and the demands placed upon us by NATO to meet certain targets mean that we have to move faster than the Government currently say. A spending review published in 2027 could, in theory, postpone most of the increase until the final year of the period. That would technically fulfil the commitment, but it would not reflect the

urgency of the moment. There is a significant difference between spending 2.8% in 2028, 2.9% in 2029 and 3% in 2030, and remaining broadly flat and trying to make a leap—if we can prove that we can do that—at the end of that spending period. The Government deserve credit for changing the direction of travel from what it was in the past, but events have accelerated and so we need to accelerate our rearmament beyond those plans.

There is no shortage of priorities, and the DIP was a significant document, as colleagues have described. I share their concerns about some of the autonomy in the Royal Navy. It is unlikely that we will have the new ships designed, tested and deployed within 10 years, and there will have to be service life extensions for the Type 45s. I worry about the lack or absence of—

Ben Obese-Jecty: The hon. Member is making a very important speech. I agree that there should be a life extension plan for the Type 45, but we know that there is not one. It is not costed, it is not in the DIP, and the plan is to take them out of service over several years from 2035. Does he agree that the common combat vessel would be better suited, in terms of putting that capability within the Type 31s that are being built, and that, indeed, that is what will likely happen?

Tim Roca: The hon. Gentleman makes a very good point and, eventually, we will have to look at the Type 31 hull as a possibility. Maybe the Minister will comment on contingency plans if continuous capability sustainment does not develop as it should.

On the lack of commitments around ballistic missile defence, we are now an outlier in Europe in terms of air defences. Many countries in Europe—Spain, Germany, France, and so on—have Patriot or SAMP/T—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. I call Ian Roome.

3.13 pm

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): I thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) for securing this debate. There are moments in politics when delay is not just a mistake, but a danger. This is one of those moments. The truth is that the world has become more dangerous much faster than Britain has become ready. The strategic defence review mattered because it stripped away comforting illusions. From the end of the cold war, we enjoyed a peace dividend that offered more security and more money for public services, but war has returned to Europe. Hostile states challenge us daily with cyber-attacks and sabotage, flouting international law and the liberal rules-based order. The absolute supremacy of the western alliance is no longer absolute.

The SDR set out the right ambition: a more integrated force, a more digital force and a more resilient Britain, ready to learn lessons from Ukraine and the middle east. The defence investment plan accepts that analysis, but next comes the hard part: not only recognising the problem but solving it. Does the plan move quickly enough to make Britain safer? I fear it does not.

We lost nearly a year waiting for the defence investment plan to be published. Months of hesitation when industry held its breath, investments stalled, contracts went unsigned and momentum was lost. The SDR talks of mobilising "rapidly in the event of a crisis". If only that sense of urgency were reflected in government. Capability delayed is capability denied. The pace matters as much as the decision.

The review rightly placed at the heart of Britain's future military capability the digital targeting web—the system that links sensors, commanders and weapons into one integrated force that can identify a threat and destroy it. The defence investment plan commits money for our armed forces to do more, but too much of that funding is still on the other side of 2030.

The Prime Minister has said that NATO could face an attack from Russia before 2030. Yesterday, Lord Robertson and General Sir Richard Barrons pointed out to the Defence Committee that many of the capabilities deemed urgently needed in the SDR are only due to arrive at the end of a nine-year investment cycle. An example is air and missile defence, where the scale of the £790 million investment falls short of what was planned and arrives years down the line.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): My hon. Friend highlights the dangers that threaten us with Putin on our continent, and the desperate need for us to rearm, and to rearm quickly, so we have the right warfighting equipment. The recent example of Ajax, and the 16 years it has taken to try to procure it, is a demonstration of how difficult and challenging MOD procurement is, and of how we need to improve on that. We could not wait 16 years if a sudden threat arrived on our doorstep tomorrow. Does my hon. Friend agree that we urgently need to work more with our European allies to ensure that we can develop joint capabilities together?

Ian Roome: I certainly do, and I will come that later in my speech. There are areas where the Government seem to have cut corners: munitions reserves, medical support, industrial resilience—all essential for enduring a longer crisis.

Professionals talk logistics. In 1940, Sir Winston Churchill appointed Lord Beaverbrook to rapidly streamline aircraft production. Lord Beaverbrook responded by throwing out all the old rules and doubling production output inside 12 months. His sayings have become famous, describing the factories as the frontlines of the war. He said:

"Organisation is the enemy of improvisation",

"Committees take the punch out of war,"

and

"The need is great, the time is short, urgency must be the watchword."

He sounds like a nightmare to work for, but he helped rescue this country in an hour of great crisis.

Al Carns: What the hon. Member says brings a huge historical relevance to today. Throughout history, whenever we have been moving towards crisis, we have got rid of almost all of our procurement rules and regulations to streamline capability and get it into the hands of warfighters. Does he agree that the procurement system and those 10,000 people in DE&S could use AI and some of the incoming quantum capabilities to streamline our whole procurement process?

Ian Roome: I agree with the hon. and gallant Gentleman, and I thank him for his distinguished service too. We are seeing that in how we are learning lessons from Ukraine. I have been out there and seen the systems, so

[Ian Roome]

I totally agree. Defence reform is a very important element that the MOD should look at, and I am sure the Minister will have something to say about that.

I cannot find that spirit of urgency that Lord Beaverbrook showed in 1940 in the defence investment plan. The purpose of rearmament is not to prepare for war; it is to prevent that disaster, to deter aggression and to bolster our allies. As Liberal Democrats, and I am sure across the House, we believe Britain's security depends on our alliances. A stronger Britain means a stronger NATO. A safer Europe means a safer United Kingdom. We must preserve the peace previous generations sacrificed so much to secure. Let this House be remembered not as the House that scrambled in an emergency, but that saw the danger coming and acted.

3.19 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) on helping to secure this debate. Others have already spoken about rearmament and the focus on budgets, procurement and force structures, and while those things definitely matter, there is another question that I believe we must confront as well. As touched on briefly by the hon. Member for Harwich and North Essex (Sir Bernard Jenkin), it is the question of whether we are honest enough with the British public about the nature of the threat that we face.

I have repeatedly argued in this place that the United Kingdom should regard itself as already being in a sustained confrontation with the Russian state—not a conventional shooting war, but a prolonged campaign of hostile activity directed against our people, our infrastructure, our economy and our democratic institutions—and that raises a fundamental question. We often hear the term "sub-threshold", but what exactly is the threshold, and when are we going to give an indication to the British people of where that threshold is? The answer to that question matters, because it is the hard line in deterrence and absolutely key when we are considering rearmament.

I would not expect the Government ever to provide a precise answer to the question, but in a written answer this week, the Minister for the Armed Forces, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Louise Sandher-Jones), said:

> "We cannot provide detail on how the MOD would respond to certain activities versus others as this would assist our adversaries."

Rather than burden the Department with a load of additional written questions, can I ask the Minister some very specific questions? Is using a cyber-attack to steal the electoral register sub-threshold? Is stealing the email addresses of Foreign Office diplomats sub-threshold? Is using ransomware to disrupt NHS patient care, contributing to the deaths of UK citizens, sub-threshold? Is using lasers to threaten the safety of RAF pilots sub-threshold? Is targeting a major UK business with a cyber-attack costing hundreds of millions of pounds and meaningfully impacting Bank of England interest decisions sub-threshold? One has to assume that the Government consider all of these to be sub-threshold, because Russia has undertaken all of these activities.

Let me go further. Is poisoning UK citizens on UK soil sub-threshold? Is firing shots near a civilian yacht in the English channel sub-threshold? Is launching drones from a shadow fleet vessel to monitor UK air bases and critical national infrastructure sub-threshold? Is recruiting activists on Signal and having them commit arson attacks against property sub-threshold? Is endangering a UK aircraft carrier by dropping sonar buoys in its immediate vicinity sub-threshold? Is attempting an arson attack against the British Prime Minister sub-threshold? Once again, Russia has undertaken all of these activities. We are not alone, and for anyone who wants to track this activity across Europe, Emma Burrows from AP News has a fantastic website with up-to-date information.

At what point do Governments say enough is enough, and at what point, crucially, do they tell the British people that a line has been crossed? The Kremlin does not view these kinds of activities in isolation. It sees them as different tools being used in the pursuit of the same objectives: to weaken our democracy, undermine confidence, gather intelligence, create division and test our resolve. While we may not be the only country this is happening to, I am concerned that our public might be the least aware of these co-ordinated actions and the effects they have on their daily lives. This is why warfighting readiness is about much more than what sits in the inventory of our armed forces; it is about national capability and public awareness.

In a recent article written with my hon. Friend the Member for East Thanet (Ms Billington), we argued that politics too often becomes obsessed with targets instead of capabilities. We must show Russia that we have the capability to effectively respond and to deter these kinds of attacks. The Government must begin to attribute these attacks directly to the ultimate perpetrator in the Kremlin, to trust the British people with that information and to ask for their help in building the necessary capabilities to defend against it.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving a superb speech, and it is an honour to listen to it. I was at Bournemouth War Memorial Homes on Friday helping to open the new bungalows for our veterans, which my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) had toured when he was in post as a Minister. I was speaking with the veterans there, and they are under no illusions. They are aware of the threat posed by Russia. In talking with constituents, however, I understand their concern that we have been on a rollercoaster as a country since 2008 at a minimum. There is a feeling that because our psyche is somewhat low and that, spiritually, we feel somewhat deflated, to talk about the threat from Russia is to add to that feeling, but actually, as a constituent said to me on the doorstep, "It is fine to talk about the fear and talk about the plan. Talk about how you will meet the fear, and then we will come with you."

Graeme Downie: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. One of the ways we can go about building trust in the Government and in how they respond to a crisis is by trusting the people with the information. The people will be the ones who can press us to take the action that they know requires to be taken, if we give them the information. We must use our secrets more effectively and bring the British people along with us.

The central question cannot just be whether we spend 3%, 3.5% or some other percentage of GDP. The real question must be: what capability are we creating? This is where I believe the Government deserve a lot of credit. Although the DIP was delayed, what we are seeing in it is a commitment to fighting the next war and not the last one. That includes the improvements in pay and support for serving personnel and their families and in housing, which is leading to increases in recruitment, retention and morale. That is all a vital part of rearmament and deterrence, showing our adversaries that our armed forces are ready to fight tonight, as was mentioned earlier.

Alongside the human infrastructure, the Government have also invested in physical infrastructure. I know that it is attracting some scepticism and questioning from across the House, but the leap to hybrid warfare is the right thing to do. That is why I welcome the decision to build six common combat vessels and ensure that we are building ships more quickly, to give us flexibility on the capabilities that we need. I hope we make progress on that very quickly indeed. It is something I have raised with the Department since the publication of the DIP.

On future infrastructure capability, I will be slightly parochial and ask the Minister to respond to a couple of questions around submarine infrastructure when he is winding up. First, we know that to bring Dreadnought into service as quickly as possible we need a contingent docking facility. The Royal Navy has said that that would have to be at Rosyth, and with time moving on to get that operational, can I ask the Minister for a progress update? Secondly, on the decommissioned nuclear-powered submarines that remain tied up at Devonport and Rosyth, occupying valuable dock space, can the Minister update the House on when the next part of this programme will commence, releasing capacity in both the dockyards and strengthening our sovereign capability?

Preparedness for war is not warmongering. Warfighting readiness begins long before the first shot is fired, but it must start with an honest assessment and acknowledgment of the threats that we face, and with making clear to the public and our adversaries what we mean by sub-threshold. Rearmament, preparedness and public clarity are the best way to ensure that Vladimir Putin and those around him never conclude that Britain lacks either the capability or the determination to defend itself.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The time limit will be reduced to five minutes after the next speaker.

3.27 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) has highlighted a number of pertinent questions that collectively pointed to the increased threat that we face. I also very much agree with the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca). There is a lot of common ground in the Chamber today. One example of that is that I agree fundamentally with the comment from the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) that we

"must not underestimate the level of change that is required."

None of that detracts from the point that the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) highlighted in his opening remarks on the structural flaws in the funding allocated through the defence investment plan. The hon. Gentleman elaborated in more depth but, for example, less than half the headline figure announced is new money. Of the £15 billion announced, £6.9 billion over four years is new money, with £4.7 billion for the next budget, and £3.4 billion from asset sales and moving liabilities around. As he said, that is in addition to £10.7 billion of efficiencies.

In addition to the hon. Gentleman's remarks, I want to illustrate how the Government's narrative contradicts itself with regard to the efficiencies; three Government documents, which the Government agree with, actually contradict each other. For example, on page 79 of the DIP we see the total resource departmental expenditure limit of £7 billion, from savings on staffing, and a capital departmental expenditure limit of £3.4 billion. Those are figures in the Government's own annex, yet just last year on page 5 of the strategic defence review, the Secretary of State said, in no less than his own foreword:

"We will unlock nearly £6 billion of new savings".

In a year we have gone from the Secretary of State saying, "We're going to unlock £6 billion" to "We're going to unlock over £10 billion."

As the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells alluded to, there is no clear plan and confidence is low. Confidence is not just low because the defence investment plan states that it is low, although indeed its working states

"of which remaining plans at lower maturity"

with £5 billion on RDEL and £3.4 billion on CDEL—£8.4 billion of low confidence. Let us look, too, at the independent findings of the National Audit Office. It is stated on page 10 of one of its most recent reports, from December 2025, that the accounts were qualified in a number of areas and that:

"Lack of effective departmental oversight of a number of these arrangements has meant that the MOD did not have appropriate information nor assurance to ensure that transactions and balances"—

blah-de-blah. In other words, the Department itself does not have a grip. Quite rightly, the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak pointed to the scale of challenge, but we have a set of efficiencies in a 10-year plan that fundamentally contradict the Secretary of State's own assurances just a year ago.

The main point I wish to highlight—I say this as someone who has spent time in the Treasury, and I keep raising this point with MOD colleagues—is that I continue to be baffled as to why the Department is not highlighting and prioritising the reserves more than it is. Again, I think an area of consensus is the value of the reserves in delivering scale, and the fact that they are value for money as an option. Page 61 of the DIP just states £4.2 billion for reserves over four years—there is no breakdown, no detail, and no information, and it is not even clear if the training days and reserve service days for this year are secured. Can the Minister give us an assurance? Can he say what equipment will be funded for the reserves over the next four years? Can he give any colour on that, and can he explain why the reserves are not being prioritised more than they are?

My next point speaks directly to the issue of national resilience that the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak correctly identified. Looking at the Red Book,

[Steve Barclay]

£310 million has just been agreed for a digital campus in Manchester, and there is £1.196 million—£1.2 billion—on boiler upgrades over four years. But that is not enough, so the Government are extending that by £400 million this year, £600 million next year, and over £600 million the year after. I am not saying that those programmes are not useful—I am sure they are—but if the Prime Minister's Munich speech is correct, and given comments from colleagues in the House, is this really the priority? Is £4.7 billion over four years on cycling and walking really this Government's priority if we are to boost national resilience?

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend mentioned reserves. During the debate on the Armed Forces Bill, we talked a lot about enhancing the reserves. Is he aware that while there is some funding for the so-called active reserve, in the DIP there is hardly any funding at all for the strategic reserve, which the Government made a very big thing of for five months while we were debating the Bill? There is hardly any money for it.

Steve Barclay: My right hon. Friend is right to highlight the broader point, which is the lack of detail on reserves, other than to say that it is all being parked until the next Parliament. That is a wasted opportunity. Reservists also need clearer communication from the Government, including on the training days and reserve service days this year. I hope that when the Minister winds up the debate, he will say a bit more about that.

Finally, we know that a Government reshuffle is coming, and if issues such as national resilience are to be addressed, they quite rightly require an all-of-Government response. Yet there is very little detail. As the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar said regarding the answer to his written question, the MOD is often reluctant to answer on national security grounds, and there is very little detail on how other Departments will prioritise their budgets and what the key performance indicators are, particularly when new Ministers are likely to be coming in. Will the Minister clarify whether there will be KPIs relating to the defence investment plan for those Departments, and if so, when will they be set out?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): With an immediate five-minute time limit, I call Kevin Bonavia.

3.34 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) on securing this important debate.

We live at a time when our country is being targeted—not just threatened or tested, but actively targeted. We have already heard from many hon. Members that the reality is that hostile states are seeking to harm us every single day. Cyber-attacks batter our systems, malign actors push relentlessly at the seams of our national security and disinformation campaigns seek to warp our public debates, including in Clacton in the weeks ahead, where Russian bots will have to decide whether it is going to be the current outgoing Member for Clacton or Count Binface—that is the choice they face. More seriously, we know these threats in our day-to-day work as Members. They happen to us and to anybody who wants to speak out in public debate. And why is that? It is to undermine our common security.

We have had discussion today about whose fault it is that our defences have been run down in recent years. Let me be bipartisan: we all lived off the peace dividend from the end of the cold war—that is understandable and we get that—but in that time, we came together as a country and as a House to defend countries in need, not least Ukraine. We have done that, but now we need to look to our home defence, which is under threat in a way that it has never been since at least the second world war.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is incredibly important that the Prime Minister is at NATO right now, working to calmly and strongly ensure that we are right at the heart of that alliance? Will he join me in congratulating the Prime Minister and the rest of the EU on our agreement to invest £37 billion over the next 10 years with 11 other countries on a new long-range missile to protect Europe?

Kevin Bonavia: That is fantastic news for the future of NATO. I pay tribute to our Prime Minister for speaking up for NATO. This country has a NATO-first policy, and rightly so. We put our nuclear deterrent and our own taxpayers' money to the service of NATO. We must come together as an alliance and we must recognise that our country's contribution has been great, no matter what the debate about how we get to 3.5% of GDP in the years ahead. I thank my own Government—as a Labour MP, I should—for what they have done to support our armed forces by increasing pay and taking housing back into public ownership, so that the armed forces can have the morale that they deserve. But we need to keep doing more.

I thank our defence industry in this country too. I want to mention two defence firms in my constituency of Stevenage. Airbus helps to produce between a quarter and a third of all satellites in space, but the company cannot manufacture the satellites in my town alone; it collaborates with companies in sites across the country, including in Portsmouth—I see my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) is in her place. We need to come together and support our SMEs. Last week, I visited Astute, a defence logistics firm in my constituency that needs our support. This Government are and must do more to support such companies in the armed forces industries, but that is not enough if we are going to truly make our country safe.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) made an excellent point about how we have to face the threats from hostile actors around the world. It is not just about the hardware or about the people we need to recruit to our armed forces. As many hon. Members have said, it is about a whole-of-society approach.

My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) talked about national resilience, and this really has to be a national cause. The excellent strategic defence review finishes with that point and talks about a whole-of-society approach. Can we really do that? Members have said today that the public do not really feel that yet, but many Members and veterans do. The armed forces and our intelligence services see it.

There are things that I do not even know about, but I do know—from what I am allowed to know—that this issue is serious and affecting us now. Russia's grey-zone war is there, and it will not just be Russia in the years ahead—we know that there are others—so how do we take this approach?

Before the second world war, many people thought, "Never again. We cannot rearm; we cannot do all this." There was a famous debate in the Oxford Union, where they voted not to fight for King or country—and that is said about our young people today, but I do not believe it. I see countries, such as Ukraine, Poland and the Baltic states, that feel and see the urgency. Maybe we do not feel it yet in this country, but it behoves all of us, in this place and beyond, to help people understand what is going on. That will be harder now. In the 1930s, we had the mainstream media, or whatever it was called back then; now, we are going to be dealing with disinformation. When we try to make our case, there will always be somebody out there to talk about poor, maligned Putin. I have that in my patch—only a few days ago, a Russian state broadcaster wanted Stevenage to be attacked with missiles. We must do better, and I am sure that we will.

3.41 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I refer Members to my entries in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, in particular my participation in a parliamentary delegation to Ukraine in February with the UK friends of the armed forces.[1]

I want to build on some of the arguments made by the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie). As I sat here listening to this thoughtful and valuable debate, the issue that really struck me above anything else was that, in many ways, we are preaching to the converted in this Chamber. Those of us who are here recognise the seriousness of the moment—we understand that defence is not an optional extra and that it cannot wait for a more convenient fiscal moment—but our responsibility goes much further than this Chamber, of course. Our responsibility is to the British public, and that means telling them the truth.

As we have heard repeatedly during the course of today, the truth is that the world has changed and the threats are very real. For far too long, we have risked treating defence as something done by someone else—something done by sailors under the waves, soldiers on distant deployments and pilots in the skies. However, modern deterrence asks us to do much more individually. It also requires government to be honest, and the public to understand what is really at stake.

As we have heard, the Government have clearly set out that Russia could be in a position to attack a NATO ally by as early as the end of this decade. The Chief of the Defence Staff has warned that we are not as ready as we need to be, and the noble Lord Robertson, a distinguished former Secretary-General of NATO, has gone even further; he has been really blunt in his assessment that we are simply not ready. Those are the judgments of people who have spent their entire lives defending our country.

We must not treat the British public like children. They do not need comforting slogans; they need searing honesty from people in public office. We cannot set out a case in which we say to them that Russia is probing our waters and hostile states are targeting our energy networks, satellites and cyber-systems, and then suggest that the answer to those dangers is promises that begin in the next decade. Quite simply, we cannot describe a 2030 threat and offer a 2035 solution. I believe that is the weakness at the heart of the Government's approach to date.

Readiness is not simply about owning equipment. It is about having the people trained to use it, having the stockpiles behind it, and having reservists who are able to mobilise. It is about factories that can surge, ports that can receive and energy systems that can endure. A nation is not ready simply because a Minister declares that it is ready. A nation is ready when the whole system is ready to row in behind it, and the reality is that national security requires choices, discipline and—we have to be blunt—sacrifices. For the past 30 years or so, we enjoyed a peace dividend, and too often we behaved as though that would never end, but we forgot the simple truth that freedom is never free; there is always a cost to be paid. It is a different cost depending on the generation, and each has to deal with it in different ways. Our duty is to ensure that this generation pays in preparedness so that the next generation does not pay in blood. The British people will understand that if we level with them, which is why the arguments for spending 3% of GDP on defence in this Parliament are not an extravagant ambition, but the bare minimum response to what is a deteriorating world.

Britain is not a weak nation. We possess one of the most extraordinary armed forces in the world; we have outstanding intelligence services, world-class scientists and engineers, and above all, a people who have never failed this country when they have been told the truth. Therefore, if we want to defend the peace that we so cherish, we cannot have a resilience that starts after the crisis has begun. It is perhaps worth ending by remembering that the cost of preparedness will always be far less than the cost of war itself.

3.46 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): I took the underground to Westminster this morning, and at the bottom of the steps at the entrance into Parliament there was a homeless man sleeping against the wall, lying on the cold, dirty floor of the tube station. He was the last thing I saw before coming into this grand palace where we sit as legislators, taking decisions and making political choices that impact that man and everyone else in the country. Last week, £15 billion was found for weapons that will get us ready for a conflict that many politicians, much of the media, and various think-tanks and lobbyists say is imminent. That hawkish rhetoric is ramping up—of the 22 questions asked at Defence questions on Monday, three contained mention of Russia, and two were about defending the High North. A consistent theme ran throughout, pushing the narrative that we must spend on defence above all else.

Of course, I appreciate that the first duty of Government is to keep our citizens safe and to defend the realm, but what about that man at the bottom of the tube station steps? Who is keeping him safe? What about the children who are going to school with no food in their bellies—do they feel safe? Over 3 million people need a food bank to survive—people who, when the winter comes, will

1.[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 12WC.] (Correction)

[Brian Leishman]

have to decide whether to eat a meal or put their heating on. How safe do they feel because of political choices that have seen other departmental budgets cut?

I do not think it needs to be this way. Tony Benn used to say regularly in this place that if we can find money to kill people, we can find money to help people. When I watch the news on television or scroll through my phone and I see conflict, ethnic cleansing, the displacement of millions, the destruction of Ukraine, Gaza and Sudan, and Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war on Iran—remember, a girls' school got bombed—I do not think, "You know what the world needs? We need more weapons. We need more death." I think that what we need is obvious. We need diplomacy, we need the de-escalation of tensions abroad, and we need a domestic agenda not of war, but of prosperity and peace.

I want us to invest in health, education and public services—all the good stuff that keeps communities together. I want better wages, the reindustrialisation of forgotten heartlands across the country, and the redistribution of wealth and power to create equal opportunities for people. I want a social security system that is a genuine safety net, one that stops people from descending into poverty. We are at war right now with poverty and inequality, and our people are dying because of it, so I urge Members not to look the other way the next time they are in Westminster tube station.

3.49 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Given the important armed forces community in Taunton and Wellington, which includes 40 Commando Royal Marines, 675 Squadron Army Air Corps, our sea and air cadets and our army cadet force, I start by thanking all those who are serving and all the veterans in my community who have served.

At the weekend, I was pleased to have the opportunity to thank Ed Cullen and all the veterans who organised our superb Somerset Armed Forces Day event, drawing 49,000 people, which was a record attendance. I hope that the Minister will join me in congratulating them, as well as Terry Williams, who is fundraising to establish the "poppy of honour", with 1.1 million named paper poppies for every individual lost in world war one. Indeed, I call on the Government to support that fundraising effort in a meaningful way. Speaking of those who have been on active service, I also congratulate my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) on his service. He brings to these Benches the sharpest of insights on defence and rearmament, and great experience too.

How we treat our veterans is a vital component of how we will attract the men and women to serve in the forces and deliver the warfighting readiness that this debate is about. That is why the superb work of the NHS Somerset armed forces link team must not be cut back as a result of cuts to integrated care boards by the Department of Health and Social Care. Former Royal Marine Steven Summers has said to me that

"the support provided…has been life changing. They have helped bridge the gaps between the NHS, local GP surgeries, and the commitments made under the Armed Forces Covenant… Their work really does make a difference."

The support that we give our veterans should also include those who served in Operation Banner in Northern Ireland. They should never have to face double jeopardy. That is why the Liberal Democrats voted against carrying over the Government's Northern Ireland Troubles Bill.

Given the heat, I will spend a moment thanking soldiers on ceremonial duties. I am personally appalled by the way a minority of members of the public treat the guards and their horses, as is regularly shown on social media. Veterans in my constituency have asked me to raise that here today. I urge the Government to consider whether anything can be done to better prevent people from interfering with guards' duties. Cadets are tomorrow's servicemen and women, so I welcome that our cadet forces are set to keep growing, and the 30% target must be met as soon as possible.

A decent home for serving personnel matters, so I was proud as the Liberal Democrats housing spokesperson to take forward the work begun by my hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) and propose amendments to the Renters' Rights Bill, which were eventually made by the Government, to bring service family accommodation up to a decent home standard by law. I am delighted that the amendments of my hon. Friend the Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) to the Armed Forces Bill would extend that to single living accommodation.

I welcome the £15 billion defence investment plan, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells said, it does not go nearly far enough. With £4.75 billion of that yet to be found, any raiding of the military housing budget would be a false economy and bitterly opposed by Liberal Democrats. If this defence investment is to be spent well, the promise made to our small businesses to properly integrate them into procurement must be kept. The current 5% procurement budget for SMEs is a pittance. An SME in my constituency—Coker Engineering in Taunton—needs reliable access to steel imports. I repeat the call for defence companies to be granted exclusions from steel import tariffs so that they can make the arms our forces need.

In conclusion, if the Government's ambition falls short, the Liberal Democrats' ambition does not. We call for: a new EU-UK defence pact providing the basis for negotiating UK entry into SAFE, or Security Action for Europe; decent homes for service families and single living accommodation; and a £20 billion programme of defence bonds to inject the capital that our forces urgently need to meet the challenges set out by my hon. Friend and the strategic defence review. That is the defence of our country that Liberal Democrats have been campaigning for, and that is what we would deliver.

3.54 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): We live in an increasingly unstable world. From Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine to the conflict in the middle east, the threats to our national security have grown, and families across the country have felt the consequences through higher bills and rising prices. We cannot afford to ignore the reality of the world we face, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) so eloquently put it, the question we need to address is this: "What does warfighting readiness actually mean to this Government, to our forces and to our country?"

It is worth reminding the House and our constituents—as it would not have been thought from the opening speeches today—that this Government inherited armed forces that had been hollowed out by years of under-investment, overstretch and a failure to keep pace with modern warfare. Let me point out to the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) that this destruction was a result of initiatives such as the coalition Government's 2011 defence basing review, which reduced the number of times our Type 45s were serviced, thus giving us this challenge.

Ships, aircraft and tanks, and indeed personnel, are not built overnight, so I am proud that this Labour Government are beginning to put that right—and to put it right across Government, because this is not just the role of the Ministry of Defence. This Government deserve credit for changing course. Over the next four years, we will invest £298 billion in defence. The defence investment plan will help us to modernise our armed forces by investing in drones and autonomous systems, building at least six new warships, and strengthening the capabilities that our services need to respond to today's security challenges. It reflects and learns from the lessons of recent conflicts, and ensures that our defence capabilities will keep pace with the changing nature of war. Although I do not agree with the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells that this is too little too late, I do agree that we need to move and ensure that the sector is more rapidly equipped for national security and for growth.

We know that increasing defence spending alone is not enough. We also need stronger industrial bases and a system that allows for swift procurement, and that means backing British defence manufacturers and innovative small and medium-sized enterprises with better access to finance so that they can grow and create skilled jobs and apprenticeships and strengthen our national resilience. In my constituency, for instance, defence jobs and national security go hand in hand.

That is why I would like to ask the Minister whether the Government will look again at joining the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank. Spearheaded by Prime Minister Carney in Canada, the DSRB could help unlock private investment for the defence sector and support the industrial capacity that our armed forces really need. We should seize every opportunity to work with our allies to strengthen our defence industrial base, and we should seize every opportunity to ensure that we can not only have research and development here, but have the opportunity to scale up British companies so that they choose to invest and grow here and not abroad.

Defence is about far more than equipment and technology. Our greatest strength is the people who serve this country. That is why, as well as improving defence design and manufacturing, we must continue to improve the support that those people receive. When we extend the armed forces covenant across Government, we must ensure that our people know about it, and we must continue to deliver the £9 billion defence housing strategy to improve service homes. As I have constantly argued, we should also seek to improve paternity service leave for fathers and families. If we are serious about national security, we must also be serious about recruiting, retaining and supporting the people who keep our country safe.

Britain faces significant security challenges, and meeting them requires sustained investment, a strong defence industry, and a firm commitment to those who serve our country. It also requires—as my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) so brilliantly argued—an open and honest conversation with the public, so that citizens in the United Kingdom can really understand what warfighting readiness means; so that they can understand the challenges and the very real threats that we face in the UK, the priorities that we may need to make, and the misinformation and dangers that the cyber world holds out there. These are conversations that we know are happening in our allied countries, such as Norway and Finland—conversations that will make us all warfighting ready.

This Labour Government are rebuilding our armed forces, they are backing British defence jobs, and they are strengthening our national security for the future. Much has been done, and there is still much more to do, but I have every faith that we as a Labour Government will rise to the challenge.

3.58 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) for making this debate happen. I have been to see his bookshelves and, trust me, the books on strategy and military affairs in his library are well thumbed. He knows what he is talking about, and he has done well to corral us all into talking about it today.

Let me begin by talking about defence spending. It is fair to say that others have covered it, but I will repeat the fact that we are not spending sufficiently on defence. I want to challenge the hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman). He did a bold thing in challenging the prevailing consensus, the mood of the House, and views that are now quite mainstream in the House, but while it is compelling to think about all the welfare need that exists in this country—and I acknowledge that there is a great deal—he has a crude oil refinery in his constituency.

Brian Leishman: No, I do not.

Richard Foord: Forgive me, but I understood that Grangemouth was a crude oil refinery.

We need only look to Eurasia—we need only look at what has been happening in Ukraine and Russia—to see that war comes to those who do not really want it to come to them at all. Yes, that is a failure of diplomacy, but it is also a failure of preparedness. Today, I will focus my remarks on the business of readiness.

We are currently spending 2.5% of GDP on defence, and the target is 3.5% by 2035. We really ought to be getting midway between those two by 2030, yet we are projected to be at only 2.68% by then. Of course, the Prime Minister is currently at the NATO summit in Ankara. Nye Bevan said to the Labour conference in 1957 that his party members should not send him

"naked into the conference chamber",

and I fear that the Prime Minister has been sent naked into the Ankara conference chamber. The defence investment plan is indeed a skinny dip.

[Richard Foord]

The hon. Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia) talked about the famous "King and country" debate at the Oxford Union in 1933. I completely agree with him that people who thought that they would not fight for King and country in 1933 found that, by 1939, they had no choice but to do so because of the circumstances. He knows a great deal about that from his time on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Mr Francois: The university's records do not show how every individual student voted, but we know that many of the students who were present at that famous debate in 1933 subsequently signed up in 1939 and 1940.

Richard Foord: The shadow Minister is exactly right. Of course, those people's parents fought in the first world war. They were a generation who really did not want to meet war, but war came to them none the less.

Clausewitz, the philosopher of war, talked about government, military and people being the remarkable trinity concerned with war. A lot of today's debate has centred on the military, on defence, on procurement, and perhaps a little on government as it pertains to policy. We have talked a bit less about people, although the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) did talk about our servicepeople. I want to add to that by talking about people in the country more broadly—the people we represent. We need to think about defence as a national endeavour that builds on everyone's understanding of the threat and the need to defend the nation. When we discuss warfighting readiness, we are talking about not just platforms, ships, tanks and aircraft, but information.

The Foreign Affairs Committee published a report on disinformation. We talked about the use of military and non-military—overt and covert—methods to blur the lines between war and peace, to sow doubt in the minds of target populations, and to destabilise and undermine societies. Last year's strategic defence review covers sub-threshold attacks, and it talks about how such attacks are difficult to attribute to a perpetrator with certainty due to the methods used and the frequent reliance on proxy actors. The focus has to be on countering Russia's hostile activities in the information space, as well as thinking about preparing to fight a war and have war readiness, because that is the reality of modern conflict.

Conflict does not necessarily begin when a missile is fired or a border is crossed. It can begin when public trust is systemically eroded, when elections are manipulated, when information is weaponised or when hostile actors succeed in weakening a society's confidence in its own institutions. The objective is often not mere propaganda or the spreading of false information, but to persuade societies that a particular lie is true. The aim is to persuade people that objective truth no longer exists. I want us to think about war readiness in the round, including in the information space.

4.4 pm

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): I thank the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) for bringing such a prescient and timely debate to the House. I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) and the hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) for the step they took against what, in their view, was clearly insufficient investment, resulting in insufficient protection for these islands and the people who live here.

The DIP manifestly writes cheques that the Treasury is ill-equipped or ill-prepared to cash. As many Members have said, there is no clear spending plan for how we get to 2030, much less for how we get to 2035. The projected expenditure on defence in the UK is not going to be incremental over those years. We are supposed to believe that, magically, in 2029 we will get to where we need to be in 2030, and the same again in 2034. A lot of us are long enough in the tooth to know that is a load of unbelievable rhetoric. Efficiency savings of £10.7 billion have never happened before, and there is a good reason: it does not happen. That is not how we fund any budget, whether CDEL or RDEL. We do not fund budgets with efficiency savings of that size.

This is serious: we have lost a Secretary of State for Defence and one of his Ministers. If we speak to men and women in uniform, as I and many other Members are privileged to do on a regular basis, we sense the palpable fog of dismay as they try—in vain, largely—to figure out what they are expected to do, how they are expected to do it and with what. The DIP generated such expectation, as did the SDR that precipitated it, but once they were finally published, they have generated more questions than answers.

Platforms matter. I hear all the time that we need to learn the lessons from Ukraine, and we do need to learn the lessons from those brave warriors defending their homeland in an existential fight with zero strategic depth. However, we are not Ukraine—this is not Ukraine—because we have access to platforms and systems that they do not. We have strategic depth in relation to the contemporary threat we face from Russia. I am not inviting Members to be complacent; I am inviting them to see beyond learning the lessons from Ukraine, and platforms and the replacement thereof do matter.

In a very brief summary, the UK just now is fielding clapped-out Vanguard nuclear bombers. When we see them coming back up the Clyde after 200 days under the waves, they look as though they have been raised from the bottom of the sea, not out patrolling for what should be 90 days, not 200 days. It is a dreadful way to treat sailors. Not one of the six completed Astute-class submarines is available for service, which is absolutely unbelievable. The new medium-lift helicopter has rumbled on for a decade, but finally got a grudging order half the size of the original. Ajax is now in its 17th year—it is absolutely incorrigible—and that is not a sophisticated novel system. It is a very good system, but it should not take 17 years. By the time it gets into service, it will be obsolete.

Those are just ordinary things that defence in the UK has demonstrated it cannot pull off, yet according to the DIP, we are going to start doing all this exquisite, novel stuff that nobody has done before, and we are going to be world leaders, which the UK always seems to think it has to be. I do not believe a word of it. I hope it is true and I am wrong, but if we cannot do ordinary, how can we be expected to believe that exquisite is just around the corner?

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): Did the hon. Member just refer to the nuclear deterrent as "ordinary"?

Dave Doogan: It has been around for 50 years; it is not novel.

The hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) referred to £45 billion for the nuclear enterprise. I think the figure in the DIP is £64 billion. That is an important point, because the Government and the one before it have refused to publish the rolling 10-year nuclear enterprise budget. If the Minister could clarify what the nuclear enterprise budget is over the rolling 10-year period, that would be helpful. I am a supporter of defence—there are a few people in here who will testify to that—but the MOD does have a case to answer. It increasingly looks like if we want £1 million of output, we need to put £2 million into the MOD pot. If we look at any Public Accounts Committee report on defence, we can see what a troubled enterprise it is. It needs root and branch reform.

I have heard people say quite a lot that we have not told the public about the threat we are under. I agree with that. I think that is a true and an honest assessment, but we need to see beyond the transmission of the threat and be prepared for the response that we might get back. I am not making a constitutional point; I am not talking about Scotland. I am talking about housing schemes and communities up and down these islands. If they are asked to put their families and their own lives on the line for the United Kingdom, they might well not be quite as enthusiastic as we might wish. They might think, "What has my country done for me?" If they are 25 years old and have grown up over the last 20 years they might think, "What has the UK done for me, because I see myself and my generation getting poorer than the generations that went before." I might be wrong—I hope I am wrong—but we do not know it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

4.10 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I congratulate my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) on securing this extremely valuable debate.

Much has been said about rearmament and defence in this House in recent months. It is widely accepted that successive Governments have allowed our nation's defences to decline to a perilous extent. This debate should therefore be an opportunity for the House to come together to address the first duty of any Government, the defence of the realm. It is a conversation that cannot be limited only to this building; it needs to be had in every corner of our great nation.

The Prime Minister and others tell us that the point of maximum threat from Russia is in 2030. That is just over three years away. If that is the case, we must show urgency and clarity. It is for that reason that the long delay in the publication of the defence investment plan was so serious and so damaging. That delay cost us precious time, which our adversaries have spent building their own forces and probing our vulnerabilities. The Public Accounts Committee has already told us what that delay cost us. It called the resulting bureaucratic drift damaging to Britain's international credibility and warned that it has created deep uncertainty across our defence industrial base while sending a weak signal to allies and adversaries alike.

When the plan finally arrived, what did we find? The Secretary of State told the House that he had secured an extra £1 billion, yet it has come to light since then that most of that money has simply been taken from cancelled transport and energy projects or clawed back from funds that were meant to improve military housing. Worse still, £4.7 billion of the £15 billion promised increase is, in the Government's own words, still to be "confirmed at the Budget". That, I am afraid, is not a funding plan.

Defence chiefs have been explicit that anything below £28 billion would leave this country vulnerable and force Ministers into hard choices about capabilities that we simply cannot afford to lose. The figure the Prime Minister has now settled on falls well short of that warning. Nowhere is that more alarming than in air defence. The strategic defence review recommended that we spend at least £1 billion in this area. The people of this country rightly assume that they are safe from missile and drone attack. We must urgently work with our NATO allies to build up our collective integrated air defence. It is folly to spend billions on equipment if it can all just be destroyed in an instant by Russian ballistic missiles.

The SDR was also clear that we needed pace in investing in the capabilities needed to deter Russia. That is why the Liberal Democrats have argued for issuing defence bonds to make £20 billion available in the next two years—before 2030—to spend on plugging those gaps. We have also urged the Government to explore multilateral efforts to fund rearmament, such as the defence, security and resilience bank or leading on the establishment of a European rearmament bank.

The threat is real and the money is needed now, not years down the line, and we need to spend not only more, but better. Around 5% of the defence procurement budget currently reaches SMEs and 42% of contracts remain concentrated among the same 10 suppliers. These smaller firms are the source of much of the flexibility and innovation the sector needs, and they support skilled jobs in every part of the United Kingdom. The long delay to the DIP left them in limbo for over a year. Some went out of business in that time or even moved overseas, and with the £4.7 billion gap still to be resolved at the Budget, uncertainty has not been lifted from their shoulders. To make their funding numbers add up, the Government have also started chipping away at their previous commitment to fix mouldy military homes and crumbling barracks. The Liberal Democrats have supported the Government's efforts to sort out that mess, so to hear that hundreds of millions have been trimmed is bitterly disappointing.

The Liberal Democrats changed the law so that service family accommodation must now be assessed against the decent homes standard—we forced the Government to concede that principle in the House of Lords. We went further still, and sought to extend that same standard to single living accommodation, so that no member of our armed forces is left living in substandard conditions, but the Government voted that down in Committee. If Ministers are serious about retention

[James MacCleary]

and persuading talented people to stay in uniform, they must reverse that decision and bring all military housing under a single, decent standard. They must also stop backsliding on their commitment to fully fund the recovery of our military housing stock.

We cannot meet this moment alone. Our security is bound up with that of our European neighbours, because geography has not changed, even if American commitment is growing less certain. The Liberal Democrats want the Government to show real ambition to restart negotiations for Britain to join the Security Action for Europe programme, to work with partners towards a European rearmament bank, and to help build a European security council that can co-ordinate our allies' efforts to meet NATO's requirements, even as Washington draws back.

Our alliances are one of our greatest strengths, and should the worst ever happen, we are far stronger standing with our friends than on our own. That is why squandering soft power through cuts to international development aid and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office are an entirely false economy. Those cuts diminish our standing in the world and create issues for which we will have to pay far more down the line. It is always cheaper to prevent a war than to fight one, which is why our hard and soft power must go hand in hand.

I will end where I started: it is time that the Government and the new Prime Minister, when he takes office, lead a serious national conversation with the public. We hear endless rhetoric about tough choices, and those will not get any easier without public support. The parties represented in this Chamber will come up with different answers to the question—we can debate that here—but every party will find it harder to justify those choices unless they are part of a real national conversation on defence, and that conversation is simply not happening right now.

Just this week, the United States warned of a possible imminent attack by Russian forces on Poland to test NATO defences. The threat is not abstract; the threat is real, and it is to the safety of our children and our nation's future. I urge Ministers and the incoming Prime Minister to be decisive, issue defence bonds, take the conversation on defence out into the real world, and show the urgency that the moment deserves before it is too late.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call the shadow Minister.

4.17 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I begin by congratulating the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) and the Backbench Business Committee for scheduling this important and timely debate, which coincides with the NATO summit. I will make what is perhaps a point of consensus: yet again, when we debate the defence of the realm—the first duty of Government—the Reform Bench is empty; yet again, the plastic patriots have gone AWOL when we discuss the defence of this country. Count Binface clearly has them worried in Clacton.

As I am a historian by training, perhaps I can offer some historical context. Arguments about military readiness are not new. The Roman military theorist, Vegetius, some two millennia ago, coined the now-famous phrase, "Si vis pacem, para bellum"—he who desires peace should prepare for war, in order to deter it. There have been times in British history where we have disregarded Vegetius's sage advice. For instance, in 1919, following the first world war, when Britain had fought at great cost—both human and financial—a Liberal-led Government introduced the concept of a 10-year rule: a pan-Whitehall edict that no major war was likely for at least a decade. That continued on a rolling basis into the 1930s. On 9 February 1933, just 10 days after Hitler became Chancellor of Germany, in the now famous Oxford Union debate, referred to several times already, the students resolved by more than two to one that:

> "This House would, under no circumstances, fight for King and country."

And yet, a few years later, we know that many of them did.

The 10-year rule was only finally rescinded in the mid-1930s. Nevertheless, as General Lord Dannatt pointed out in his excellent recent book "Victory to Defeat", our armed forces still did not recover sufficiently in time to deter Hitler from launching what eventually became world war two, in which some 60 million people perished worldwide.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Having spoken on this very subject the week before last, I thought that I would, for once, sit and listen to what others have to say. Does my right hon. Friend agree that one of the reasons for the failure of deterrence at the beginning of both the second world war and the first world war was that the United States was detached from the future of security in Europe? The success of NATO has hinged on the knowledge that an attack on any NATO country would mean war with the United States from the outset. Does he share my concern that the United States is at present led by someone with insufficient regard for that history?

Mr Francois: NATO is the most successful defensive alliance in history, and article 5 is its absolute fulcrum. We must maintain our commitment to article 5 to keep all NATO nations safe.

In 1946 in Fulton, Missouri, Churchill said that an iron curtain had descended, leading us into the cold war. In the mid-1980s, under Conservative Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher, defence spending was gusting about 5% of gross domestic product. When the Berlin wall came down in 1989, countries across the west took a peace dividend. Francis Fukuyama wrote his famous book "The End of History" in 1992, and many in the west believed that the threat of world war had finally receded. When the Conservatives left office in 1997, we were spending around 3% of GDP on defence, and that downward trend continued under Tony Blair's Government—although, in fairness, he was only doing what many other western democracies were also doing.

Today, we face a revanchist Russia led by Putin—

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: In a moment.

We face a revanchist Russian led by Putin, who launched an invasion of Crimea and the Donbas in 2014, and then an even more brutal, full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. As someone who visited Ukraine in February of this year, I remind the House that the Ukrainians would argue that they have therefore been at war with Russia not for four years, but for 12 years—longer than the first and second world wars combined.

Against that rising threat, Labour produced its much-vaunted strategic defence review, and there was much good in it. However, it still contained echoes of the 10-year rule, declaring the Government's intention, on page 43,

"to deter, fight and win—with allies—against states with advanced military forces by 2035."

That is nine years away. The Chief of the General Staff has warned that we might have to fight Russia by 2027, the First Sea Lord said 2029, and even the outgoing Prime Minister said that this might happen by 2030. How are we supposed to deter Putin without a single attack submarine currently at sea, with no new AWACS aircraft in service in the Royal Air Force, still, and with Ajax almost a decade late and still not in operational service, despite Ministers previously promising us that it was fine? That really is corrosive complacency, is not it? The threat is now, and we need to rearm accordingly, including by spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2029 at the very latest, if not earlier.

The three co-authors of the SDR were adamant that the cost of implementing it was spending 3% of GDP on defence, and a year after the SDR was published, we finally received Labour's plan for how to pay for it: the so-called defence investment plan. But that was not before Labour's Defence Secretary and Armed Forces Minister—the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who is in his place—both resigned on 11 June after months of frustration with the Treasury over the paucity of funding in the plan.

As the outgoing Defence Secretary powerfully wrote in his resignation letter to the Prime Minister,

"you have been unable, and the Treasury has been unwilling, to commit the resources the nation needs to defend the country at this time of rising threats."

That is damning. The former Armed Forces Minister said in his letter:

"I have sat in the rooms, seen the assessments, and spoken to the commanders who will be asked to do more with less, and I cannot in good conscience stand at the dispatch box and defend a level of investment I know to be inadequate to the task."

Moreover, the outgoing Defence Secretary revealed that he had been offered an increase in defence spending to only 2.68% of GDP by 2030—billions short of what the SDR authors required.

The new Defence Secretary has tried to argue that he has been given some additional funding—a bit more than £1 billion—but that takes defence spending to barely 2.69% of GDP by 2030, a difference that does not even touch the sides. Sadly, it is worse than that. The chiefs of staff have been urging the Prime Minister and the Chancellor to invest an additional £28 billion in defence over the next four years, partly to enable them to implement Labour's SDR. They were offered barely £15 billion instead. On closer examination, even that sum unravels rapidly.

As we have heard, £10.7 billion relies on so-called efficiency savings, which is Whitehall code for cuts in MOD spending over the next four years, the bulk of which have not even been identified. On the day of publication, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Committee described that as an old accountant's trick. It still does not disguise the fact that the MOD would have to make massive in-year spending cuts, including from operations and training, to recycle that money to fund the defence investment plan. The Chief of the Defence Staff warned of the implications of doing that only the other day.

The disastrous DIP also relies on a further £4.7 billion, which has not yet been cleared by the Treasury and will be subject to another public spending round. In other words, the two sums combined will be more than the £15 billion of extra money that was promised. There is practically no new money for defence at all. All we have been offered is Enron accounting and smoke and mirrors to try to pretend that there is a massive increase in defence spending—barely 0.01% of GDP over four years.

Alex Baker (Aldershot) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: No, I am summing up.

Lord Robertson, the lead author of the SDR, told the Defence Committee only yesterday that

"we are running out of years… the challenge is now bigger, more serious and earlier than we had anticipated, yet the defence investment plan does not come up to it."

General Barrons, his co-author, told the same Committee that

"the Prime Minister is saying that Russia could attack NATO by 2030, and we essentially lost a year of mobilising for that."

Incredibly, even the DIP says on page 78:

"The figures presented are indicative rather than precise cost estimates. They do not constitute binding commitments and are subject to the Government's approval processes, affordability considerations and contracting procedures. Figures have been rounded and, therefore, may not sum."

You can say that again. In other words, the document isn't worth the paper it's printed on. The plan relies on extra money that does not exist. We will not deter the likes of Vladimir Putin and Xi Jinping with such unfunded proposals. If Trotsky was right, and war is interested in us, we must rearm now to deter it.

I reluctantly find that the Labour Government are failing the people of this country in the first duty of Government: the defence of the realm. If the incoming Prime Minister cannot plug the £5 billion black hole that he is about to inherit, he should make way for people who can.

4.28 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): I am pleased to have been a signatory to the application for this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) on securing it. *[Laughter.]* Therein is a lesson.

The subject of the debate—rearmament and readiness—could hardly be of greater importance to our constituents, our military and the future security of our nation. I thank Members of all parties who have contributed to a compelling discussion, and I welcome the opportunity

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

to respond to some of the points that have been raised. You can enjoy the confusion of my moving between my speech and the notes I have taken.

I will attempt to explain how the Ministry of Defence is working to get our armed forces warfighting ready as an urgent priority. However, I will start by responding to the principal criticism of the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) that there is no new money. I emphasise that £300 billion is new money; £15 billion is new money. I will never, ever let you forget the cold water that I endured in the messes of the bases on which I served—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Please can I remind you that saying "you" is not acceptable in this Chamber, because it refers to me?

Mr Bailey: The removal of funding specifically in 2010 resulted in the removal of Nimrod and the reduction of our shipyards and boatyards, which has led to the risks that are manifesting today. The Opposition cannot deny that is the reason that we are in the position we are in now.

Sir Julian Lewis: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bailey: In time.

Two years ago, this Government inherited a defence programme that was overcommitted, underfunded and fundamentally unsuited to countering the very real threats we now face. Since then, we have published a strategic defence review, the defence industrial strategy and, most recently, the defence investment plan. We are building a far more modern and lethal military, through massive increases in defence spending, radical reform of the armed forces and close collaboration with our NATO partners to protect Europe's and Britain's borders, showing Putin that the alliance remains as strong as ever.

As technology reshapes warfare at the fastest pace in history, and as the world becomes increasingly dangerous, our overwhelming focus at the Ministry of Defence is to get warfighting ready as fast as possible, and that was the critical tilt in the change between the two Defence Secretary's DIPs. This DIP is a defining moment in that journey, committing, as I said, £298 billion for our armed forces over the next four years, ensuring that they have the kit and weapons they need. That is £15 billion more—more than significant—and £1.5 billion more than was announced just a few weeks ago.

The DIP means that UK defence spending will rise in real terms by 27% between 2023-24 and 2029-30—the largest sustained increase since the cold war. Indeed, the Ministry of Defence budget will grow faster over this Parliament than the budget of any other major Department. The £74 billion allocated next year—2027-28—is £20 billion more for our armed forces than the last year of the previous Government, and the budget will continue to grow in real terms for the rest of this Parliament.

Sir Julian Lewis: I congratulate the Minister on acceding to office, but he needs to appreciate that the cost of all Departments goes up in absolute financial numerical terms year on year, but the way in which we measure the investment in defence is by looking at it as a proportion of GDP. During the cold war, when the risk was almost as high as it is now, we were spending 4.5% to 5% of GDP. Vladimir Putin does not have nine years for us to spend 3.5% of GDP. Those are the measurements the Minister has to look at; we are nowhere near spending enough.

Mr Bailey: Twenty four years of serving this great nation means that I am acutely aware of the risks that the Opposition presented me and manifested during my time in service. That is why I am resolute in addressing these challenges and why I am backing the defence investment plan.

Let me make one point crystal clear: Britain has always met its NATO spending obligations in the past, and under this Government we always will. That begins with the early delivery of our first commitment to raise defence investment to 2.7% of GDP next year, compared with just 2.3%, which was missing from the Opposition's analysis of the decline in our defence spending.

Alex Baker: The debate about percentages of GDP is slightly irrelevant, because even if defence spending were raised to 3%, we have no ability to spend that money within the industrial base, as we do not have the capacity. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to look at a much more innovative approach to some of these things, with multilateral options? I have been campaigning for the UK to join the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank for over a year.

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend has advocated for the Defence, Security and Resilience Bank and alternative finance methods for the past two years. It was pleasing to see the DSR Bank announcement from Canada over the last couple of days alongside the multilateral defence mechanism announcement from our Government, which, significantly, was joined by Poland. I hope that we will see the DSR and the MDM aligned as we go forward.

Steve Barclay: Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bailey: Not at the moment.

Let us jump forward to tech. It is not about how much we spend but about how we spend it, as we heard repeatedly in the debate. It is about how we rearm and get to warfighting readiness. The DIP will energise the transformation of our armed forces and target resources to reflect how war is waged today. We will sequence the delivery of a NATO-first transformed and integrated force powered by modern technology. Through the DIP, AI autonomy and uncrewed systems will receive the sustained increase in support that reflects their strategic importance.

I will pivot to the remarks made by the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells about the hybrid Navy. The DIP speeds up the transition to the hybrid Navy. I have a great deal of respect for him, but it is incoherent to talk about future manned flight but talk down an autonomous fleet. On my visit to Portsmouth only last week, a member of our Royal Navy said "Never again" as we walked past a Type 45, and made it clear that the work on the Type 83 had stopped a significant time ago—it is an incoherent conversation. For the Type 23, every refurbishment takes two to three years and costs us £100 million, while £115 million has given our nation

the autonomous capability that we are rolling out in the middle east. That is how incoherent the hon. Member's argument is.

Mike Martin: I specifically said that I am fully in favour of moving to autonomy as fast as we can. All I questioned was whether we could go from a PowerPoint concept for multiple vessels to their being at sea on operations within nine years. That is all I questioned—not the idea that we need to move to autonomy.

Mr Bailey: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I agree that this will be testing, but we must take up the challenge, and we need people like him on the Defence Committee to ensure that we are held to account while we proceed with delivery.

The DIP also speeds up the transition to: a digitally enabled Army that is 10 times more lethal; the next generation of combat air, including a potent mix of crewed and uncrewed air power; a new uncrewed systems taskforce to rapidly develop and deliver field autonomous capabilities; and Europe's biggest drone testing site in Swindon. I remind those who do down our nation and say, "We aren't building enough" that at the moment we are providing 150,000 drones a year to Ukraine.

Steve Barclay: Could the Minister clarify why the efficiency target has gone up over 73% in a year compared with the strategic defence review? Was the SDR just too unambitious?

Mr Bailey: I thank the right hon. Member for his question. Perhaps we should have a discussion about it outside, because of its ambiguity—*[Interruption.]* The right hon. Member and I will speak afterwards.

The programme of rapid rearmament mentioned in the motion of this debate has not only begun; we are well on our way to delivering it, with significant and further increases in funding to come. That means an unprecedented investment in new technologies, new munitions, new factories and new jobs. It means creating a path to 3% and then 3.5% of GDP, and having honest public conversations about the very serious threats we face. As a fellow veteran, I know how committed the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells is to strengthening UK defence. I hope we get behind this national endeavour, which represents an historic upturn in support for our military and for our brilliant service personnel who keep Britain safe in an increasingly uncertain world.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Mike Martin to wind up very quickly.

4.40 pm

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I will not list the constituencies of all the hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed; they know who they are and I thank them very much.

Three themes came out of this debate that were interesting and bear repeating. First, we are already in a war and it is happening in different ways and it is happening below the threshold, but the threshold is moving about and we need to think about that. Secondly, there is the point about national resilience, the economy and the industrial base. In an age of drones that get depleted, with a cycle in which the drone model changes every six weeks, it is about how quickly we can build stuff. Nations win wars, and we need our economy to reflect that. Thirdly, we need to trust the public and tell them not just about the threat that we face but about the current state of our armed forces and where they need to get to.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House recognises the danger that Russia's renewed illegal invasion of Ukraine poses to European and British security; further recognises the threat to the international order and the UK posed by China; also recognises the increasing uncertainty surrounding the reliability of the US as an ally within NATO; acknowledges the current shortfalls in the UK's ability to deploy a credible fighting force; further acknowledges that this lack of military capability is resulting in the coercion of Britain and its interests in the international sphere; and calls on the Government to begin a programme of rapid rearmament to strengthen the defence of the UK and its allies.

NHS Corridor Care

4.42 pm

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered NHS corridor care.

I express my sincere thanks to the Backbench Business Committee for granting time to the important subject of corridor care, and I declare my interest as a proud serving NHS emergency doctor working in A&E at St George's hospital in my Tooting constituency. In my 21 years as a doctor—I know; I can hear the audible gasp because I do not look old enough—I have never felt more proud to serve with a group of individuals such as those at St George's hospital. The leadership team, to which we welcome a new CEO in Mat Shaw, and the team of nurses, doctors, reception staff, porters and healthcare assistants in my emergency department, make me proud to go and do every single shift that I do there, and it feels like a pleasure, not a chore.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for her fantastic work in the NHS as a doctor; it is much appreciated. Like many NHS workers, she struggles against the odds and sees on a daily basis the impact of corridor care. Does she agree that NHS staff feel frustration with corridor care as much as patients do, and that they want to act and see it end as much as anyone else? Crucially, the key is more staff. Is that not, ultimately, what we all want?

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend and I are not performing a double act today, but he leads me on perfectly to the next part of my speech, as I go on to say that "corridor care" is something of a misnomer. Treatment in a corridor, far away from oxygen, proper equipment and emergency cords to pull, without privacy or dignity, without access to decent and appropriate toilet facilities, and without the highest standard of infection prevention and control, cannot be classified as care in any realistic sense. It is important to say that the staff go above and beyond with what they have. It is not the case that patients are suffering in pain because the staff do not care or do not provide a first-class service; it is because, quite simply, a corridor or any other space not built to serve and care for patients in is not the right place for a patient to be.

It is not just corridors, because patients across the NHS have been seen in antenatal rooms, store cupboards, waiting rooms and even car parks, filling every conceivable inch of a hospital. Members can imagine that people are coming in feeling particularly vulnerable, and they are happy to get the care wherever they can get it. I have never heard of any of my colleagues across the country say that they have had a patient who refused to be seen in a cupboard; they are just grateful to be seen. Even the official definition of so-called corridor care is problematic. NHS data relies on local clinical judgment about whether an environment is safe and whether patients' privacy and dignity are being maintained. Trusts are applying these standards differently, and some feel the need, sadly, to game the system to artificially lower their corridor care statistics.

Irene Campbell (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): I would just like to highlight that the Scottish Government do not record or publish any statistics on the number of patients being treated in corridors. However, we know that it happens. The Crosshouse hospital, which serves my constituency, was recorded in January as having one of Scotland's most under-pressure emergency departments. It exceeded capacity by 50% in December, revealing corridor care conditions in the hospital. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important to record accurate data so that we can track improvement?

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I am so sorry to hear of the situation in her community in Scotland. It is regrettable, and patients and their families deserve better. Absolutely, if we cannot accurately assess the issue in full, it is impossible to deal with, and I hope the Minister will talk today about how she will commit to revising this definition to make it more robust.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate and for allowing me to intervene. The Mid Yorkshire Teaching NHS trust published data about patients in corridors for the first time only in May, and in that month it recorded 121 patients per day being treated outside clinical rooms and areas. A constituent of mine, Catherine, wrote to me to describe seeing at first hand elderly people waiting in corridors for hours with no family members to support them. Does the hon. Member agree that corridor care has moved from being an exceptional problem to an everyday issue in many NHS trusts, and that the Government must act to address the root cause of this issue?

Dr Allin-Khan: The hon. Member is right, but I know that the Government care deeply about this. This is not something on which I am in tension with the Government in any way. I have spoken to the Ministers and the Secretary of State, and I know that they are committed to acting and ensuring that every single patient across our country gets the best possible care. Let us be really clear: the NHS should not be a political football. Safe and dignified healthcare should not be a political football. I hope that we are all in agreement on this issue today. I would have hoped to see more Members on the Opposition Benches today, and I hope that their absence is not a reflection of how much they care about the issue, because, quite frankly, we owe it to all our communities to get this right.

I know from my own experience, as will other hon. Friends in the Chamber, that when someone comes to A&E, it is often the worst day of their life. It could be the worst day of their life because of their experience as a patient, or it could be the worst day of their life because someone they love—their child, their partner, their mother or their father—is dying or has died. When we think about the dignity and care that we give, we have to look at it holistically—not simply as a set of symptoms that we are treating but as a family and the experience that they take away with them of what has happened on that day. People are in tears, people are in pain, and we owe it to them to get this right.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Many people in my constituency have written about experiencing corridor care, and that loss of dignity when vulnerable and elderly patients are sitting in corridors. Does the hon. Member agree that we desperately need urgent action to ensure that dignity is prioritised wherever care is given?

Dr Allin-Khan: That is absolutely right—the hon. Member makes a valid point. People can be enduring a heart attack; they can be losing a baby; they can have had a road traffic accident and be lying on a trolley, blocked and collared, or lying on a board and looking up at the ceiling, wondering when they might make it into the scanner. People will definitely be having a time in hospital that will be etched on their memory, and sadly for many patients, and many loved ones, that is the last day they will ever see—the A&E will be the last place they know.

In the NHS we want that experience to be as comfortable and reassuring as possible. We want the best possible care, delivered in the fastest possible time, to patients who are treated fairly, efficiently, and with compassion and dignity. Frankly, that is impossible in a corridor, even with the greatest will in the world. In my A&E at St George's hospital we have patients in corridors, as we do across the country, but we have nurses who are there and dedicated to check their observations, ask if they need pain relief, and try to deliver—and they do—the best possible gold-standard care. But there is no privacy in a corridor, or in a cupboard, or anywhere where there should be, and that simply is not right. In emergency departments across the country, regardless of data that some trusts try to put forward to show that it is in only a certain number of places, we know from our inboxes that corridor care is everywhere.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. She has spoken about some of the impacts of this issue. My 80-odd-year-old mum was recently admitted to Airedale hospital with acute respiratory issues. She had to wait in a chair for over 12 hours, alongside my dad, in a very undignified way. Does my hon. Friend agree that ideally we should be preventing admissions for older and frail patients, and does she believe that the stronger proactive primary and community care services proposed by the Government with neighbourhood health teams could help to prevent some admissions for older and frail elderly people like my mum?

Dr Allin-Khan: I hope my hon. Friend's mum is making a swift and healthy recovery, and I am sorry to hear that that was her family's experience. I agree that prioritising care for the frailer, elder population can often be dealt with more effectively before someone comes to hospital. I also know that my hospital of St George's in Tooting has a special dedicated frailty unit that goes a long way in speeding things up for people. Good pilots are going on across the country, where care can be taken to our elderly community before people come in. Tackling social care is something I am coming to in my speech, because we could not have a speech on corridor care without a huge nod—or an entire body bend—to social care and the need to fix it.

While this situation is extremely hard for patients and their families, the toll it takes on healthcare staff is huge. By healthcare staff I do not just mean doctors such as myself, but nurses, porters, healthcare assistants and cleaners—we are one big family in the NHS, and no one job is more important than any other. We are unable to do any of our roles without all the others, and for that we are truly grateful. Knowing that they might be caring for a patient in their mid-80s, who is trying to hold back tears because they do not want to upset anybody very publicly in a corridor, is absolutely heartbreaking and takes a toll on their mental health. Our nurses, doctors and all the staff I have mentioned are going home absolutely burnt out—this is not what they trained and studied for, and not what they go to work to deliver. They go to work to deliver the best possible gold-standard care for the community that they care about.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): On my hon. Friend's point about burnout, we are entering what for many Cornish men and women is the dreaded tourist season, when our population doubles or trebles. My constituents in Camborne, Redruth and Hayle are concerned about the chronic capacity issues and the impact of the tourist season on patient safety at Treliske, our one general hospital that covers the whole of Cornwall. Does my hon. Friend agree that NHS workforce planning and funding for places like Cornwall need to reflect the additional pressures placed on healthcare services during periods of peak tourist activity?

Dr Allin-Khan: I remember meeting my hon. Friend before he became an MP when I visited a hospital in his community, and I know that he has been a powerful advocate from long before he came to this place. I thank him for that and for raising this issue. We often think about winter pressures and forget that different communities experience different pressures—it is not a one-size-fits-all situation. It is important to look at the tourist season in Cornwall, and I am hopeful that the Government take that into account in their planning.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be appalled, as we all are, to know that there are places up and down the country where bodies are being wheeled to the mortuary past living patients in corridors. People are spending hours in pain and distress, desperate for privacy, and exhausted staff are working while feeling that they have one arm tied behind their back.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is being generous in taking interventions. There are few Members of this House, if any, who know about this subject in more detail than her. In Scotland, where my own constituents are facing the problem of corridor care, the Royal College of Nursing said a few weeks ago that we are "trailing behind" even what is happening in England, partly because the NHS in England is publishing statistics on corridor care. Does she agree that the Scottish Government should do the same so that we can track corridor care and therefore help resolve it?

Dr Allin-Khan: My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for the people of Scotland. Yes, of course those statistics should be published, because in order to have any understanding of the issue, we have to have the data. Quite frankly, without the data, it is "not happening". We should keep pushing for that and I hope that he puts the clip of him asking this question on social media to spark a little fire under some boffins to make that happen.

The reality is that corridor care is happening in every corner of the country. The drivers of the issue of corridor care are multifaceted, but one key cause that we cannot escape is our failing social care system that forces medically fit patients to sit and wait in hospital

[Dr Allin-Khan]

beds, seemingly endlessly. Without a hospital back door that works efficiently, we simply cannot get people through the front door to treat them effectively and move them on appropriately. The social care sector must be empowered because that will prevent hospital admissions in the first place and support timely discharges.

All sorts of unappealing names are given to people who have to spend a long time in hospital waiting for appropriate social care. Our vulnerable elderly, our grandmas and grandpas, are called bed blockers because they cannot get the social care that they need to safely be in their own homes. This requires a complete change in thinking and approach, one that understands the inherent link between the NHS and social care. Most significantly, we need leadership that is willing to address the crisis with the urgency it deserves, so that people get the highest quality of care.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): One of my relatives went into hospital to get intravenous antibiotics but later died in that hospital due to being stuck there. She was ready to move on to a community hospital, but she gave up because she was scared in the hospital—they did not keep an eye on her, she fell out of bed and cracked her head open, and she later passed away. Does the hon. Lady agree that we need a lot more investment in social care to ensure that does not happen and our relatives do not have to go into hospital in the first place?

Dr Allin-Khan: I am heartbroken to hear about the hon. Member's relative. This is the point: anyone who works in a hospital understands that, just by being in an emergency department waiting room and accessing people who are unwell, it is possible to catch other illnesses.

One thing we try to do is prevent unnecessary admission, because we know that a vulnerable elderly person who comes to hospital and is admitted to a ward with people who are unwell is more at risk of catching illnesses. As in the case of the relative of the hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance), people can be vulnerable and not in an appropriate bed. There may not be enough staff able to check on them appropriately. Without tackling social care, we will never get on top of that issue. I am truly sorry to hear about the hon. Member's relative. Simply put, we cannot dither or delay; we need answers to the social care crisis, and we need them quickly.

Another group of people who are very often overlooked are mental health patients. They continue to spend extraordinary amounts of time waiting in A&E. People experiencing a mental health crisis are two-and-a-half times more likely to face long delays in A&E. Just for a moment, let me paint a picture of what that looks like. The patient could be somebody with auditory or visual hallucinations who feels extremely scared and vulnerable. They may need security to ensure that they do not leave their room. They may be wondering what they have done to deserve this. They may not have staff there who know about their usual medication. Very often, they are shouting very loudly, and other patients will be concerned, not understanding that they have a mental health issue.

As doctors and nurses, we are not allowed to talk about somebody else in the hospital, so we can have a very loud A&E department, with someone who is very vulnerable—screaming and shouting and really suffering—being completely in the wrong place for so long and with everyone confused about why they are there. That is not appropriate, safe or dignified for mental health patients.

We are as far away as ever from parity between mental and physical health in the NHS. As I have just outlined, we witness that daily in emergency departments across the country. We need to create more partnerships between our emergency departments and mental health trusts, where mental health patients can be triaged and seen by a mental health team in a more dignified and appropriate manner.

St George's hospital, where all hon. Members will know by now that I work my A&E shifts, is exploring a partnership with South West London and St George's Mental Health NHS Trust, which would set up an assessment unit to triage mental health patients outside the emergency department. That would be safer, more appropriate and more dignified, and a calmer and more pleasant environment in which those patients could be assessed by mental health professionals.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that often this is compounded when somebody has been arrested and police officers are sitting for hours? I was recently in A&E, and there were two police officers there for the duration that a member of the public was there. They may also need somewhere else to deal with that situation.

Dr Allin-Khan: I think my hon. Friend has been on most of my last A&E shifts with me. *[Laughter.]* That is absolutely a common occurrence, and that is not the best, safest or most efficient place for any of our incredible teams of police officers and mental health nurses, who are trying to get on with their job. It is incredibly distressing. In parts of hospitals, colleagues tell me that they are waiting in relatives' rooms with police officers and mentally unwell patients next to the resus area of an A&E department with bereaved families. None of that should be happening for anyone involved.

I am sure the Minister will agree that the best solution to this crisis will involve a holistic, multi-agency approach involving councils, social care providers and NHS trusts. As I have just outlined, this unacceptable and dangerous situation is shared not just by patients, but by their families and NHS staff, who are trying to do their best in a difficult situation.

Moving on to the professional bodies, corridor care has rightly been condemned by the Royal College of Nursing, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine—my royal college—the British Medical Association, and other professional bodies and trade unions. Some 65% of respondents to the Royal College of Emergency Medicine's violence and aggression survey, which is due to be published later this year, said that care in inappropriate and non-clinical spaces contributes to the increase in violence and aggression towards staff and other patients. The impact of corridor care is clearly much more wide-reaching than we realise. It results in violence against our own NHS heroes—the very best of humanity—who, in a fractured and dangerous world, exemplify compassion, decency and selfless care for strangers. I can tell the House beyond a shadow of a doubt that staff in emergency settings are upset, traumatised and driven to tears of

rage, and we know that NHS staff have to take a disproportionately large number of days off for the sake of their mental health.

Adam Dance: The hon. Member is making a fantastic speech. On the topic of staff, one of the biggest problems in Yeovil hospital is bullying culture, as we saw in the Baroness Amos report in relation to maternity. Does the hon. Member believe that staff should be free to speak up without the worry of losing their job?

Dr Allin-Khan: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. Although it digresses from the debate about corridor care, I will happily answer his question. I think everybody in the NHS must be able to go to work free of intimidation, bullying and harassment. Wherever that happens, people should feel free to speak out—not to their direct line manager, because very often they are involved, but to a safe third party within the hospital, clinic or public setting where it happens, so that they will not be concerned about finding themselves moved or no longer in the job they love. I thank the hon. Member for raising that point; I have gone off topic, but it is an important point to acknowledge.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I am sure the hon. Lady understands how much support there is in the Chamber for this debate, and will be coming to a conclusion shortly.

Dr Allin-Khan: Thank you very much for raising that, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am nothing if not a talker. I am sorry that I am taking such a long time, and I will move forward quickly with my speech.

The Royal College of Emergency Care and I, as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on emergency care, have put together a number of recommendations. First, restore patient flow by reducing delayed discharges; secondly, focus equally on four-hour and 12-hour performance; thirdly, reform funding and incentives; fourthly, spread responsibility for patient flow across the hospital; and lastly, address inequalities in access and outcomes. We cannot have a debate like this without recognising the terrible inequalities that scar our healthcare service—we have to work to reduce the disproportionate burden of long waits on deprived communities, older patients and people with mental health needs. Those measures would make a real difference to hospital systems, patient experience, and the overall effectiveness of the NHS.

The founding principles of the NHS are stretched to breaking point every time someone waits for 10 hours, in terrible pain and sometimes in their own urine, under the harsh strip lights of a corridor, unable to feel that they can ask for help. It is completely undignified. The Minister will be very familiar with the stats we have sent to the Department, which show the disproportionate number of deaths in our country that are due to corridor care. The fact that we in the UK have people dying because they have been treated in a corridor is simply unacceptable to me and other Members of this House, so let us commit today to ending it once and for all, and ending corridor care forever.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): We will start with an immediate five-minute time limit.

5.9 pm

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I begin by thanking the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for setting out so brilliantly, with her professional expertise and human touch, what it means for corridor care to be a normal habit across the NHS in all parts of the country—not just in the winter, with winter pressures, but throughout the year. She made many good points, and I hope I can add some context with the stories I have gathered in Mid Sussex, from constituents who have experienced corridor care first-hand, whether as patients or staff. They have shared some of the most frightening, painful and vulnerable moments of their lives with me. First, I thank them, and to those whose stories I cannot share today due to a lack of time, I apologise.

Many of those people wanted the House to be told one thing before anything else: the staff who cared for them were extraordinary. They spoke of nurses who never stopped smiling despite being exhausted, doctors who apologised because they knew patients deserved better, and paramedics who stayed compassionate under impossible pressure. One constituent arrived at the Princess Royal hospital in Haywards Heath after falling and breaking both a shoulder and a kneecap. It was a Friday night, and A&E was overflowing. After X-rays, they spent hours on a trolley in a corridor beside the nurses' station because there was nowhere else for them to go. They told me that the nurses were attentive and kind throughout the night. They checked in constantly and did everything they could. However, kindness cannot create another treatment cubicle, compassion cannot magic up another doctor, and dedication cannot create a bed that is simply not there.

Another constituent, Chris Philpot, shared an experience that I found impossible to forget. Following a ruptured appendix and serious complications, he spent 19 hours on a trolley in the corridor at the Royal Sussex county hospital. During that time, he watched an elderly lady have her blood pressure taken while resting her arm on his leg because there was nowhere else to support it. No privacy, no dignity—that is not the standard of care patients should expect in modern Britain.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): My hon. Friend has just highlighted a point that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan). That kind of experience causes concern not only for its lack of dignity, but for infection control, antimicrobial resistance and hospital-acquired infections. That kind of treatment not only has a lack of dignity, but can be lethal. That is a huge public health issue, which my hon. Friend's specific example highlights.

Alison Bennett: I agree with my hon. Friend. What we see time and again is that one problem becomes another until eventually the patient pays the price. My constituent, Catherine Jeater, has seen corridor care as a patient and as a relative of a patient. She watched her father being treated for appendicitis in an emergency department that was so overcrowded that patients were double-parked on trolleys, changing into hospital gowns in full view of strangers. Months later, while undergoing chemotherapy herself, she attended the Princess Royal hospital with a chest infection. Because she was immunocompromised, she should have been isolated. Instead, she received

[Alison Bennett]

intravenous antibiotics sitting on a chair in a corridor, because no cubicles were available. She told me the staff were amazing, but she also made it clear that amazing staff should never have to work in those conditions

Perhaps the most difficult responses I have received were from the healthcare professionals themselves. One doctor told me that they regularly examine patients in corridors. Another said that corridor care is not just an A&E problem, and that it is now normal for people to be on trolleys in non-clinical areas throughout the hospital. That means there are no curtains to provide privacy, no piped oxygen and no name above the bed, and patient safety is inevitably compromised. A senior nurse described to me the moral injury that they and their colleagues face every day, having to try to deliver the best care possible in terrible conditions, all the while apologising for something that is beyond their power to fix. They have to do that every single day. I am not personally enjoying this third heat wave, but imagine A&E departments without air conditioning: they become furnaces. Imagine trying to treat incredibly frail patients when the temperature in a corridor is 40°C. Another clinician wrote something that stopped me in my tracks. They said that corridor care had become so common that they were teaching medical students and junior doctors how to provide it—and that is not just during winter pressures, but all year round.

This should trouble every single one of us. We are training the next generation of clinicians to adapt to something that should never have become normal in the first place. The real danger is not simply that corridor care exists, and not that we begin to accept it, but that we shrug our shoulders and tell ourselves that this is just how the NHS works now. The solutions are not easy—hospitals cannot fix this on their own—but we do need to get it right. We need to invest in capacity, in workforce, in social care, and in reducing waiting lists so that treatable conditions do not turn into emergencies.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Alison Bennett: I am sorry, but I will not, in the interests of time.

This is happening not because our NHS staff are failing, but because they are being asked to deliver excellent care in circumstances that make excellence almost impossible. My constituents have not shared these stories because they have lost faith in the NHS; they have shared them because they believe that the NHS can and should be better than this. Let me therefore end with a plea that we never describe corridor care as the "new normal", because there is nothing normal about receiving intravenous antibiotics during chemo in a corridor. There is nothing normal about waiting 19 hours on a trolley. There is nothing normal about losing your privacy, your dignity, and sometimes even your safety, simply because there is nowhere else to go. The NHS was founded on the belief that every person matters. We need to make that happen once again.

5.16 pm

Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford) (Lab): Let me first offer huge thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for her brilliant speech, and for the work that she does most weeks and about which, in my opinion, she does not speak loudly enough.

My mum has been rushed to A&E twice in the last two months, and I have been with her. The paramedics were amazing and the hospital staff were amazing, but nothing prepared me for what I witnessed: trolley after trolley backed up along corridors as hospital staff and family members visiting patients in A&E walked hurriedly up and down, trying to cause as little disruption as they possibly could. I saw staff trying to pull a curtain across halfway down the corridor to provide some semblance of dignity for vulnerable patients who were trying to use bedpans, but it was futile, given the number of people walking up and down. It was harrowing. I can only describe it as something that one would see in a war zone rather than in modern Britain.

When I asked the staff, "Is it always like this?" they said, "Yes. It comes and goes when it gets busy. It gets worse at weekends. But ultimately we do not have enough beds, and we do not have enough staff to be able to cope with this level of pressure." I heard similar stories from my constituents, but I will give the House just one today. An 80-year-old who attended A&E with his frail wife spent 15 hours there, eight in a wheelchair and the rest on a trolley in a corridor.

This is not just a symptom of winter pressures; it is the visible sign of a healthcare system that has been stretched beyond breaking point by years of political decisions. For years we saw hospital beds disappear, staff vacancies grow, social care neglected, community health services hollowed out, and local authority budgets slashed, and the consequences were entirely predictable. Now we see patients who are well enough to leave hospital but have nowhere to go, emergency departments overflowing with wait times that no sick person should ever have to endure, and people being treated in places that were never designed to deliver healthcare.

No one should pretend that this can be fixed overnight, but if we are honest, we know that we have to act fast. Emergency departments are still operating beyond safe capacity, and people remain stuck in hospital because social care, community services, mental health support and general practice still do not have the necessary capacity. If we want to end corridor care, we must deal with its root causes, not just the consequences, because it does not just begin when someone arrives at A&E; it begins when they cannot get a GP appointment, when mental health support is not there, when local authorities cannot provide a care package. It begins when care cannot happen at home. Community nurses who should be visiting vulnerable patients regularly cannot do so, because they are stretched beyond breaking point.

There is a lot of talk about virtual wards providing hospital-grade care at home. That sounds brilliant, but the fact is that the system does not have the staff capacity to deliver it, so we need a properly funded long-term workforce plan that delivers fair pay, expands education and apprenticeships, improves retention, ensures that we have safe staffing standards, and gives frontline staff a real voice in how services are designed. It also means finally delivering a national care service that brings care back under public ownership and control, that delivers a universal entitlement to care based on need, not ability to pay, and that is publicly accountable, properly funded and built around people's needs, not the fragmented marketised provision that we see at the

moment. It also means investing in community nursing, neighbourhood health teams, rehabilitation services and mental health, so that fewer people reach crisis and more people can leave hospital safely when they are ready. It means taking prevention seriously too, because every £1 spent on improving housing, reducing child poverty, cleaning up our air, and supporting healthier communities strengthens public health and saves many more pounds further down the line.

Our NHS was founded on a simple principle—healthcare should be based on need, not the ability to pay—and corridor care betrays that principle. We need to see our Government restore the promise that when someone is at their most vulnerable, our national health service will be there for them—not in a corridor or on a trolley, but with the compassion, privacy and care that every person deserves.

5.21 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for securing the debate. This is a really important topic, and I do not think there has been enough focus on it in the last few years. Her speech was very powerful, and the hon. Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) made really important points about corridor care not happening in a silo. There is a wider system of things going on, so we need to look at this more broadly.

I feel strongly about this issue because I have seen the shocking reality for myself at East Surrey hospital, in my constituency, and at St Helier hospital, which is outside my constituency but serves some of my constituents. Patients are being cared for in spaces that were never designed for clinical treatment, and staff are trying their best to do their jobs in impossible circumstances. I cannot imagine how upsetting it must be to go into hospital with a serious medical problem, only to spend hours on a trolley, surrounded by noise and footfall and without any sort of privacy, and to be denied basic dignity. In fact, I saw one example of a patient who was near automatic doors, which opened and shut every time someone walked past them. That is not dignified or appropriate in any shape or form.

How can it be right that doctors are forced to discuss private medical matters with patients in public hallways, or even to attempt examinations and treatment without the facilities that they need being close at hand? Let me be clear: all the staff I met on my visits were doing the best they could in extremely difficult circumstances. The problem was not down to their lack of commitment or compassion; it was down to a system that is operating without enough physical space to meet the excessive demand placed upon it. The previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), promised to eliminate corridor care by the next general election in 2029, and we need to understand how it will be addressed. I think we all accept that this is not an easy thing to solve, but it would be good to know what steps will be taken to address this big issue.

The crux of the issue appears to be hospital flow. Emergency departments cannot move patients into wards when beds are full, and beds remain occupied when people who are medically fit to leave cannot access the care, rehabilitation or support that they need outside hospital. Delayed discharge therefore remains part of the problem. Without sufficient social care capacity, community service and intermediate care, hospitals cannot safely discharge patients.

At St Helier, there is another fundamental issue: physical space. The hospital is trying to offer a modern service in buildings that the trust says are no longer fit for purpose. Much of the estate is older than the NHS itself, and staff contend with leaking roofs, flooding, damp, mould and buildings that are difficult to keep at a suitable temperature. Those conditions make it harder to provide safe care, and place still more pressure on staff, who are already overstretched.

One example of the type of challenge is the women's health block, which is currently a big issue. Routine testing has identified low levels of legionella and pseudomonas in the water supply. While filters have been installed and regular testing commenced, that highlights the fact that these measures are not a sustainable long-term solution, given the age and complexity of the building's water system. This is hugely disappointing for patients and staff, particularly considering the hard work that has gone into improving the hospital's women's health services.

That is why I strongly support the planned new specialist emergency care hospital in Sutton to be delivered alongside significant investment to modernise both St Helier and Epsom hospitals. The new hospital would bring together major emergency care, acute medicine, critical care and emergency surgery in modern facilities designed around the needs of patients and staff, while crucially leaving 85% of services at the existing hospital sites. This is exactly the sort of investment urgently needed to reduce overcrowding and end the indignity of patients being treated in corridors, yet the start of construction has been delayed—pushed back to 2033. I urge the Government to reconsider that timeframe, as that would be important in helping to address the challenge we face with corridor care.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. The speaking limit will drop to three minutes after the next speaker.

5.26 pm

Naushabah Khan (Gillingham and Rainham) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for bringing this important matter to the House, and for talking so eloquently about her experiences on the frontline.

Few issues speak to the state of our national health service more than this one. Since being elected, my inbox and advice surgeries have been inundated with heartbreaking and, frankly, harrowing stories from constituents who have either experienced care in a hospital corridor themselves or have witnessed the experiences of loved ones. May alone saw more than 90,000 instances of patients receiving care in clinically inappropriate settings, which is almost 3,000 people every day across our nation. In their most vulnerable hour, patients are being stripped of privacy and dignity, and left without a call bell or even sometimes access to a toilet.

I will give Members some examples of the cases that have been raised with me. One constituent wrote to say that their mother, who was on end-of-life care, was

[Naushabah Khan]

treated in a corridor. I cannot even begin to imagine how distressing that must have been. Another reported on how she was treated in a single patient cubicle that had been stripped of its bed and fitted with six chairs, and hearing other people's medical history, watching their cannulas being inserted and, harrowingly, witnessing a confused elderly man beg for his daughter.

I look to Conservative Members—unfortunately, not many of them are here—when talking about this and about exactly how we got here, because the normalisation of these practices over 14 years of Conservative Government has brought us to this point. Indeed, it was under their watch that 12-hour waits in A&E rose twentyfold. Lord Darzi's report laid it all bare. We inherited a health service in a critical condition and broken by over a decade of under-investment.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is important to recognise this wider legacy. In my area of Reading, we are waiting for a new hospital to be built. One was promised by the last Government, but no funding was provided, and there are very real-world implications of continuing with old buildings in such a state, like our A&E. I appreciate my hon. Friend raising this matter, and I look forward to the Minister providing further details.

Naushabah Khan: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that very important issue.

Yet while corridor care was rising in our hospitals, the previous Government did not count the numbers. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), who as Health Secretary chose to publish the official data, because how can we fix what we cannot measure? I also welcome the steps taken by the Government to turn the tide on the mess we inherited, such as the millions of extra appointments delivered, bringing waiting lists down from record highs, and the commitment to end corridor care by 2029.

However, corridor care does not begin in the corridor itself, as many Members have noted. It begins with the hospital bed that cannot be freed, as well as the lack of investment in the wider landscape and the lack of support in our communities. This January, the data suggested that one in 10 NHS beds were occupied by people who were medically fit to leave but had no safe place to go—a failure that costs the state £2.7 billion a year, and that costs some of our constituents their lives.

Monica Harding: My mother, who is 94 and fit and healthy, fell and fractured her collarbone. She went in and was medically discharged on the same day, but because there was no care support for her, she was then in hospital for a week, bed blocking. Because of the quality of care she received, when she came out she ended up with a very severe urinary tract infection and sepsis, and then had to stay in hospital for six weeks. Obviously that cost my mother a lot, but it also cost the NHS a huge amount of money. Does the hon. Lady agree that one of the problems is adult social care and that we need to fix it?

Naushabah Khan: The hon. Member makes a very powerful point. I will come to adult social care in a moment.

We simply cannot end corridor care at the front door of the hospital when the back door remains jammed shut. I welcome the steps taken to reform adult social care—a £3.7 billion funding boost for local authorities—but it is clear that we must go further. I eagerly await Baroness Casey's independent commission on adult social care. However, I am concerned that the review's terms of reference call for recommendations to be implemented in a phased way over a decade. That is simply not fast enough. Social care reform must work in lockstep with NHS reform. A commission reporting in 2026 and 2028, with implementation stretched over a decade and beyond, will not be able to enact the scale of change needed to meet our targets. I urge the Government to move at pace.

Anna Dixon: Will my hon. Friend give way?

Naushabah Khan: No, I will not take any further interventions, thank you.

Lastly, I would like to pay tribute to the nurses, doctors and staff who keep Medway hospital in my constituency of Gillingham and Rainham running. In this House, we all receive correspondence from frustrated members of the public regarding the state of our NHS. However, it is the staff who carry the moral injury of apologising, shift after shift, for conditions that they did not create.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I have a correction to make. Back Benchers are on a four-minute speaking limit. We have found some more time.

5.31 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I congratulate the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) on securing this debate. Some very important points have been made. I am going to skip through some of those important points to reinforce the message, and bring forward issues raised directly with me by my constituents.

What we have heard is that what was once regarded as an exceptional state of affairs in the NHS has become so commonplace that Parliament is now debating it as a national issue in its own right. We have heard about the lack of investment and the redirection of resources, and about the issue being compounded over the many years of the previous Government. I acknowledge and recognise the efforts made by the current Government to try to address this, as well as many other challenges in the NHS. I congratulate them on their efforts to bring down waiting lists by many, many thousands; my constituents appreciate that.

We heard that more and more that patients are being treated away from clinical and sterile places: in corridors, cupboards and other places not designed for treatment. They are being denied their privacy, dignity and adequate support. One doctor described patients dying because they could not access appropriate clinical areas in time. That is not what we would class as a jewel-in-the-crown public service—but that is what the NHS is, and all of us across the House want to restore it back to being the world-class, free-at-the-point-of-need care service for every single person in our country.

For many years, hospitals under pressure often managed overcrowding by keeping patients and ambulances outside emergency departments while they waited to be handed over and moved into clinical areas. That resulted in ambulance waiting times going through the roof and many patients not receiving the emergency paramedic assistance they clearly required. Under the previous Government, that issue was displaced: from holding patients inside ambulances to moving them into the hospital building, freeing up ambulances to go and serve other patients.

I am not a medical doctor, but I am a scientist and an engineer, and what is obvious is that the 40 hospitals under the previous Government did not get delivered—not all of them were new, but that is also true of the ones that were to be refurbished and expanded. As with prison spaces, we lack the number of beds in our country that the NHS needs to provide safe and dignified care for every patient who seeks treatment.

Catherine, one of my constituents, wrote to me to say that she went into hospital with her husband. She waited in a corridor for five hours, but she saw many elderly patients with no relatives or friends with them, who had been waiting there for many hours before she arrived, and nobody was able to look after them or offer them water. They had to keep asking for water from other patients. That experience will exacerbate somebody's medical condition and increase demand on the NHS. We have heard—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Sarah Hall.

5.36 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): Let us be clear from the beginning: corridor care is unacceptable. No patient should be treated in a corridor. No family should watch a loved one receive care without the privacy and dignity that they deserve. No member of our brilliant NHS staff should be put in the impossible position of delivering care in an environment that they know is not right. I know how deeply my constituents feel about this, and hardly a week goes by without someone contacting me about their experience of Warrington hospital. They tell me about the kindness of the staff despite incredibly difficult circumstances; others tell me about the length of time that their loved ones have waited to be seen, and those experiences are reflected in the figures.

In May this year, Warrington hospital recorded the second-worst 12-hour A&E performance in the entire country. Those figures are deeply concerning, and it would be wrong of me to pretend otherwise, but if we only talk about A&E waiting times, we miss the bigger picture. Corridor care does not begin in a corridor: it begins when patients are medically fit to leave hospital but the care or support that they need at home is not yet in place. It begins when patient flow slows down, leaving emergency departments carrying pressures that they were never designed to absorb. It begins when a town like Warrington grows significantly without its infrastructure keeping up.

Anna Dixon: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that it is not about fixing the problem at the front door; it is about fixing the problem at the back door. Does she agree that closer integration of health and social care is part of the answer to enable that flow through hospitals out into the community? During the summing up, I hope the Minister might carefully consider my amendment to the Health Bill on health and care integration—my hon. Friend might also look at that.

Sarah Hall: I absolutely agree; the NHS system as a whole is very fragmented, and the lack of connectivity is a big issue. Social care is a core component and it needs to be a priority going forward.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Of course, we must fix the back door and help people get out of hospital quicker, but there is also a challenge at the front door, with too many people feeling that they need to go to secondary care for health treatment. Is it not so important that we fix the foundations of the NHS by having a shift to community treatment, so that fewer people feel that they have to go to a hospital in the first place?

Sarah Hall: I agree with my hon. Friend and will touch on that point in a second, using Warrington as an example.

I am pleased that our local trust has already taken steps and is rightly treating corridor care and waiting times as a priority, but there is more to do. That is why I have been working closely with our local NHS, Ministers, and Cheshire and Merseyside ICB to move beyond talking about the problem, and to start changing how urgent and emergency care works in Warrington. Together with our local trust, I have developed a three-part pragmatic plan to improve health services for our town.

Given the pressure on A&E and waiting times, the first priority is clear: a new urgent treatment centre for Warrington. In April, I was pleased to announce that proposals had moved forwards, with architects beginning the initial design work. Since then, the proposal has moved forward again, and detailed design and site survey work is now under way.

An urgent treatment centre in Warrington means that families would not have to travel out of borough for things like minor injuries, sprains, cuts, burns or infections, or for a child with a fever who needs checking over. Such conditions can still be serious, but they do not need the full resources of an emergency department set up for life-threatening situations like heart attacks, strokes and major trauma. An urgent treatment centre would help to free up space in A&E for the sickest patients and improve the experience for others by helping them to get the right care in the right place.

Easing pressure in A&E is the first step, but it is not the whole answer. Part 2 of my plan is about moving routine appointments, diagnostics and planned care into the community so that people can be treated closer to home, and the hospital can focus on the patients who need the most specialist care.

However, there is one issue that none of us can ignore, and that is the hospital itself. People back home know that we need a new hospital. They see it when they go to A&E and when they visit relatives in hospital, and staff feel it every day. Much of the site was built in a different century for a different population and a very different NHS. We urgently need a new hospital—there is absolutely no question about that.

[Sarah Hall]

Much to our deep disappointment, Warrington was never included in the previous Government's so-called new hospital programme, despite warm words hinting to the contrary. That brings me on to the third part of my plan: modernising and replacing outdated hospital facilities, built in phases while vital services continue to run.

When I was elected, I said that I would be honest about the challenges before us. Yes, Warrington needs a new hospital, but it also needs a proper plan and funding behind it, not just empty promises. My approach is a pragmatic one: we must ease the immediate pressures today, build better services around the hospital tomorrow, and put Warrington in the strongest possible position for investment in the years ahead. That is what I am fighting for. I will keep challenging where challenge is needed, keep working with our local NHS where partnership is needed, and keep putting Warrington South first until we get this right, because my residents in their time of need and our excellent NHS staff deserve better.

5.41 pm

Dr Ellie Chowns (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for securing this incredibly important debate.

I have heard from literally dozens of my constituents about why this issue is so important. They have told me their individual stories about elderly relatives stuck in corridors and the terrible effect that has had on their treatment, care and health outcomes. I have heard from staff in my local hospitals, who have shared exactly the same concerns about the conditions in which they are forced to work.

Patients tell me universally how proud they are of the NHS and how much they value the incredible care they get at the hands of the people who keep it going, but they also tell me universally that corridor care is shameful and should not continue. I recently raised this matter directly with the chief executive of my local hospital, Hereford hospital, in our regular catch-up, and was delighted to hear that Hereford is not just aiming to meet the Government's target of ending corridor care by 2029, but that locally, we have a target of ending corridor care by this autumn. I am really pleased that this is being prioritised so much locally, and I will be keeping a careful eye out to ensure that that happens.

I want to raise a particular issue that has been touched on by many colleagues across the House this afternoon, which is the integral relationship between the NHS—what happens in our hospitals—and the social care system. We simply cannot fix the problem of corridor care unless we fix the problem of social care. For too many years—for decades, in fact—social care has been a political football kicked down the road by Governments of all stripes because it is difficult, but we have to grasp this nettle. We simply cannot fix the NHS unless we fix social care. Lord Darzi said exactly that himself.

Sadly, however, we have not given the necessary attention to fixing social care. Yes, we have the Casey commission, which I value very much. I am very pleased with the work that has been done by Baroness Casey, but insufficient political effort is being put into this issue. It took nine months for us to have the first cross-party meeting that the previous Secretary of State for Health and Social Care said he was going to call, and we have only recently had the second. We must put our shoulders to the wheel collectively to fix the challenges of social care and to have the difficult conversations about how we will fund it, because it does need funding; we do need those political conversations, and we need to find consensus. Unless we address the issues at the back door, too many people will be stuck in hospital when they would be better cared for elsewhere—better for them and their health; better for the national budget, because it would be cheaper; and better for our overall outcomes. It is shocking to learn that the Royal College of Emergency Medicine calculates that there were 15,000 excess deaths last year because of corridor care. That should not happen in our country today.

I urge the Minister and her colleagues as strongly as possible to give the same attention to fixing social care as to fixing the NHS. Let every Member put in that effort too. It is notable that at Health and Social Care questions there is usually one question on social care and 19 on health. We must redress the balance collectively, put in the focus to fix social care, and thereby fix corridor care.

5.45 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): A number of constituents who work as nurses in the A&E department at St Helier hospital asked me to come to see for myself what they were dealing with. They asked me to come late on a Monday morning, rather than a Saturday or Sunday night as I had anticipated. What I saw was deeply troubling. Around 250 patients were coming through the department every day. Elderly people were being cared for on trolleys out of nurse sight lines. However, what really struck me was that packs of staff were wandering around A&E, with nowhere to do their job. They could not do their paperwork, sit near their patients or monitor anything.

Corridor care does not begin in the corridor; it begins long before a patient reaches A&E. For years, community services and alternatives have gradually disappeared. The walk-in centre at the Wilson hospital in Mitcham, which once treated patients every day until midnight, even on Christmas day, has gone. Out-of-hours GP services have been reduced. Those patients have not disappeared; they now go to St Helier. If we want fewer people waiting in our overcrowded emergency departments, we must invest in the services that prevent them from needing to be there in the first place. That is particularly important in communities such as mine, where people are more likely to live with long-term health conditions and greater health inequalities.

An A&E department cannot function in isolation. It depends on having the services, capacity and infrastructure around it to keep patients flowing safely through the hospital. That is why I have spent years campaigning for St Helier. I am therefore delighted that NHS London announced up to £57 million to expand and modernise St Helier's emergency department. However, that cannot be the end. St Helier needs renewal.

Only days later, there was an announcement that disrepair in the women's services block meant that it would have to close. I am delighted that the chief executive of the hospital trust has said that those services will return. Nevertheless, the situation is a stark reminder of what happens when hospitals are expected to serve growing populations in ageing buildings that have been allowed to deteriorate for decades.

Corridor care should never become normal in our NHS. My constituents deserve a St Helier hospital that is properly equipped to care for them when they need it most. I am determined to continue to fight for that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I will now announce the results of today's deferred Divisions.

On the draft Children's Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 (Establishment of Schools) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2026, the Ayes were 369 and the Noes were 102, so the Ayes have it.

On the draft Supply of Machinery (Safety) (Amendment etc.) and the EU Machinery Regulation (Enforcement etc. in Northern Ireland) Regulations 2026, the Ayes were 317 and the Noes were 103, so the Ayes have it.

On the draft Town and Country Planning (Discharge of Local Planning Authority Functions) (England) Regulations 2026, the Ayes were 283 and the Noes were 182, so the Ayes have it.

[The Division lists are published at the end of today's debates.]

5.49 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) on securing this debate and on her tremendous work in this area, both in this House and as an emergency doctor in the NHS.

I want to begin not with statistics, but with something that happened to me. Last year, at about 9 o'clock one evening, I stood up to go to watch a film with my family, but I suddenly felt faint and nauseous. A home blood pressure machine showed that my reading was over 200. I went to A&E and was seen, and a CT scan was arranged. I then had to sit on a chair in what was essentially a public waiting room, where I stayed for the entire day. I had my scans and blood tests there—everything was based in that room. It was only the next evening that I managed to get a bed on an acute unit, so I spent 24 hours in effectively what we would call a corridor. The next day I had an MRI scan and then went to see a neurologist and a stroke team.

Let me be absolutely clear: I do not blame the hospital or the staff. They were professional and compassionate throughout. But they are working under chronic pressure in a system that simply does not have the space or the beds to care for patients as they would wish.

The first official NHS England data on corridor care published last month showed that in the Royal Bolton hospital, an average of 13 patients a day were treated in corridor spaces in May. I welcome the honesty of the trust's chief nursing officer, who said that even one patient cared for in this way is far too many, and I commend the trust's commitment to eliminate the practice ahead of the national timescale.

Bolton is not an outlier; it reflects a national emergency across the United Kingdom. About 2,200 patients experienced corridor care on any day in the month of May, while many hundreds were treated in unsuitable spaces. Nearly 148,000 patients waited 12 hours or more in A&E in that month—the worst record in May. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine warns that the official figure may still understate the true scale. This is not just undignified; it is deadly. The Royal College estimates that in 2025 alone, over 15,800 excess deaths were associated with long waits in emergency departments. The Uncorked—Understanding escalation area and corridor care in UK emergency departments—study found that corridor care leads to longer hospital stays and a greater risk of death.

There are many reasons for the delay, and many of them have been mentioned. Bed occupancy is running at 93%, far above the safe level of 85%, while some 13,000 beds are occupied by patients who are medically fit to leave but cannot be discharged for want of social and community care.

I know that the Government have spent a lot of money on the NHS, such as ending the doctors' dispute, but will they make a full commitment to ensure that corridor care does not occur in our country and that no patient in Bolton and Walkden, or anywhere else in the United Kingdom, spends a day of acute illness on a chair in a waiting room? The staff of our NHS deserve better, as do our constituents.

5.52 pm

Dr Simon Opher (Stroud) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for securing this debate and for her years of work in the A&E at St George's. Emergency care is in crisis in the NHS, and corridor care is just an overspill because we cannot cope. That is because we are doing a few things wrong that we could remedy.

I work as a GP. I did a surgery last Friday and actually tried to admit someone. I rang up A&E and they said, "Well, I wouldn't send them up at the moment, as we've got a six-hour wait." I realised that, quite often, we do not have an operable emergency care service, and this is something we need to work on.

I will briefly go through a few causes and then a few remedies, and the remedies could be clinical as well as organisational. First, we have an ageing population. Frailty is increasing. In Stroud alone, in four years, the number of over 90-year-olds went up 29% in just that short period of time. We have an enormous cohort of very elderly and frail people. Secondly, as we have heard, we have a lack of beds due to delayed discharge—I will not say any more on that. Thirdly, we have a lack of care beds in the community to enable discharge. There is also a lack of capacity in GP surgeries for on-the-day appointments. In my surgery, 45% of our appointments are on the day, but we obviously need to increase that so we can absorb the demand in primary care.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I have sat through the debate, and I do not believe that community pharmacy or independent prescribing have been mentioned. Does my hon. Friend, with his experience as a GP, endorse the changes that the Government are making to maximise the use of pharmacists to deal with some of the pressures that he mentioned GPs face?

Dr Opher: That is absolutely true. We need to look at all the ways of reducing demand on GPs and, therefore, on A&E departments—that is what my speech is totally involved in—and pharmacies have a really good role to play.

There is another thing here, which was noticed in the doctors' strike. When we have senior clinicians on the front door of A&E, that makes the department much quieter, because they make decisions quickly and can take a bit more clinical risk as they are more experienced. Perhaps we need to rearrange how care works in A&E departments so that we do not get a backlog.

I turn to the remedies. We are beginning to turn the NHS around—that is clear from working in it and from what my patients say. Things are beginning to change. We need to do a lot more, but we are investing a lot of money in it. We must not say that things are getting worse, because I believe they are slowly getting better.

As so many have said, we need to fix social care. We could have a system whereby the community is responsible for a patient as soon as they are ready for discharge. Perhaps the community should have to pay for the patient to remain in hospital after that to encourage it to get them out of hospital.

We must stop agency working in social care, because that is causing a huge amount of stress to carers. We need care to be based on a community model so that carers cover small areas and do not have huge travel times. We also have to improve GP access. I think we should also make it so that A&E departments see only accidents and real, genuine medical emergencies.

So we need a little bit of an increase in funding for primary care. We also need GPs to be assessing emergencies up until 10 o'clock at night to relieve the pressure on A&Es. There are a couple of other things. I have said about getting more experienced doctors involved earlier in the process, but we also need to invest in scanners—so many people in A&E are waiting for tests before they go home. Also, as my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) said, it is not appropriate to have mental health assessments in A&E; we need mental health assessment units, which I do believe the Government are bringing in.

There are a few clinical factors. Perversely, we need not to be so risk-averse. For example, admitting a patient for risk of falling is ridiculous, because they are more likely to fall in hospital than in their own home. Dementia fluctuates, so just because someone has seen a slight increase in confusion, that does not mean that they need a whole batch of tests. We need to treat dementia more holistically. Polypharmacy—that is old people on loads of drugs—causes about 10% of admissions, so let us reduce that.

We need good end-of-life care. Some 50% of people with cancer die in hospital—many of them face corridor care—and we need to reduce that, because most of them want to die at home. Every older person needs an advance care plan so that, when they become ill, we know whether they want to go to hospital. That is incredibly important in pathways of care.

Corridor care did not appear overnight, and it will not disappear overnight. But, by rebuilding the NHS from the community upwards, fixing social care and investing where it matters most, we can ensure that no patient is left waiting for care in a hospital corridor ever again.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I now call another doctor—it is easier to see a doctor here than to get a GP appointment.

5.58 pm

Dr Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): It is true: I am another doctor. I qualified in 1982, probably long before my distinguished colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan), was even born. I thank her very much for securing this important debate.

For context, when I was a registrar in 1988, the NHS had 300,000 beds, but by the time I was a senior consultant in 2020, we had 140,000 beds—less than half the beds we had when I was a registrar. I recall how the Northern general hospital in Sheffield had rows of Nightingale wards with crisp, white linen stretching as far as the eye could see down to the end of the ward. There were always beds. There was no such thing as corridor care.

To echo what the distinguished GP, my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud (Dr Opher) said, if an elderly woman goes off her legs at five o'clock on a Friday evening in February, the family will call the GP. The answerphone will say "Dial 111", the call handler will triage her and advise ringing 999, and that woman will arrive at A&E at 9 o'clock in the evening, be seen at 1 in the morning and be admitted, because that is what happens if someone is seen at 1 in the morning.

If we had a functioning community health service, with more neighbourhood health services, the patient would probably have been visited by a GP, perhaps until 10 o'clock at night. The diagnosis of a urinary tract infection would have been made, the patient would have been given an antibiotic and somebody would have come to see them in the morning, and they would have been a lot better by then and would never have been admitted. We can definitely reduce admissions if we think more carefully about how we treat patients in the community.

"Corridor care" is an oxymoron. There should be no corridor care. As we have heard, it happens when patients arriving in A&E overwhelm the available cubicles and rooms and the wards have no beds, and we know that patients are sent to A&E because the GP system simply cannot cope. I understand that the APPG on emergency care found that 20% of major emergency departments had patients being cared for on trolleys or in chairs in corridors. Almost 80% of clinical leads also said that patients were being harmed by corridor care.

My son is an A&E doctor, who is presently in London. He texted me shortly after I was elected:

> "Dad, bring the Health Secretary here right now so that he can see what is going on."

There were queues of trollies and patients waiting in ambulances, and trollies in the car park. We know that many patients come to serious harm while waiting. As my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud said, A&E means accident and emergency; that is what it is for.

At West Suffolk hospital in my constituency, Dr Cameron, the chief executive, said that corridor care had been "sorted out" through a whole-hospital approach, with everyone thinking about patient flow, planning discharge early and involving social services, allied health professionals and pharmacy. West Suffolk hospital simply

refused to accept that corridor care was inevitable. I believe that we should take the best of those ideas to the rest of the NHS.

6.2 pm

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for securing this debate and all my esteemed colleagues for covering the issue so brilliantly and with such expertise. You will be glad to hear, Madam Deputy Speaker, that that allows me to be brief and to focus on Blackburn A&E.

Blackburn A&E is one of the busiest in the country, serving east Lancashire. It has been one of the starkest examples of corridor care, and I could tell so many stories of constituents suffering the indignities and poor care that are the inevitable consequence of that. There is the 70-year-old lady with spinal cancer who was stuck there for 72 hours; the young woman who was a historical sexual assault victim, physically shaking with fear at being left in a corridor surrounded by men; or the 90-year-old with dementia and double incontinence, reliant on her daughter to change and clean her, and desperate for privacy, comfort and reassurance. I too have been there, unable to walk after a fall, for 13 hours overnight in a corridor that felt like a war zone, next to an old lady who was in constant pain, fearful and alone, crying out for her family—just one voice among many.

Corridor care is at best undignified and at worst heartless, heartbreaking and cruel. Its normalisation is a scandal and is one of the starkest examples of a health system failed and broken by Tory austerity. We must end it, and I am pleased to say that in Blackburn we are finally seeing progress.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): We talk about getting people out of hospital, but it is also about keeping them out of there. I spent years in and out of hospital as a teenager; I was one of the youngest people in Britain to have a hip replacement when I was in sixth form. The rehabilitation services that I relied on at the Royal London hospital were sadly closed by the last Government. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is important that we invest in those services for them to reopen, so that when people leave hospital, they stay out of hospital?

Andy MacNae: The investment in prevention and in repairing the massive damage done by the previous Government to our valued health system is crucial and fundamental.

We are finally seeing progress in Blackburn, and that is because of additional resources and support from NHS England and the Government's getting it right first time initiative. East Lancashire Hospitals NHS trust and the leadership must be praised for that. They have been working hard and with real focus to address the underlying drivers of corridor care, such as safe and timely discharge, and the presence of senior clinicians. This is not about quick fixes but about looking to end the practice for good. So far, waits of 12 hours-plus have reduced by 18%. That means there is a long way to go, and myself and fellow east Lancashire MPs are working with the trust both to challenge progress and to argue for the resources needed to do the job.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): The hon. Member and I share the same local authority and all our constituents are affected by the corridor care crisis at the Royal Blackburn hospital, which ranks seventh for A&E corridor care and fifth for ward corridor care, despite the management and the executive team working extremely hard. Does he agree that for places such as Blackburn with Darwen, which have the highest levels of deprivation and health inequalities, one solution is to have a targeted needs-based funding system?

Andy MacNae: The crucial thing is that we recognise the scale of the challenge and work together to solve it. This needs to be a shared mission on behalf of our residents, our friends and our families. In a year's time, I intend to be standing here after we have together ended corridor care in Blackburn A&E for good, and I hope the Minister and the Department of Health continue to share this commitment. This is a moral imperative, and together we must deliver the care and dignity that our residents deserve.

6.6 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for organising this debate. It is really important and very timely. Corridor care is a visible symptom of the pressure our NHS is under. According to Age UK, the number of people experiencing corridor care has grown 563-fold since 2015. In Cornwall, where I am from, it is no longer a seasonal response to winter or summer pressures but happens all year round. This is true of the Royal Cornwall Hospitals NHS trust in my constituency, which includes Treliske, Cornwall's only major acute hospital. On any given day in May, 31 patients in RCHT were receiving corridor care in the emergency department and 16 on the wards. One ex-clinician said to me that corridor care

"distresses patients, costs lives and demoralises staff".

Patients treated in temporary escalation spaces face a lack of privacy and dignity and limited access to necessities such as food, water and toileting. They experience worse outcomes as well. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine has estimated that in 2024 there were 16,500-plus associated excess deaths related to stays of 12 hours or more before being admitted. We know that part of the root cause of the problem is a lack of bed space and staff in hospitals. While Treliske's overall four-hour performance has averaged 45.8% so far this year, its performance for patients admitted to hospital averages 26.3%, so patients just are not moving through the system quickly enough.

Since this Government came to power, there have been some welcome improvements, particularly in ambulance handover times. Our local ambulance trust, the South Western Ambulance Service NHS foundation trust, has got much faster at moving patients from ambulances, so that the ambulances do not waste so much time sitting outside the emergency department, but of course, moving patients faster can increase the queue in ED and the need for corridor care there.

On any given day in May, 103 hospital beds were occupied by patients who were fit to leave, which represents over 15% of all general and acute beds within the trust. It is crucial that we address gaps in community and social care provision and strengthen the integration between hospitals and social care so that these patients

[Jayne Kirkham]

can come out faster, reducing the pressure. The 10-year plan is committed to ending corridor care, and I welcome that emphasis. Part of that approach involves strengthening co-ordination between the NHS, social care and the voluntary sector. We have very good neighbourhood health teams in Cornwall. They are ahead of the game and their community health and wellbeing workers are proven to make a real impact on hospital admissions.

The NHS's urgent and emergency care plan sets out a number of other important measures to reduce corridor care, including reducing internal discharge delays of more than 48 hours and investing £450 million in same-day emergency care. I welcome the expansion of same-day emergency care capacity at our community hospitals and the efforts that are being made by mobilising the third sector. However, that must be balanced with the fact that sending people home so early without proper rehab can increase the risk of them coming back and increase the demands on GP surgeries.

Kernow Health CIC runs out-of-hours GPs, a 111 advice service, and a line for clinicians to talk to paramedics. That has led to some people not having to go into hospital. We also have a specialist falls car that can help with nine callouts a day, and stop people going into hospital when they fall. So much more could be done and there have been many suggestions, but ultimately, corridor care needs to be treated as a system-wide problem. We must also look again at the way we treat people at weekends, because closure over a weekend can make such a difference.

6.9 pm

Sojan Joseph (Ashford) (Lab): We must continue to highlight corridor care, as it puts a spotlight on the pressures facing the NHS. One of the first visits I made after being elected to this House was to William Harvey hospital in my constituency. During my visit I was shown around an A&E department where 19 patients were being treated in corridors, even in the summer months, when emergency departments are typically under less pressure. That was deeply concerning, and demonstrated how under the previous Conservative Government corridor care became increasingly normalised. I have previously spoken in the House about the incident at William Harvey hospital last September, when a coffee shop had to be converted into an emergency ward to accommodate A&E patients because it ran out of corridor. That was not an isolated incident, but part of a wider pattern caused by years of under-investment and rising demand. NHS staff continue to provide outstanding care in difficult circumstances, often without the capacity, workforce or facilities that they need.

One lesson we must learn from the failures of the previous Conservative Government is that health infrastructure must keep pace with population growth. I recognise the need to build more homes to address the housing crisis that this Government inherited, but we must ensure sufficient capacity in GP surgeries, community health services and urgent care facilities. While schools and shops often come as part of a new housing development, healthcare infrastructure has too often been an afterthought. We need sufficient primary care capacity to prevent avoidable hospital visits and admissions that make corridor care more likely. Will the Minister set out what steps the Government are taking to ensure that, as new homes are built, health infrastructure planning and investment keep pace?

I welcome the Government's commitment to end corridor care by the end of this Parliament. We should never accept a situation in which hospital corridors become makeshift wards. No patient should receive treatment without privacy and dignity, and no member of staff should have to provide care in an environment that falls below the standards they strive to uphold. Our constituents rightly expect to be treated in safe, appropriate and dignified settings.

I was pleased by the announcement a few months ago that East Kent hospitals NHS trust, which covers William Harvey hospital, will be part of the new intensive recovery programme. I am hopeful that such targeted support will help to tackle the significant challenges facing the trust, reducing waiting times, improving patient flow, and ensuring that people across east Kent receive the timely, high-quality care they deserve. I hope the programme will help to ease the pressures that have contributed to corridor care, and that the Minister will update the House on the new intensive recovery programmes.

I also welcome the forthcoming opening of an upgraded same-day emergency care unit at William Harvey hospital, which I recently had the opportunity to visit. Funded through the trust's use of part of a £29 million investment from the Labour Government, the unit will increase capacity and help to relieve pressure across the hospital, enabling more patients to receive timely assessment and treatment. I also welcome the recent announcement by the local ICB about the single neighbourhood provider. GP services in my constituency are proactively reaching out to frail patients, which will help to avoid them going to A&E.

This Government have made important progress through additional investment, workforce expansion, improved discharge arrangements and targeted support for struggling trusts. Those steps should be welcomed, but there is more to do. If the Government are to fulfil their commitment to end corridor care, they must continue to pursue reform with urgency and determination—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I call Amanda Martin.

6.14 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for her service and for securing this debate.

There is no clearer sign of the failure of the NHS under the Conservatives than the fact that corridor care was allowed to become normal. Only a few weeks ago, I was in the Queen Alexandra hospital in my constituency watching my dad being cared for in a corridor. It brought home just how far standards have fallen and no family should have to experience that. Corridor care has real consequences. As we have heard, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine estimates that in 2025 alone there were more than 15,000 excess deaths associated with long waits in emergency departments. It is not just the physical impact on patients that is damaging, but the emotional impact on patients, loved ones and the NHS staff who come to work every day wanting to

provide the care that their patients deserve, yet are too often forced to do so in impossible conditions. It is degrading, undignified and should never have become an acceptable norm.

Before I go further, I want to thank the incredible staff across Portsmouth's NHS and care services. From those working at the Queen Alexandra hospital, to our ambulance crews, GPs, pharmacists, community teams and carers, they continue to deliver outstanding care despite extraordinary pressures. Last winter, it was an absolute privilege to spend a night shift with Nigel and Sam from our local ambulance service. Seeing at first hand their professionalism, compassion and resilience only strengthened my admiration for everything they do, often in incredibly difficult circumstances.

I recognise the work already being done across Portsmouth to help people access the right care. Strengthening general practice and supporting people who arrive at A&E with non-emergency conditions to receive care elsewhere helps to ensure our emergency department is there for those who need it most. That work matters and deserves recognition, so I thank Linda Stead and her team at the Portsmouth Primary Care Alliance Ltd, and the team at the Southern Hampshire Primary Care Alliance.

I welcome the decision of the previous Health Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), to ensure NHS England has finally introduced a clear definition of corridor care and begun publishing trust-level data. We cannot solve a problem if we refuse to see it and measure it. Sadly, the first set of figures makes difficult reading for Portsmouth. In May this year, Portsmouth hospitals university NHS trust ranked eighth worst for corridor care on hospital wards and ninth worst in emergency departments. That is simply not good enough.

I welcome the Government's commitment to shift more care into communities. Preventing unnecessary admissions is essential if we are to reduce pressure on our hospitals, because corridor care starts with a lack of community services. However, I remain deeply concerned by my integrated care board's approach and its failure to engage meaningfully with me. The initial discussions on health hubs focused on potential sites, yet astonishingly, although not surprisingly, the proposed locations were all in Portsmouth South. That is simply unacceptable. If we are serious about reducing health inequalities and improving access to care, these services must be available across the whole city. Yet, as with so many decisions affecting Portsmouth, residents in Portsmouth North are neglected and overlooked. To help me change that, will the Minister outline what expectations have been placed on integrated care boards to work constructively with local MPs?

Of course, reducing admissions is only one part of the answer. We must also improve patient flow through our hospitals, so I welcome today's announcement about a 10-year capital plan for health and social care. Buildings and modern facilities are important if we are to move people from corridors to beds and from A&E to GPs, but too many people remain in hospital because the social care support they need is simply not available or because the pharmaceutical system is not fit for purpose. Will the Minister update the House on what further action is being taken to improve hospital discharge and tackle the pressures in social care and pharmaceutical services?

I am proud that this Government have already begun to turn our NHS around. We have seen the fastest ambulance response times in five years, the shortest A&E wait for four years, and the biggest fall in dissatisfaction in the NHS since 1998, but none of us should be satisfied while patients are still receiving treatment in corridors. People in Portsmouth deserve dignity when they need care, NHS staff deserve the resources and conditions to do their jobs, and together we must ensure that corridor care becomes not the accepted reality of our NHS, but a thing of the past.

6.18 pm

Dr Beccy Cooper (Worthing West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for bringing this timely and important debate to the Chamber.

As we have heard, corridor care is one of the clearest signs of wider pressures across urgent and emergency care services, including rising demand, delayed discharge and constrained hospital capacity. As so much has already been said, I want to focus my remarks on a couple of areas. As an MP for a coastal community, I want to make it clear to the Minister that when we are looking at these pressures, we need to acknowledge the additional pressures facing specific communities. Coastal communities tend to have older populations and poorer health outcomes.

Worthing West sits within one of England's coastal communities. Its population is older than average—even though I am not older than average—frailty is increasing, multiple long-term conditions are common, emergency admissions are correspondingly higher, recruitment is harder and deprivation exists alongside affluence. All these things contribute to the pressures that we have discussed during the debate.

University Hospitals Sussex NHS foundation trust is in my constituency. As we have discussed, NHS England's data is not completely useful in many instances, but it is the best that we have. I have had a look and, on average, the four emergency departments in the trust are seeing 65 patients in their emergency department corridor care service each day. In their general and acute wards, they have corridor care for 39 patients each day. That is not insubstantial.

We have talked about the back door, but I really want to talk about the front door. Members will be unsurprised to hear that, as a public health doctor, I know that prevention is a corridor care policy. The Government need to ensure that investment in prevention and public health is recognised as part of the solution to reducing corridor care. We have to reduce the flow of avoidable illness into our hospitals in the first place, and that means tackling smoking, poor housing, air pollution, obesity, loneliness, poverty and delayed access to community care. Corridor care begins long before a patient reaches an accident and emergency department.

Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab): My local hospital, Basildon university hospital, is in the 40th worst trust for delivering hospital care. Does my hon. Friend agree that not having the right community equipment, such as community disability aids and home adaptations, can quite often be

[Jen Craft]

a leading cause of delayed discharge? Will she urge the Minister to look at this issue when she commits to ending corridor care by the end of this Parliament?

Dr Cooper: I thank my hon. Friend for those excellent remarks, and I agree wholeheartedly.

As I have said, corridor care is a symptom, and our challenge is to identify the underlying causes, rather than simply measure the symptoms. It is what happens when demand, delayed discharge, workforce shortages, social care pressures and preventable ill health collide in one place. Stakeholders that I speak to—and, I am sure, stakeholders that colleagues across the House speak to—repeatedly call for public health investment, stronger community services, social care capacity and the prevention of avoidable admissions. Every prevented stroke, every smoking cessation intervention, every warm home, every child who grows up healthier and every patient supported earlier in the community means one less avoidable admission to an already overcrowded emergency department, such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting.

6.21 pm

Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for securing this important debate. The previous Government wreaked havoc on the NHS, with waiting times at an all-time high even before covid-19 hit a bruised and battered system. Under-investment and undelivered promises saw corridor care become commonplace, with its subsequent indignity and risk. It is a clear visual demonstration of a system on its knees.

This Labour Government are determined to act. The urgent and emergency care plan for 2025-26 provided more than £450 million of investment in urgent and emergency care. Additional millions of pounds of capital investment, reaching £1.9 billion over the next four years, will help to deliver it. Links between hospitals and social care are clear and critical, which is why the Government are working to implement a national care service and initiatives such as the first-ever fair pay agreement for adult social care staff.

Watford general hospital in my constituency is on the new hospitals programme, but it was previously delayed endlessly under the Conservative and Liberal Democrat coalition Government and subsequent Conservative Governments. However, under this Labour Government, it is seeing tangible action in preparation for the rebuild.

West Hertfordshire Teaching Hospitals NHS Trust has worked incredibly hard in my constituency to deal with corridor care, and I am delighted to say that corridor care has been eradicated altogether at Watford general hospital. It has not had a single incident of corridor care for six months. How has it managed that remarkable achievement?

First, the hospital has taken a whole-hospital approach to flow, making it everybody's business and therefore everybody's concern. The trust states:

> "The simple rule is we don't accept corridor care in our wards. We find other solutions."

Secondly, the hospital has embraced data, embedding it into everything that it does to manage the flow of patients. It has real-time data tools such as electronic bed management, e-whiteboards and a digital command centre. Six key measures have been identified, which staff are using and which are easy to understand. Thirdly, the trust has engaged in partnership working—it could not tackle corridor care in A&E alone. There is a care co-ordination centre to reduce the number of ambulances coming into A&E for those who do not need emergency treatment; a multidisciplinary team to advise paramedics on where people should be treated; and close working with social care, treating people away from hospital, as is included in the NHS 10-year plan.

In conclusion, I place on record my thanks and admiration for the staff at the trust. Their hard work has paid off, and it demonstrates what can be achieved when working together as a team to deliver for their patients and population.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call James Naish to make the final Back-Bench contribution.

6.25 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I appreciate being called. Before I begin my speech, I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) mentioned coastal communities. She was absolutely right to do so, and I will refer to rural communities, because there are equal challenges with delivering healthcare to that particular demographic.

I will start with some good news for my constituents. Last year, Nottingham University Hospitals NHS trust was named among the 10 most improved trusts in England for four-hour A&E performance, and sixth nationally for 12-hour waits. That is not a small thing; it reflects genuine hard graft by staff at Queen's Medical Centre and Nottingham City hospital, and it earns the trust a share of a £3 million reinvestment fund from NHS England. That sounds good, but I would be doing my constituents a disservice if I stood in this place and pretended that the job was done, because just over a week ago, on 29 June, NUH declared a critical incident after the recent extreme heat drove demand across the trust far beyond what its emergency department could safely absorb. What is more, it was the fourth critical incident over the past year. At its worst, during the latest incident, there were 188 patients in the emergency department and 20 ambulances queuing outside. Patients were experiencing lengthy waits on corridors, and more people than expected were medically fit but unable to be discharged.

I recently asked the Government about this issue, and the Minister's response was clear: corridor care was "unacceptable", and should never become normal practice. That should not even need saying, and it is only after 14 years of drift that it did. What matters now is action, and the Government have published a national definition of corridor care for the first time and started daily reporting, so that neither trusts nor we in this place can hide the problem. Thankfully, that transparency is being backed by some new money: over £450 million is going into urgent and emergency care capacity this year alone, and £215 million of capital funding is delivering 40 new and expanded urgent care sites across England. For my constituents, this means two things locally that I genuinely welcome: confirmed funding for an expanded urgent treatment centre at QMC, and a trust-funded

reconfiguration of the emergency department, because our chief executive has found the money internally to get on with that work now, rather than wait.

I was particularly pleased to be able to tell this to one of my constituents, Renee, after she contacted me to tell me about her experience in A&E. As a lady in her 70s with a long-established heart condition for which she has ongoing consultant care, after a heart attack, she found herself spending nine hours waiting for care in A&E for a condition that should have been treated immediately. Nationally, A&E waiting times are at their best level in five years, and elective waiting lists are at their lowest in three and a half years. That is progress, but it will ultimately count for nothing in Rushcliffe if a bad winter, a system failure or a staffing gap can still tip a good department into crisis extremely quickly. As such, my ask of the Minister is simple: keep funding urgent and emergency care, keep the pressure on trusts that are lagging behind, and keep listening to Back Benchers, who regularly hear about this issue from doctors and constituents at our surgeries.

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

6.29 pm

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for her excellent opening speech—it was what we expected, given her unparalleled experience and knowledge in this area. As we have heard over and over again, our A&E departments are at breaking point and ambulance services have been overwhelmed. The corridor care data, which was finally released last month, confirmed the extent of this crisis, well after the end of what we would consider to be the winter peak. Corridor care is no longer a phenomenon confined to the winter months; it is a year-round crisis. I have no doubt that the recent heatwaves will have put unbearable pressure on services yet again.

The scale of corridor care has a huge impact on patients. Some 36% of visitors to hospitals have seen care delivered in a corridor. A freedom of information request by the Liberal Democrats revealed that the average hospital trust now sees nearly 3,000 patients wait more than 24 hours in A&E each year. Corridor care is also extremely detrimental to staff. A 2025 Royal College of Physicians survey found that 78% of doctors had provided care in a temporary space. In testimonies collected by the Royal College of Nursing, nursing staff described patients deteriorating unnoticed and suffering avoidable harm. They expressed their anxiety and demoralisation at the level of care they were able to give and being unable to guarantee patient safety, because corridors are unsafe for patients and unsafe for staff, too.

Staff are losing hope, and corridor care has become so normalised that one hospital advertised for a dedicated corridor care nurse. Another, as we have heard, even created a makeshift ward in an on-site Costa Coffee. The Government owe it to patients and staff to make fixing this crisis an urgent priority. Even the release of corridor care data was a shambles, arriving late after months of the former Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), paying lip service to transparency and delaying its publication.

Concerns have already been raised over loopholes in the Government's definition of corridor care, which anecdotal evidence suggests has encouraged trusts to hide the true extent of the crisis, with treatment being pushed back into ambulances to avoid incidents being labelled as corridor care. University Hospitals Coventry and Warwickshire NHS trust had no patients being treated in corridors, while ambulance crews were providing care in its car parks, according to a recent West Midlands ambulance service board paper. Increasing ambulance handover times will not tackle the indignity of corridor care, but will only compound it and prevent the release of those ambulances to people with potentially life-threatening conditions.

The corridor care data, which is the best we have got, revealed that May alone saw a shocking 90,000 incidents of corridor care. The Royal College of Emergency Medicine's recent report estimated that long waits caused at least 15,860 excess deaths in England in 2025. All of the evidence is there. The royal colleges have been sounding the alarm for years. Data and reports demonstrate the huge scale of this scandal. Countless individual stories remind us of the personal tragedies behind the numbers.

One of my constituents, a carer for three adult sons, called after a truly awful experience last year. His eldest son had collapsed on the stairs in the middle of the night. After calling 999 and being told no ambulance was available for some time, my constituent drove his son to A&E himself with some difficulty, and only once his son had regained consciousness. They waited in A&E for 28 hours to then be put in a holding area for one and a half days before being transferred to a ward. Each of these numbers and cases involves a person. Madam Deputy Speaker, it could be your child, an elderly relative or a vulnerable friend—each experiencing no privacy, no dignity and suffering poor outcomes.

I look forward to hearing the Government's plan to resolve this crisis. The Liberal Democrats have an action plan to fix corridor care. We believe that hospital capacity is a key issue, and that cannot be fixed without fixing social care. One of the biggest factors behind lack of capacity is the lack of social care. Baroness Casey's final report is not due until 2028, and I hope that the Minister will be able to announce that the Secretary of State will bring that forward, so that we can solve the social care crisis. Without those beds, people are either held outside in ambulances or on corridors outside wards.

We would invest £1.5 billion to provide 6,000 more beds across the system. Those would be provided through new staffed hospital beds and investment in safety-net social care beds, proper step-down care packages and more support for carers and hospices, so that thousands more patients can leave hospital. To solve corridor care, we have to fix the front door and the back door, and invest in primary care as well as social care. That would include boosting recruitment and retention to provide 8,000 more GPs to reduce pressure on hospitals and save the NHS time and money in the first place. We would also place a duty on the Secretary of State to prevent 12-hour waits in A&E and ensure that they do not continue to happen year in, year out.

The Liberal Democrats have a plan to bring back the dignity and safety that patients deserve, and the working conditions that NHS staff deserve too. I hope that the Government will listen to our plan, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

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

6.34 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): I should begin by declaring my interests as a member of the British Medical Association, a member of the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, and an NHS paediatric consultant.

I thank the hon. Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for initiating the debate. I know that, as a practising doctor like me, and, in particular, as someone who works in an emergency department, she understands the importance of this subject. Let me also pay tribute to the staff who work throughout our health service, some of them in quite difficult circumstances.

I am glad to respond to this debate on what is a very important but very difficult issue. Every day in May, nearly 3,000 patients spent time in so-called clinically inappropriate spaces. These may be corridors, but as we have heard, they may also be cupboards or waiting areas. That is not good enough. Corridors are no place to provide clinical and nursing care. There is no privacy and dignity for people getting changed or being examined, and others may overhear what is said about their medical conditions. It is not safe. The hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) pointed out the infection control risks. Availability of oxygen has also been mentioned. If someone has a cardiac arrest and collapses, where is the space for them to be looked after?

I wonder if the Minister can tell us whether the Government intend to support new clause 84 of the Health Bill when we discuss it in Committee, probably next week. The new clause requires the number of patients who have died when 12-hour waits in A&E departments were a contributory factor to be recorded.

We have heard upsetting stories this afternoon, and I have heard some myself in my constituency, including that of a gentleman who sat for more than 60 hours in a plastic chair while receiving intravenous antibiotics for sepsis. These are all examples of a much broader and more serious problem. Every day, patients, often frail and elderly, are kept for hours on trolleys in corridors or on chairs in waiting rooms. As we heard from the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Opher), we have an ageing population, so this problem is applying more pressure. A&E attendances increased by 2.5% last year. The latest figures show that in May this year alone, 50,212 patients waited in A&E for more than 12 hours after a decision to admit them to hospital. That represents a 17.1% increase since last May.

Last year, the Government produced their urgent and emergency care plan, in which they set their targets, including the target for an absolute minimum of 78% of patients to be admitted, transferred or discharged within four hours. That target is well below the NHS constitutional standard, but, furthermore, the latest NHS data shows that the Government have missed it, with 25.7% of patients seen within four hours in May 2026, down from 76.9% in the previous month. Things are actually going in the wrong direction.

We need to consider why patients are being cared for in corridors. Essentially, it is a reflection of the lack of appropriate spaces, often spaces in an in-patient ward. We therefore need a structured plan. The hon. Members for Shipley (Anna Dixon) and for Worthing West (Dr Cooper) spoke about where we should start. We should start with prevention, care at home and virtual wards. We need to think about delivery in rural areas. The hon. Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley) talked about care and treatment in the community, and others have talked about improved social care. I hope the Minister will tell us whether, when we debate the Health Bill in Committee, she will accept new clauses 105 and 106, which relate to how people can care for themselves, to education and to the safety and classification of prescription-only medicines, so that the more simple conditions can be managed closer to home by pharmacists.

Harriet Cross (Gordon and Buchan) (Con): Community care, which my hon. Friend has just touched on, is still important, particularly in preventing the need for corridor care. Insch War Memorial hospital, in my constituency, has been earmarked for closure, which is completely wrong. The trustees have done an amazing job in raising money to keep this vital community asset open. Does my hon. Friend agree that such community hospitals are vital not just for rural communities, but in helping the larger hospitals to manage their own patient care?

Dr Johnson: I absolutely agree. The NHS is devolved in Scotland, but that sounds like a very unwise decision that it should certainly reconsider. I am sure my hon. Friend will be a doughty campaigner in ensuring that it does so.

That brings me to the next part of my speech, which is about the extra space in emergency departments and the importance of caring well for people in A&E. I ask the Minister for an update on the work that Dr Acheson and the Royal College of Emergency Medicine have been doing on on-time medication, as we need to make sure that patients do not suffer detriment in A&E because they are not given medication on time. An hon. Gentleman on the Labour Benches talked about the extra space on wards and the number of beds. The number of beds has reduced over time, partly because we do clinical care differently—for example, people now stay in hospital for a much shorter period after having a baby, and that is true of other operations too. However, my understanding is that the total number of beds has dropped further since Labour came into office. Can the Minister explain why that is?

It is fair to say that we did not get everything right when we were in office, but we did increase the number of emergency department doctors by 100% between 2010 and 2024, and we met our manifesto commitment to hire 50,000 new nurses. We developed a long-term workforce plan, but this Government did not want our plan; they wanted their own. They said that they would deliver it by the autumn, and then by the spring. It has now been "imminent" for quite some time, but how soon is imminent?

As many Members have said, we need to tackle corridor care, but we also need to tackle the back door: social care. Two years ago, this Government promised cross-party talks. As has been mentioned already, they took nine months to have the first meeting and have only recently had the second meeting. That is not tackling the problem with the urgency that it needs. The Casey report is not due till 2028, and this is being kicked into the long grass. We can only hope that the new Prime Minister will make a difference.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) said, the Government need a plan. I hope the Minister will explain in detail how they intend to deliver on their plan, because delivery is key. We often hear of targets and aims, which are easy to set but hard to reach. What have we seen so far? Long A&E waits are up, and we have seen overall waiting lists increase by 112,000 on the previous months. The number of people waiting for operations and procedures is up on last year and last month. The Government have ditched their promise to deliver a doubling of medical school places, and delayed the workplace plan. The promise to roll out fracture liaison services is running behind schedule, and there is still no response to the Hughes report. I could go on, but the basic issue is that the Government seem keen to set targets—worthy and important goals—without knowing how to deliver them, leading inevitably to disappointment.

Can the Minister say how she will meet the target of abolishing corridor care? What will be the effect of reducing the capital budget, as announced in the defence investment plan? What does she think will be the effect of removing the social care voice from ICBs? Importantly, as we look forward to winter, what planning is being done now to make sure that patients are kept safe in the autumn and winter?

6.42 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson), the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) and I are deep in the Health Bill Committee, and I have not seen them all day, so it is nice to have the opportunity to get back into the swing of our discussions. I am really grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Tooting (Dr Allin-Khan) for securing this important debate. Her commitment, and her pride in St George's hospital and all the staff who work there, is always so clear to see. She did a great job for them and the rest of the country again today. She has given us an opportunity to discuss something that matters so much to patients, their families, NHS staff, Members from across the House, and the staff who work here.

I recognise the important contribution of frontline clinicians, professional bodies and organisations such as the Royal College of Emergency Medicine and the Corridor Care Coalition. Their experience and expertise have helped shape our work to establish a consistent national definition of "corridor care" and strengthen national guidance. We share the same objective: to ensure that every patient receives safe, dignified care in an appropriate clinical setting. We will continue to work with these experts across NHS England and the Department of Health and Social Care.

Let me be absolutely clear: corridor care is not an acceptable standard of care, and it must not become normalised or, as the hon. Member for Mid Sussex (Alison Bennett) said, a habit. Wherever possible, patients should be assessed and treated in an appropriate clinical environment with dignity, privacy and the highest possible standards of care. Equally, NHS staff deserve to work in an environment that allows them to provide the compassionate care that they are trained to deliver. That is why tackling corridor care is a priority for this Government.

If we are to solve this problem, we have to be honest about why it occurs, and we have heard some of the reasons today. Corridor care is one of the clearest symptoms of pressure across the entire urgent and emergency care pathway—it is not simply an emergency department issue. As we heard from my hon. Friends the Members for Rushcliffe (James Naish) and for Worthing West (Dr Cooper), it also responds differently in different places, such as rural cities or coastal areas.

Historically, care in non-designated clinical areas was an exceptional escalation measure during periods of peak demand, but over time sustained increases in demand alongside capacity constraints across hospitals, community services and social care mean that what was once exceptional has become more routine in some places, and that is not acceptable. The hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham might not remember exactly how and when that happened, but I know that when I worked in urgent and emergency care in Bristol, under the previous Labour Government, we eradicated such pressures in A&E, and they somehow crept back—not by magic, but by neglect—under the Conservatives' stewardship.

We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Salford (Rebecca Long Bailey) about her mother's experience, and I do hope people are witnessing that. My hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin) talked about her father's experience. My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) had a terrible experience of her own. My hon. Friend the Member for Ashford (Sojan Joseph)—again, he is on the Public Bill Committee and doing great work—went to observe his emergency department, as I know many hon. Members do. So we have direct experience of this in the House and have seen it for ourselves, and I have of course visited my local systems in Bristol.

Pressure in one part of the system affects other parts, and when patients who are medically fit cannot be discharged because appropriate support is unavailable, beds remain occupied, reducing hospitals' ability to admit new patients from emergency departments, and the result is overcrowding, delayed patient flow and an increased risk of patients being cared for in temporary environments. We heard about that in detail from my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Sarah Hall), for Stroud (Dr Opher) and for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham), and that is why we are tackling it.

The first step was bringing in consistency and transparency about how corridor care is measured. For too long there has been no single national definition, making it really difficult to understand where the pressures were greatest or to compare performance across the NHS. We cannot improve what we do not measure, as was noted by my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Naushabah Khan). NHS England introduced a clear national definition of corridor care and began daily reporting in March 2026, and since June that data has been published, providing greater transparency and enabling targeted support for those organisations experiencing the greatest pressure.

Let me make it clear to the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for North Shropshire, that part of getting the definition and the data right did mean that did not come out immediately. It is difficult to get this right, and we continue to work on doing so.

[Karin Smyth]

I also make it really clear that, in overseeing this, I am not hiding the experience of things such as ambulance waits. We are absolutely monitoring those things as part of my overseeing of the wider system.

Alongside improved reporting, NHS England has strengthened the national guidance for trusts where temporary care environments cannot immediately be avoided. The guidance is clear that patients must continue to receive the same clinical standards of care wherever they are treated. They must be prioritised according to clinical urgency, supported by senior clinical oversight, named nursing responsibility and ongoing monitoring, with clear escalation arrangements, where required. I know that Members are rightly concerned by patient safety, and of course no patient should receive a lower standard of care because they are being treated in a temporary clinical environment, but the safest care is in the right clinical setting, and that is what we are aiming to do.

We have also ensured that, following the spending review, the Government allocated up to £1.9 billion of capital funding over the next four years to support improvements in urgent and emergency care to help restore the constitutional standards talked about by the hon. Member for Sleaford and North Hykeham. The Conservatives did not hit any constitutional standards for over 10 years, and we are determined to right that wrong.

Along with that investment, NHS England has published its model emergency department guidance, supporting faster clinical decision making, improved streaming of patients and stronger whole-system responsibility for performance. While there is much more to do, these reforms are already contributing to improvements, as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Stroud, including the shortest waiting times for four years and the fastest ambulance response times for about five years, despite continued and increasing high demand.

Targeted support is where we need to do the most work, and early national data shows that much corridor care is concentrated in some key places. The specialist "Getting it right first time" teams are therefore working directly with those trusts to help improve patient flows, strengthen the discharge process, make better use of data and share learning from organisations that have already made progress.

I commend my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Dr Prinsley), who highlighted the improvements at West Suffolk hospital, and my hon. Friend the Member for Rossendale and Darwen (Andy MacNae) for the great work happening at Blackburn and the work he is doing with other east Lancs MPs. My hon. Friend the Member for Watford (Matt Turmaine) talked about the improvements happening there. We heard about North Herefordshire and I am going to hold them to the autumn deadline raised by the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Dr Chowns). There is nothing like putting it on the record for them, is there? Great work. As colleagues have said, we want to take the best to the rest and some people are doing amazing work in difficult circumstances.

Ultimately, as Members have said, eliminating corridor care means improving flow across the whole system. That requires: faster discharge; stronger community and neighbourhood services, as highlighted by my hon. Friend the Member for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh); improved social care; and more people receiving care closer to home, so that hospitals can focus on those who need in-patient care. That ambition sits at the heart of our urgent and emergency care plan and our 10-year health plan, which of course includes more prevention, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West. The shift from hospital to community care will improve patient experience, reduce avoidable hospital attendance and create the capacity needed to restore urgent emergency care standards. This is about lasting reform, not a temporary response to seasonal pressures, whether they be the current heat or winter.

Before I conclude, I want to acknowledge the extraordinary professionalism of NHS staff: doctors, nurses, paramedics, health care assistants, porters, pharmacists and so many other people who continue to provide outstanding care under immense pressure. No member of staff comes to work expecting to treat patients in corridors, and many have spoken openly, rightly, about the moral distress it causes. They deserve not only our gratitude, but practical action to improve the conditions under which they work. Part of what we are doing—introducing the national definition, being transparent about the data, strengthening patient safety guidance, investing additional urgent care capacity, providing targeted support to the most challenged trusts and addressing the wider pressures that drive corridor care—is the start of doing just that.

Every patient deserves care delivered with dignity, compassion and respect. Every member of staff deserves a system that enables them to provide that care safely. Corridor care is not inevitable. It is the consequence of pressures that have built up across the health and care system, and it is a challenge that this Government are determined to overcome. By improving patient flow, increasing capacity, supporting frontline services and delivering long-term reform, we will restore urgent emergency care standards and end the routine use of corridor care before the end of this Parliament. That is our commitment to patients, NHS staff and this House.

6.51 pm

Dr Allin-Khan: As I stand here now to give my closing remarks, I am filled with a sense of pride. There are very few occasions when we all come together across the House in unison on an issue. Today is an example of where Members from every party and those who sit as independents have come together to say: enough is enough, we all stand united against the scourge that is corridor care.

It would not be fair of me to single out individual contributions, because they were all worthy of accolades. Members have shared their own deeply personal experiences or those of their families. They have highlighted how important it is that we understand the geographical implications of how this is a challenge that does not require a one-size-fits-all approach.

I am really pleased to hear the commitments from the Minister, especially as we know that, according to the Royal College of Emergency Medicine, 1,300 excess deaths occur every month due to long A&E waits. That is the equivalent of a plane crash of people dying every single week. We cannot allow that to happen. I appreciate

everything the Minister said, but my closing request is this. Can we please do everything we can to heed the remarks of everyone across the House today and speed up whatever we can to ensure there is not a single excess death attributed to something that could be avoided?

For every person who dies when it could have been prevented, we have a family in grief and a life taken too soon. If we know there are things we could be doing—money we could be spending, a social care system we could be fixing to ensure people have extra precious time with their loved ones and that people have dignity on what is, on many occasions, the last day of their lives—we must spend every ounce of energy in the Department of Health and Social Care to fix this problem.

I thank everyone who has taken part in this debate and I thank the Minister. Let us end corridor care for good.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered NHS corridor care.

Point of Order

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I would like to correct an inadvertent error I made earlier today. During the Ninth Delegated Legislation Committee debate on the Greater Cambridge Development Corporation (Establishment) Order 2026, I inadvertently stated that a relevant powers and functions order would fall under the affirmative procedure, when it will actually be made under the negative procedure.

[*Official Report, Ninth Delegated Legislation Committee,* 8 July 2026; c. 10.]

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I thank the Minister for giving notice of his point of order, and for seeking to correct the record so quickly, which he has now done. Hopefully that draws a line under it.

PETITIONS

Tenant Management Organisations and the Right to Manage

6.55 pm

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents of the Loughborough Estate in my constituency, I wish to say that the conditions in which the residents there are currently forced to live are shocking. The lack of a straightforward remedy to those conditions is completely unacceptable, and the need for change is urgent.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the Loughborough Estate in Brixton,

Declares that the right to manage for residents of social housing is important and that tenant management organisations often deliver high quality services, but the Loughborough Estate is under the long-term control of a tenant management organisation which has lost its democratic mandate, and fails to deliver the essential services in respect of which it receives over £3 million per year of funds from the London Borough of Lambeth; and further declares that the current right to manage legislation is not fit for purpose, lacks essential safeguards, and enables rogue entities to retain control of council housing without democratic mandate and oversight.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons considers this issue, and urges the Government to: (i) produce regulations amending the Housing (Right to Manage) (England) Regulations 2012, introducing essential changes to safeguard the democratic integrity of tenant management organisations; and (ii) publish updated guidance in relation to the application of any such regulations, including a new Modular Management Agreement.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003218]

Railway Station in Long Ashton

Sadik Al-Hassan (North Somerset) (Lab): I would like to present a petition for a railway station in Long Ashton on behalf of North Somerset and the village of Long Ashton, which remains significantly underserved by public transport infrastructure, with no viable railway connection to Bristol and beyond.

The petitioners therefore request

"that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a feasibility study for the construction of a new railway station at Long Ashton, North Somerset, in order to serve the existing

[Sadik Al-Hassan]

community and support the sustainable development of the forthcoming healthtech campus."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of Long Ashton, North Somerset and the surrounding areas,

Declares that the community of Long Ashton in North Somerset is significantly underserved by public transport infrastructure; further declares that the area is set to become home to a £1.25 billion healthtech campus which will bring substantial employment, economic growth, and inward investment to the region; further declares that the absence of a railway station serving this community places an unacceptable burden on residents who currently have no viable rail connection to Bristol and beyond; further declares that the provision of a new station in Long Ashton would reduce car dependency, ease congestion on local roads, support the region's net zero ambitions, and ensure that the economic benefits of the incoming healthtech campus are accessible to a wide range of workers and residents; and further declares that failure to invest in this infrastructure risks undermining the full economic potential of one of the most significant development projects in the West of England.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to undertake a feasibility study for the construction of a new railway station at Long Ashton, North Somerset, in order to serve the existing community and support the sustainable development of the forthcoming healthtech campus.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003220]

Hundredstone Post Office

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): After amazing campaigners secured more than 900 signatures, I present this petition on the closure of the Hundredstone post office in Yeovil, which will leave locals with no in-person post office and banking services.

The petitioners therefore request

"that the House of Commons urges the Government to put pressure on the Post Office to ensure a replacement operator for the post office in the area is in place before the current site is closed; and to consider how to provide communities with more resilient in-person services."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,

Declares that an alternative operator for the Hundredstone Post Office site in the Morrisons Daily on Glenthorne Avenue in Yeovil must be provided before the store's closure 29 July 2026; and further declares that the current model for local services, whereby bank services often operate in post offices and post offices often operate in shops, means that local people lose almost all of their in-person services when shops, as is often the case in the current business and regulatory environment, don't survive.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put pressure on the Post Office to ensure a replacement operator for the post office in the area is in place before the current site is closed; and to consider how to provide communities with more resilient in-person services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003221]

Greenhouse Gas Removals Sector

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Gregor Poynton.)*

7 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to bring this Adjournment debate to the House and to make the case for greater Government support for the greenhouse gas removals sector. First, I thank the sector for engaging so openly with me about its businesses and concerns, the Minister for his continued co-operation on this issue and Dr Alan Whitehead for publishing his extremely important review.

Before entering this place, I spent almost a decade working in renewable energy, and before that on climate impact projects. I would certainly not claim to be an expert on greenhouse gas removals, but, through my work in the renewable energy sector, and now as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on climate technology and the co-chair of the net zero APPG, I have at least become a passionate advocate for the sector.

It has been encouraging to see a Secretary of State and Ministers who genuinely recognise the scale of the climate challenge. However, warm words must now become concrete action if Britain is not to miss yet another opportunity to become a world leader in one of the defining industries of the next century.

Climate change is here. It is happening now. We see it through rising temperatures and increasingly frequent heatwaves, flooding, drought and wildfires. The changing climate is already affecting our communities, businesses and public services. Much of the conversation has rightly focused on reducing our emissions, and let me be clear: decarbonisation must remain our first priority. Every tonne of carbon dioxide we avoid emitting now is better than having to remove it later. However, even if we achieve every single one of our net zero targets—and we absolutely must—we will still have a problem.

Net zero does not remove the carbon dioxide that is already sitting in our atmosphere, which is why this debate is not about carbon capture and storage, but about carbon removal. The Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has been absolutely clear that without greenhouse gas removals, keeping global warming within internationally agreed limits becomes effectively impossible.

Today, humanity removes only about 2 billion tonnes annually, 99.9% of which is done by trees and plants. Meanwhile, we continue adding more greenhouse gases to the atmosphere every single year. The scale of the challenge is enormous. Whenever I speak about this issue, someone invariably asks, "Why do we not just plant more trees?" I agree: trees are wonderful, and we should absolutely plant more of them. However, to keep global temperature increases below the 1.5% or 2% target, we would need to remove 10 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere every single year, which would require us to plant roughly 50 million hectares of new forest annually. That is equivalent to covering the entirety of the UK with trees, twice, every single year. Even the most committed of environmentalists would accept that that approach has practical limitations.

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): In recognising the challenge of planting enough trees on the land, I wonder whether my hon. Friend has thought more about capturing carbon in the ocean. He and I share the Lyme Bay marine protected area in our constituencies. The Vision Group for Sidmouth was telling me that despite covering less than 1% of the ocean floor, seagrass beds are responsible for 15% of its total carbon capture. Does he agree that we can also look to the sea for the capture of carbon?

Edward Morello: My hon. Friend and neighbour is absolutely right. There are many exciting nature-based solutions for which I have high hopes. In my role as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on climate technology, my focus today is mainly on the engineered solutions, but we need to consider all solutions to meet the challenge ahead.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing the debate. I spoke to him today about this subject and I congratulate him on highlighting environmental issues. Does he agree that we must ensure that all areas of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, receive a fair share of investment? Does he also agree that the Government must ensure that the GGR strategy supports our rural communities, utilising natural land-based solutions rather than just financing large industrial projects elsewhere? Above all, we must protect local jobs and ensure that common sense always prevails.

Edward Morello: I believe that we should back any and all solutions that help us face the challenge, and Northern Ireland is as well placed as any part of the UK to offer innovative solutions.

Technology such as direct air capture and engineered removal methods will become an essential part of moving beyond net zero towards net negative emissions. Those technologies are nascent. The businesses that will develop them need to be founded today and to scale over the next decade. They need investment, certainty and confidence if they are to become globally competitive and properly supported.

The encouraging news is that Britain already possesses almost everything needed to succeed. We have world-class universities that produce cutting-edge research, exceptional engineers, innovative start-ups and university spin-outs, globally respected financial services and investors, and advanced manufacturing capability.

The UK's GGR sector already contributes about £1.2 billion to the UK economy. It has the potential to contribute between £7 billion and £9 billion to GDP by 2050 while supporting more than 100,000 skilled jobs. The countries that build those technologies first will not simply reduce emissions at home; they will be central to global emission reductions for decades to come. Britain should aspire to become the global centre of carbon removal innovation, the home of future climate tech unicorns and a leading exporter of GGR technologies.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that creating industrial clusters is the best route to bringing in some of the new companies that look to scale up and invest? I recently met UnionDAC, which is looking to invest in Teesside. That is partly because of the huge amount of investment that is coming to the east coast cluster carbon capture, utilisation and storage project, which is

[Luke Myer]

creating 3,000 construction jobs as we speak. Does he therefore agree that the Government must continue to maintain the momentum for those clusters and new ones in next year's spending review to create skilled jobs across the UK?

Edward Morello: There is a lot of truth in what the hon. Member has outlined. We see the most rapid transformation and progress where innovation and expertise are clustered.

British innovators are already developing world-leading GGR technologies. The problem is that many of them struggle to raise the long-term investment needed to move from successful demonstrations to commercial deployment. British companies have told me that they will be European or American by the end of next year if the UK does not do more to support them.

The Whitehead review made that point very clearly. It recognised that the United Kingdom possesses many of the ingredients required to become a global leader, but that early-stage GGR companies continue to face significant barriers to scaling up. Many of those businesses require substantial upfront capital before they generate meaningful revenue. Private investors understandably look for long-term certainty and a return on their investment. Without that certainty, investment simply flows elsewhere.

UK start-ups struggle to access patient capital at precisely the moment they need it most. Of all climate tech early start-ups that failed, 62% fail at series A, the start of the so-called valley of death. Britain has repeatedly invented world-leading technologies only to watch other countries commercialise them. We cannot allow that to happen again.

If we get this right, GGRs could become one of Britain's great industrial success stories. If we get it wrong, we will again become purchasers of technologies developed elsewhere. The Government can create the long-term policy framework that gives markets confidence.

The publication of the GGR business model alongside the Whitehead review was an important milestone. The commitment to integrating GGR into the UK emissions trading scheme is another positive step, but companies developing GGRs are making decisions today about where to build their first commercial facilities. Those decisions will determine where future supply chains develop, where highly skilled jobs are created and where intellectual property remains.

What the sector is calling out for are low or no cost policy changes that would make a real difference until the response to the Whitehead review finally stops gathering dust on the Minister's desk. Solutions could be amending the sustainable aviation fuel mandate, improving access to finance from public finance bodies, voluntary carbon market changes, expanding UK GGR standards to wider methods or endorsing interim standards, a new UK buyers' club, a regulations audit, departmental sandboxes and standards for the emissions performance standard. We must give the market the certainty it is asking for and the investors the confidence to unlock that potential.

That brings me to what I believe is the single most important proposal that the Government should consider. The answer lies in creating a British carbon bank, a Government-seeded revolving fund that will crowd in private finance. A British carbon bank would provide long-term advanced market commitments for verified GGRs. That would de-risk the purchase for the offtaker as the credits are certified, provide the capital that the GGR project needs to start capturing greenhouse gases and generating carbon credit, and improve investor confidence because there is a guaranteed purchaser. Rather than the Government attempting to fund every project themselves, a British carbon bank would create guaranteed demand for high-quality removals over many years, allowing businesses to secure investment and scale their technologies with confidence.

The Whitehead review recognises exactly this challenge. It concluded that demand certainty will be fundamental if GGRs are to develop at the pace required. Without reliable long-term demand, many technologies will simply struggle to reach commercial scale.

One particularly interesting example is Terraset, a US charity. Rather than relying solely on traditional grant funding, Terraset uses philanthropic finance to early pre-purchase commitments to vetted projects, giving those projects the capital to actually remove greenhouse gases. Those advanced commitments provide early demand, giving companies confidence to develop technologies while demonstrating to investors that a future market exists. These projects deliver verified carbon credits to Terraset, which it then sells to buyers. Any revenue generated is then returned to the fund and gets deployed into new projects. For every $1 it deploys, it unlocks $5 in private finance and achieves a 15% mark-up for credits under this de-risk model. As a result of this profit margin, it is now attracting interest from institutional investors, including pension funds.

A British carbon bank would take that principle and apply it at a national scale. It would provide a clear signal that Britain intends to become the best place in the world to develop, deploy and commercialise greenhouse gas removal. One strength of a British carbon bank model is that it addresses the greatest barrier currently facing the sector: risk. The bank would purchase future carbon removals in advance, holding those credits until they have been independently verified and certified. There is, of course, a risk for the Government that some projects may ultimately fail to deliver the promised removals or not achieve certification. However, that risk can be significantly reduced through robust due diligence and careful product selection, as organisations such as Terraset have already demonstrated successfully.

Importantly, the model also overcomes the current "chicken and egg" problem in the market. Today, many buyers are reluctant to pre-purchase carbon removals because they bear all the delivery risk. By contrast, a British carbon bank would offer only certified verified credits to the market, making them far more attractive to businesses seeking high-integrity carbon removals while simultaneously providing developers with the up-front certainty they need to secure investment and scale their technologies. The market will determine which solutions ultimately prove effective, whether nature-based approaches, direct air capture or entirely new technologies that are yet to emerge. With a relatively small Government investment, we could seed this market, crowding in five or 10 times more in private finance.

Terraset supported Graphyte, which needed early-stage capital to move from planning into commercial deployment. Private buyers recognised the value of the project, but were

not yet ready to commit at the scale or speed required. Through its revolving fund, Terraset made an advance commitment of just over $100,000, providing the confidence and working capital that enabled the project to proceed. Once Graphyte had delivered independently verified carbon removals, those credits were purchased by a commercial buyer, with the proceeds going back into the revolving fund to support the next generation of projects.

I believe that a British carbon bank could replicate this revolving model at scale, helping promising British companies bridge the gap between innovation and commercial success. Net zero is today's problem, and net negative is tomorrow's, but if we do not start thinking about it now, we will not be ready to meet that challenge. We should be ambitious. We should not settle for participating in the market—we should aim to lead it.

Will the Minister confirm precisely when the Government intend to publish their full response to the Whitehead review, and whether that will be before the House rises for the summer recess? Will he confirm whether the Government are giving serious consideration to the proposal for a British carbon bank or revolving fund to provide the long-term market certainty the sector has consistently called for? If the Government are not yet in a position to introduce longer-term reforms, what interim measures will they take to ensure that promising new UK GGR businesses are supported and not lost overseas while policies are being developed? Finally, will the Minister commit to continuing to work closely with the sector over the coming months, listening to businesses, investors and researchers, so that the UK can seize the opportunity to become a global leader in greenhouse gas removals rather than watching others move ahead?

Carbon does not recognise borders or respect international treaties; it is a global challenge that demands world-leading solutions. I believe that those solutions should be developed here in the UK.

7.15 pm

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): May I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) on securing a debate on this important topic? I thank him for all his engagement on this and many other issues, and for his leadership on the energy transition. In the rising noise in and outside this place against facts on the climate crisis in front of us today, it is genuinely a relief to have conversations with him about what we can do about the reality. On that, he makes a hugely important contribution to the House. In all my engagements with him, I come away having learned something new; I thank him for that.

I will start where the hon. Gentleman started: by recognising that we cannot put off our response to the climate crisis to tomorrow. We are now living through extremely hot weather caused in part by the action that we did not take to tackle the climate crisis. While this is one of the hottest summers that we have lived through, it is almost certainly one of the coldest summers that we will live through, so every single step we can take to tackle this crisis should be taken.

We absolutely need greenhouse gas removal technologies to reach net zero and to tackle the climate crisis. Such technologies give us a not just a huge opportunity to balance the residual emissions from hard-to-decarbonise sectors, but—as we have said throughout all of the work the Government are doing on the clean power mission and beyond—an exciting opportunity to grow our economy and secure new investment into the UK. When I say that, I mean all parts of the UK, including Northern Ireland, which the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) rightly always challenges me on. This is not just the Government's view; it is firmly the view of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and our own independent Climate Change Committee. That is why we are looking ahead and investing in these technologies.

Last year, in our carbon budget and growth delivery plan, we set out how the UK will continue to reduce emissions in a way that lowers bills and secures good jobs, including developing and deploying GGRs at scale. We forecast 0.7 megatonnes of engineered GGRs deployed in 2030, with that figure increasing exponentially to 21.8 megatonnes by 2035. We are laying the groundwork now to support the massive growth that we expect to see in the 2030s, because, as exciting as these technologies are, they are new, and it will take a comprehensive and holistic policy framework to get us to where we need to be.

I will set out six steps, many of which will respond to the points made by the hon. Gentleman. The first is providing support to incentivise private investment through a contractual revenue support mechanism. That is the GGR business model, designed to stimulate private investment in GGRs by providing revenue support under a contract for difference mechanism. It aims to capitalise on growing demand for high integrity GGRs in the voluntary carbon market and, in the longer term, in the UK emissions trading scheme, designed to enable the deployment of GGR projects at scale in the UK while ensuring at all times value for money for taxpayers.

We are employing similar approaches to support energy from waste, with carbon capture and storage through the waste industrial carbon capture business model and large-scale bioenergy with carbon capture and storage, or BECCS, through our power BECCS business model. We are also exploring the case for financing GGR technologies not reliant on CO_2 transport and storage infrastructure, such as enhanced rock weathering and CO_2 mineralisation in building materials, as we recognise that there are a number of benefits to a diverse portfolio of GGR technologies. No decisions have been made on the particular intervention or mechanism.

I want to reference the point that the hon. Gentleman has raised with me before and he raised today as well on the British carbon bank, or the idea of some kind of revolving fund. It is a serious idea that we will look at carefully, because we recognise that there is a real benefit to having that portfolio in place. We have already invested money, as I will come on to, but looking at interventions like that is important. We will continue to engage with him and the wider sector on how that could work.

Secondly, we are introducing a new standard to ensure that investors and the public have confidence in these technologies. To complement the business models, we have commissioned the British Standards Institution to develop methodologies under an official UK GGR standard, and that is expected to be published next year. This is about making sure that carbon removals are genuine and verifiable, and having a standard in place so that we can objectively assess the viability and suitability of projects applying to the business model.

[Michael Shanks]

The BSI development process generates high-integrity standards and benchmarks, bringing together industry specialists, academics and policymakers from across relevant sectors to produce a consensus-based final product. It is an example of a strong point made by the hon. Gentleman: everything we need to make this work is already here in Britain. The academics, the industry specialists, the skills and the capabilities are all here, and we just need to look at how we capitalise on those resources as quickly as possible.

Thirdly, we know that carbon capture, usage and storage infrastructure is critical for enabling some of these technologies, and we have been committed to deploying CCUS at scale. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer) about the need to capitalise on investment that we have already made, and to continue down that path by investing in these projects. In October 2024, just a few months after we took office, we made a significant funding commitment of up to £21.7 billion over 25 years to kick-start the CCUS industry here in Britain. GGR projects have been able to apply to the expansion of the HyNet and East Coast clusters through the HyNet Track-1 expansion process, the Teesside selection process and the non-pipeline transport pathfinder process—all very catchy names. I can already confirm that the HyNet Track-1 expansion includes two GGR projects that are in the negotiation phase of that process.

Fourthly, we are investing in innovation. For many of these technologies, there is research that still needs to be undertaken and there are breakthroughs that are waiting to be made. We have already invested over £80 million through the direct air capture and greenhouse gas removal innovation programme and the UK Research and Innovation funded greenhouse gas removal demonstrator programme and its co-ordinating hub.

The carbon budget and growth delivery plan committed to launching a series of cleantech innovation challenges that target mission-critical innovation. These will set specific, measurable, time-bound goals for innovation, co-owned with industry, which will mobilise public and private sector investment and focus policy efforts on creating the necessary market pull for new technologies and, in the process, de-risking those investments into new innovations.

That leads me to the fifth point about how we stimulate market demand. We want to engineer GGR projects to generate high-quality carbon credits that can be sold on high-integrity negative emissions markets, and so we will maximise the opportunity for the voluntary carbon markets to channel private finance into those GGR projects. At COP29, we launched six principles for voluntary carbon and nature market integrity to guide organisations into taking voluntary action towards nature-positive and net zero goals.

When we consulted on those principles with stakeholders, they highlighted that, in order to unlock the full potential of the voluntary carbon market, there is a need for greater clarity on the definition of high-quality carbon credits and how credits could be used in corporate net zero claims. Alongside the Governments of Singapore and Kenya, we are leading development of the Coalition to Grow Carbon Markets to strengthen corporate demand for high-integrity carbon credits, and anyone and everyone is welcome to join that coalition.

Our long-term ambition is for a competitive negative emissions market, underpinned by demand in the carbon market and the UK emissions trading scheme. We have signalled our intention to include GGRs in the UK ETS. Last summer, the ETS authority published a response to the consultation on the inclusion of GGRs in the ETS, setting out further details on how we will do this.

Finally, we are considering the findings of the independent review into GGRs that we commissioned last year under my noble Friend and all-round GGR and general energy expert and nerd, Lord Whitehead, who did fantastic work. I can assure the hon. Member for West Dorset and the House that that review is certainly not gathering dust on my desk; I have been flicking through it far too much for it to be gathering dust. I can say to the hon. Gentleman that the review includes many interesting and useful conclusions. We are taking time to go through them in detail, but we aim to publish the response this month. I am sorry that that is not quite an exact date, but I hope it is close enough.

I hope that the steps that I have outlined today will reassure the House that this Government take the future of GGRs extremely seriously. We know that these technologies will be essential to reducing our emissions while growing the economy on the road to net zero by 2050, and that is why we are acting now. I want to conclude by coming back to the point where the hon. Gentleman started. It is absolutely critical that we rebuild, where we can, the consensus on acting on the most existential crisis that this planet faces. The climate crisis is not some future threat that we can have a theoretical debate about now and worry about later; it is a very real and pressing threat, and GGRs will play a really important part in addressing it. The Government are determined to make that happen, and there is an economic opportunity if we get this right as well. I absolutely commit to working with the wider industry, with the hon. Gentleman and with everyone else who has an interest in this fascinating subject in order to make this work.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Unless I am misunderstanding him, the Minister has committed to making a policy announcement this month. There are only a few more sitting days, and he will know that Mr Speaker does not take lightly policy announcements being made outside the House; this House is where those announcements should be made for scrutiny by Back-Bench MPs. No doubt the Minister's staff will be scribbling that down.

Question put and agreed to.

7.26 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Divisions

EDUCATION

That the draft Children's Wellbeing and School Act 2026 (Establishment of Schools) (Consequential Amendments) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 20 May, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 369, Noes 102.

Division No. 51]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Aquarone, Steff
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Babarinde, Josh
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brewer, Alex
Brickell, Phil
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Cane, Charlotte
Carling, Sam
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chamberlain, Wendy
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coghlan, Chris
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Cooper, Daisy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
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, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
George, Andrew
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Goldsborough, Ben
Gordon, Tom
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Green, Sarah
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hamilton, Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Heylings, Pippa
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jarvis, Liz
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Clive
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
MacCleary, James
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami)*
MacDonald, Mr Angus
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Martin, Mike
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mathew, Brian
Mayer, Alex
Maynard, Charlie
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McFadden, rh Pat
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Midgley, Anneliese
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Munt, Tessa
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Murray, Susan
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Olney, Sarah
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo

Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Perteghella, Manuela
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Dr Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Roome, Ian
Rutland, Tom
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Savage, Dr Roz
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
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
Spencer, Hannah
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Voaden, Caroline
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
White, Katie
Wilkinson, Max
Williams, David
Wilson, Munira
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Wrigley, Martin
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Young, Claire
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Glen, rh John
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lumsden, Douglas
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike

Question accordingly agreed to.

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.

The House divided: Ayes 317, Noes 103.

Division No. 52]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Berry, Siân
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia

Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Ann
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Denyer, Carla *(Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry)*
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Downie, Graeme
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Eccles, Cat
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Gosling, Jodie
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hamilton, Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hume, Alison
Huq, Dr Rupa
Hurley, Patrick
Hussain, Imran
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Jogee, Adam
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lake, Ben
Lamb, Peter
Lavery, Ian
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewin, Andrew
Lewis, Clive
Lightwood, Simon
Long Bailey, Rebecca
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda
Maskell, Rachael
Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Chris
McDonnell, rh John
McDougall, Blair
McFadden, rh Pat
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Medi, Llinos *(Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake)*
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Mishra, Navendu
Moon, Perran
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Osborne, Kate
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Dr Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ramsay, Adrian
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rutland, Tom
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Spencer, Hannah
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Sultana, Zarah
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Bedford, Mr Peter
Bhatti, Saqib *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Burghart, Alex
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Chope, Sir Christopher
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Fox, Sir Ashley
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Glen, rh John
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lumsden, Douglas
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Mayhew, Jerome
McVey, rh Esther
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Paul, Rebecca
Philp, rh Chris
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Reed, David
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Swann, Robin
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Thomas, Bradley
Tice, Richard
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Whately, Helen
Wild, James
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike

Question accordingly 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.

The House divided: Ayes 283, Noes 182.

Division No. 53]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Rushanara
Ali, Tahir
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Alex
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Blake, Olivia
Blake, Rachel
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Sureena
Brickell, Phil
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Carling, Sam
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Dr Beccy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Coyle, Neil
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Daby, Janet
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul
Dean, Josh
Dearden, Kate
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dickson, Jim
Dixon, Samantha
Dodds, rh Anneliese
Dollimore, Helena
Doughty, Stephen
Downie, Graeme
Eagle, Dame Angela
Eastwood, Colum
Efford, Clive
Egan, Damien
Ellis, Maya
Elmore, Chris
Entwistle, Kirith
Eshalomi, Florence
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris
Falconer, Mr Hamish
Farnsworth, Linsey
Ferguson, Mark
Ferguson, Patricia
Fleet, Natalie
Foody, Emma
Fookes, Catherine
Foster, Mr Paul
Foxcroft, Vicky
Francis, Daniel
Frith, Mr James
Gardner, Dr Allison
Gelderd, Anna
Gemmell, Alan
Gilbert, Tracy
Gill, Preet Kaur
Gittins, Becky
Glindon, Mary
Goldsborough, Ben
Grady, John
Greenwood, Lilian
Griffith, Dame Nia
Hack, Amanda
Hamilton, Paulette
Hanna, Claire
Hardy, Emma
Harris, Carolyn
Hatton, Lloyd
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, Tom
Hazelgrove, Claire
Healey, rh John
Hillier, Dame Meg
Hinder, Jonathan
Hopkins, Rachel
Hume, Alison
Hurley, Patrick
Ingham, Leigh
Irons, Natasha
Jameson, Sally
Johnson, rh Dame Diana
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Lillian
Jones, Ruth
Josan, Gurinder Singh
Joseph, Sojan
Juss, Warinder
Kane, Chris
Kane, Mike
Kaur, Satvir
Khan, Naushabah
Kinnock, Stephen
Kirkham, Jayne
Kitchen, Gen
Kumar, Sonia
Kyle, rh Peter
Kyrke-Smith, Laura
Lamb, Peter
Law, Noah
Leadbeater, Kim
Lewin, Andrew
Lightwood, Simon
Macdonald, Alice *(Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami)*
MacNae, Andy
Madders, Justin
Malhotra, Seema
Martin, Amanda

Mather, Keir
Mayer, Alex
McAllister, Douglas
McCarthy, Kerry
McCluskey, Martin
McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
McDonald, Chris
McDougall, Blair
McFadden, rh Pat
McIntyre, Alex
McKee, Gordon
McKenna, Kevin
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
McNally, Frank
Midgley, Anneliese
Minns, Ms Julie
Moon, Perran
Morris, Grahame
Morris, Joe
Mullane, Margaret
Murphy, Luke
Murray, Chris
Murray, rh Ian
Murray, rh James
Murray, Katrina
Myer, Luke
Naish, James
Naismith, Connor
Narayan, Kanishka
Nash, Pamela
Niblett, Samantha
Nichols, Charlotte
Norris, Alex
Onn, Melanie
Onwurah, Dame Chi
Opher, Dr Simon
Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
Owatemi, Taiwo
Paffey, Darren
Pakes, Andrew
Patrick, Matthew
Peacock, Stephanie
Pearce, Jon
Pennycook, Matthew
Perkins, Mr Toby
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, rh Bridget
Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Platt, Jo
Powell, Joe
Powell, rh Lucy
Poynton, Gregor
Prinsley, Dr Peter
Quigley, Richard
Qureshi, Yasmin
Race, Steve
Ranger, Andrew
Rayner, rh Angela
Reader, Mike
Reeves, rh Ellie
Reeves, rh Rachel
Reynolds, rh Emma
Reynolds, rh Jonathan
Rhodes, Martin
Richards, Jake
Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Robertson, Dave
Roca, Tim
Rodda, Matt
Rutland, Tom
Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Scrogham, Michelle
Sewards, Mark
Shah, Naz
Siddiq, Tulip
Slaughter, Andy
Slinger, John
Smith, Cat
Smith, David
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Nick
Smith, Sarah
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gareth
Sobel, Alex
Stevens, rh Jo
Stevenson, Kenneth
Stewart, Elaine
Strathern, Alistair
Strickland, Alan
Stringer, Graham
Sullivan, Kirsteen
Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Swallow, Peter
Tami, rh Sir Mark
Tapp, Mike
Taylor, Alison
Taylor, David
Thomas, Fred
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Thompson, Adam
Tidball, Dr Marie
Tomlinson, Dan
Tufnell, Henry
Turley, rh Anna
Turmaine, Matt
Turner, Laurence
Twigg, Derek
Twist, Liz
Uppal, Harpreet
Vaughan, Tony
Vaz, rh Valerie
Vince, Chris
Wakeford, Christian
Walker, Imogen
Ward, Chris
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
West, Catherine
Western, Andrew
Wheeler, Michael
White, Katie
Williams, David
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Allister, Jim
Anderson, Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart
Aquarone, Steff
Argar, rh Edward
Atkins, rh Victoria
Babarinde, Josh
Bacon, Gareth
Baldwin, Dame Harriett
Barclay, rh Steve
Barker, Paula
Beavers, Lorraine
Bedford, Mr Peter
Begum, Apsana
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Bhatti, Saqib *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Blackman, Bob
Bool, Sarah
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, rh Dame Karen
Brandreth, Aphra
Brewer, Alex
Burghart, Alex
Burgon, Richard
Byrne, Ian
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Cartlidge, James
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chope, Sir Christopher
Chowns, Dr Ellie
Cleverly, rh Sir James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Cocking, Lewis
Coghlan, Chris
Cooper, Daisy
Cooper, John
Costa, Alberto
Coutinho, rh Claire
Cross, Harriet
Dance, Adam
Darling, Steve
Davies, Gareth
Davies, Mims
Davis, rh David *(Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey)*
Denyer, Carla *(Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry)*
Dewhirst, Charlie
Dillon, Mr Lee *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
Duncan-Jordan, Neil
Eccles, Cat
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Fox, Sir Ashley
Foy, Mary Kelly
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Freeman, George *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
French, Mr Louie
Fuller, Richard
Gale, rh Sir Roger
George, Andrew
Glen, rh John
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah
Griffith, Andrew
Griffiths, Alison
Harris, Rebecca
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heylings, Pippa
Hinchliff, Chris
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Holden, rh Mr Richard
Holmes, Paul
Huddleston, Nigel
Hudson, Dr Neil
Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
Hussain, Imran
Jarvis, Liz
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Kim
Jones, Clive
Lam, Katie
Lamont, John
Lavery, Ian
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Leishman, Brian
Lewell, Emma
Lewis, Clive
Lewis, rh Sir Julian
Lockhart, Carla
Lopez, Julia
Lumsden, Douglas
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Mak, Alan
Malthouse, rh Kit
Martin, Mike
Maskell, Rachael
Mathew, Brian
Mayhew, Jerome
Maynard, Charlie
McDonald, Andy
McDonnell, rh John
McVey, rh Esther
van Mierlo, Freddie
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mishra, Navendu
Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
Mohindra, Mr Gagan
Moore, Robbie
Moran, Layla
Morello, Edward
Morgan, Helen
Morrissey, Joy
Morton, rh Wendy
Mullan, Dr Kieran
Mundell, rh David
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
Norman, rh Jesse
Obese-Jecty, Ben
Olney, Sarah
Osborne, Kate
Paul, Rebecca
Perteghella, Manuela
Philp, rh Chris
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Raja, Shivani *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Ramsay, Adrian
Reed, David

Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Rimmer, Ms Marie *(Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell)*
Robertson, Joe
Robinson, rh Gavin
Roome, Ian
Savage, Dr Roz
Shannon, Jim
Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Simmonds, David
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Smith, Greg
Smith, rh Sir Julian
Smith, Rebecca
Snowden, Mr Andrew
Sollom, Ian
Spencer, Dr Ben
Spencer, Hannah
Spencer, Patrick *(Proxy vote cast by Mike Wood)*
Stafford, Gregory
Stephenson, Blake
Stride, rh Sir Mel
Sultana, Zarah
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Bradley
Thomas, Cameron *(Proxy vote cast by Wendy Chamberlain)*
Tice, Richard
Vickers, Martin
Vickers, Matt
Voaden, Caroline
Whately, Helen
Wild, James
Wilkinson, Max
Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
Wilson, Munira
Wilson, rh Sammy
Wood, Mike
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 8 July 2026

[Sir John Hayes *in the Chair*]

Draft UK-EU Agreement on Gibraltar

9.30 am

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the draft UK-EU Agreement on Gibraltar.

It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir John, for what I hope will be an interesting and constructive debate about the future of Gibraltar. I am delighted to be joined by the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar—the hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin)—on which I serve as the vice-chairman.

As the result of a discussion between me and the Gibraltar Government representative, who is in the Gallery, we thought it would be useful to have a fact-finding trip to Gibraltar, so that when the treaty on the future of the Rock was up for discussion, we could have one from an informed position. Two or three people who were hoping to go on the trip were unable to, but I was delighted that Baroness Butler-Sloss, the Cross-Bench peer, accompanied me, and we were also joined for one or two of the meetings by Lord James Wharton, from the upper House.

Following discussions with the Gibraltar office here in London, we put together a programme that was pretty comprehensive and gave us a good overview of the views of the local population, the business community and, of course, the politicians in Gibraltar. We had a meeting with His Excellency the Governor, which was just a courtesy call, but it is always a pleasure to meet up with him and other senior diplomats to hear how they approach the issues. I should point out that we went at our own expense, so we were independent of the Government of Gibraltar.

After we had seen the Governor, we were delighted to go to the airport and be joined by the Chief Minister, who delighted in giving us a tour of the airport. He has clearly devoted a great deal of time and effort to the arrangements that are necessary to ensure that all sides are content and, importantly, that the sovereignty of Gibraltar is maintained. We all know the long history of Spanish claims on the Rock, but that is definitely not in any way part of the treaty; sovereignty is absolute.

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty) *indicated assent.*

Martin Vickers: I can see the Minister nodding; no doubt he will confirm that later.

On our trip to the airport, the concerns about Spanish officials operating on the Rock were, to some extent, assuaged. I was delighted that we were able to receive reassurance from not just the Chief Minister but his senior officials who accompanied us on the tour of the airport. I know there have been certain concerns about Spanish officials, police and the like operating within British territory, but the arrangements that have been made mean that, to a great extent, our fears can be assuaged.

Next we visited the commander at the British base. He assured us that there is co-operation with the Spanish authorities, which is only beneficial to both sides. There is no interference in the operations of the base, and the military is content with the arrangements. The American navy had been in the port only a day or two before our visit. It was encouraging, particularly in view of the current world situation and some of the noises coming from the American Administration, that work and co-operation are continuing at a purely operational level.

There was one visit on which we heard some discontent. We walked along Main Street and called in to see a number of retailers, purely at random, and they raised some concerns. As we know, the retail sector is struggling in many countries, and Gibraltar is no exception. Interestingly enough, one of the shops we went into dealt in ceramics, and the owner imported most of his products from the UK. He pointed out that because of various impositions on the ceramics sector, the costs were rising in the UK so much that it was becoming unprofitable to operate. With the proposed taxation arrangements in Gibraltar affecting retailers, he was going to cease operations in the not-too-distant future after being in business for about 25 years. It was very sad to hear that. But on the whole, although many of the retailers were not particularly happy, they recognised the overall benefits to Gibraltar of the operations.

I have mentioned the concerns about security and so on. One of our meetings was with the chief commissioner of the police, who recognised that there are a number of issues that need what he described as "further consideration". Having said that, when we left the meeting we felt that, on the whole, his concerns could be worked through. I am sure the Minister is well aware of them, but I would be more than happy to discuss them with him if that would be beneficial.

We then had a lunchtime meeting with the Chief Minister, the Attorney General and the Health, Care and Business Minister. It is important to stress that we had full co-operation from the Chief Minister and his Ministers during our visit, bearing in mind that we had no official standing and were merely there as representatives of the all-party group. I want to put on the record our sincere thanks to the Gibraltar representative for assisting us in making the arrangements for the visit.

In the course of the lunch with the Chief Minister, once we had dealt with the routine matters we were there to discuss, we had a very useful political discussion. It is always interesting to hear an outside politician's views of what is happening over here in the UK. I am not entirely sure what they would make of it today, but a couple of months ago we had a fascinating discussion, mainly about whether there were concerns about the treaty across the political spectrum here in the UK. We were able to give reassurance, based on the meetings we had and knowing the views of colleagues from the all-party parliamentary group, that there would be all-party support from Westminster.

According to the report we put together, we discussed the evolving UK-EU relationship, and on the whole the direction of travel was greatly supported. We also discussed a number of the issues that were causing concern,

[Martin Vickers]

including—if I can remember the ins and outs of it—people taking advantage of the arrangements that were being put in place. It is probably not something we need to cover today, but it is worth recording that there were some concerns about people trying to take advantage of the health services provided in Gibraltar. We also had a constructive meeting with the vice-chancellor of the university, whom we had met on previous occasions. It was interesting to receive an update on how things were progressing there.

We had an interesting meeting with Keith Azopardi, the leader of the opposition in Gibraltar, because we wanted to ensure that we received views on the treaty from across the political spectrum. He pointed out that the opposition had imposed a number of red lines in their discussions, but as Members will know, the draft treaty was eventually approved unanimously by the Gibraltarian Parliament. The leader of the opposition quite understandably pointed out his party's concerns. As opposition parties do, it obviously wanted to carve out a position whereby if something went wrong, he would be able to say, "I told you so." I can see Government Members smiling at that, because they have been in opposition—my party is in opposition now, and the shadow minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), may point out one or two of our concerns in that respect.

Mr Azopardi expressed genuine concerns but—he will probably not thank me for saying this—in all honesty I think he was struggling to find reasons why he would have been tempted to vote against the treaty. It is important to recognise that political parties across Gibraltar have supported the treaty and feel on balance that it would be beneficial for it to be ratified.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member on securing the debate. He mentioned cross-party support; does he agree that, as far as we are able to ascertain, the people of Gibraltar are glad that there is cross-party support for their position in this House, and that we must try to maintain that to ensure the safety and security of the people on the Rock of Gibraltar?

Martin Vickers: I entirely agree with the hon. Gentleman.

Following our meeting with the leader of the opposition, we met with Eva Wallace, who is a store manager at Morrisons. Those who know Gibraltar well will know that Morrisons is not just a key part of the retail scene there but a big business operation. Ms Wallace outlined what she described as the significant complexities that arose following Brexit, and the different but equally substantial complexities—such as labelling requirements—that will follow the treaty's implementation. She pointed out that there would certainly be a reduction in the range of stock the store could offer. Having said that, it currently carries 20,000 different products, so I suspect most customers will not notice if that goes down to 17,000 or 18,000. Morrisons does business with Morocco, from where it gets tomatoes, and there had been problems with labelling. The store has a loyal customer base in Gibraltar, but felt that the ease of crossing the border would increase the footfall coming from Spain, for which bus trips were being arranged. The business is well established there and knows how to continue and hopefully increase footfall.

The university vice-chancellor referred to the new immigration rules, and we noted in our report that the university would closely assess their impact on its attractiveness to prospective students from around the world. Research funding had been difficult to secure since Brexit, and the vice-Chancellor hoped that that might ease with the conclusion of the treaty.

I will draw my comments to a close and allow other Members to take part. On balance, we came away with the overwhelming view that the treaty negotiations had been a success and that the final version of the treaty should be approved. It has cross-party support in Gibraltar and it would be regrettable if that were not reflected here at Westminster. I am interested to hear contributions from other Members. Having in a sense imposed problems on Gibraltar as a result of our leaving the EU, it is important that we have reached a satisfactory conclusion. We should congratulate our negotiating team, and the Chief Minister, the Deputy Chief Minister and their colleagues in Gibraltar. I know from several visits over recent years that they have worked tirelessly to achieve the treaty, which is, on balance, welcome. I hope that, as it passes through the various stages in Westminster, we are able to finalise it in the very near future.

9.48 am

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John, in this important debate.

For more than six years, the people of Gibraltar have lived with uncertainty. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar, I have had the enormous privilege of visiting the Rock several times since Brexit. I have met businesses, politicians, officials and residents. Wherever I have gone, I have heard the same message: people want certainty, so that they can get on with their lives, grow their businesses and plan for the future.

I want to put on record my thanks to the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for not only securing this debate but producing a full and thorough report, alongside Baroness Elizabeth Butler-Sloss, after their visit in May. As he noted, after years of determined negotiations we finally have an agreement that delivers certainty. I congratulate the Minister and his team on that, and I pay tribute to the Government of Gibraltar, whose steadfast commitment was instrumental in securing this outcome. I also recognise the constructive engagement of Spain and the European Union. Agreements of such significance are only possible through patience, dialogue and a shared determination to find a way forward.

This matters because every day more than 15,000 people cross the frontier to work, trade and support their families. Removing unnecessary barriers will make a real difference to people's lives, give businesses greater certainty and confidence, and help Gibraltar look to the future with certainty. However, the practical benefits need to be seen and felt, so I would be grateful if the Minister could say a little more about when people can expect to begin seeing them.

The economic case is compelling. Gibraltar estimates that the agreement could unlock around £200 million a year for its economy, without costing the UK taxpayer a penny. The agreement is good for Gibraltar, good for British business and good for our wider economy. More importantly, it changes nothing about sovereignty. Gibraltar

remains British. The treaty is clear, the Government of Gibraltar's independent legal advice is clear, and the right of the people of Gibraltar to determine their own future remains untouched.

Chief Minister Fabian Picardo said in one of his national day addresses:

> "We are an integral part of the British family of Nations. And no one can or should try to untie the knot that binds us and Britain."

Those words capture exactly what the treaty has achieved. It provides certainty for Gibraltar's future while protecting the enduring bond between Gibraltar and the United Kingdom.

It is also important to remember that this is the agreement the people of Gibraltar wanted. It was backed by a Government elected on a mandate to deliver, approved unanimously by the Gibraltar Parliament and supported by every former Chief Minister. As we heard from the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham, it was backed by the many stakeholders that he met during his visit in May.

Alongside the constitutional protections come real practical benefits: easier movement across the frontier, improved trading opportunities for Gibraltar businesses, and simpler travel for British and potentially European visitors. The agreement gives Gibraltar the opportunity to thrive while remaining proudly British. However, I hear the concerns that have been raised with regard to the retail sector, security, health and access to the university. Along with the Gibraltar APPG, I look forward to supporting and raising any concerns where possible with our Government.

As the Member of Parliament for Portsmouth North, I also welcome the protections for our national security. Gibraltar has stood alongside Britain for more than 300 years and remains one of our most strategically important overseas territories. The strait of Gibraltar is one of the world's most important maritime gateways, and the ability of the United Kingdom to operate freely from the Rock is fundamental to our national security. I particularly welcome the clear guidance that the movement of UK military personnel and equipment will not be impeded. That was an essential principle throughout the negotiations and I am pleased to see it so very clearly protected. National security is the first priority of any Government, so I would welcome anything the Minister can say about how those defence interests were protected throughout the negotiations and the close work undertaken across Government to secure that outcome.

The agreement is about more than protecting and resolving the legacy of Brexit. It gives Gibraltar certainty, protects sovereignty, strengthens our security and creates the conditions for long-term prosperity. For generations, Gibraltarians have shown extraordinary loyalty to the United Kingdom, and the United Kingdom has stood firmly with Gibraltar. The treaty honours that relationship, safeguards its future and allows Gibraltar to look ahead with confidence. As the chair of the Gibraltar APPG, I warmly welcome it.

9.53 am

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) on securing this important debate. Before I begin, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. It was my privilege to represent the Liberal Democrats at the Gibraltar national day celebrations last year as a guest of His Majesty's Government of Gibraltar. That visit, and my work on the Foreign Affairs Committee, gave me the opportunity to question Ministers, the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, opposition politicians and business leaders about the treaty. Those discussions made it clear that the agreement has been shaped by the priorities of Gibraltar itself.

The Brexit deal left Gibraltar in a state of limbo for years. The treaty finally resolves one of the last outstanding Brexit issues and provides Gibraltar with the certainty it has been seeking ever since the United Kingdom left the European Union. In 2016, 96% of Gibraltarians voted to remain in the European Union; they have had to live with the consequences of a Brexit that they did not vote for. This agreement is about undoing some of the damage caused by a Brexit deal that Boris Johnson called "oven-ready" but in reality was always destined for the bin.

The Chief Minister made it clear to the Foreign Affairs Committee that the single most important priority was ensuring that people who live in Spain but work in Gibraltar, particularly in the financial services and gaming sectors, could continue to cross the frontier every day without excessive delays. Without an agreement, Gibraltar would have been required to implement the full Schengen border code, and travellers would have faced European entry and exit systems and, in the future, the ETIAS—European travel information and authorisation system—digital travel authority. Those additional checks would have created significant delays, threatening Gibraltar's competitiveness and potentially encouraging businesses to relocate. Instead, eligible travellers will enjoy fluid movement comparable with travelling between Schengen countries. Their ability to continue doing so quickly and efficiently underpins Gibraltar's economy and the public services that Gibraltarians rely on.

But this deal is about more than economics. The Chief Minister reminded the Foreign Affairs Committee that Gibraltar and the surrounding Campo de Gibraltar are communities bound together by families, friendship and shared history. During the closure of the frontier between 1969 and 1982, families were physically separated, forced to wave to one another across a closed border. Nobody wants a future resembling that painful past.

This agreement protects the everyday relationships that exist across the frontier for work, family, education and leisure, and allows those connections to continue. Approximately 96% of Gibraltarian goods arrive through the land frontier with Spain. After Brexit, sanitary and phytosanitary barriers made importing fresh British food significantly more difficult, with products even requiring air freighting during the Christmas period. This treaty offers businesses the certainty they need. Essential food products will be zero-rated under a new transactions tax, and there will be reduced rates on other essential goods.

The Chief Minister also made it clear that Gibraltar rejected any "freedom of establishment" in the treaty. Gibraltar is home to about 38,000 people living within approximately 2.5 square miles; it was never the intention to create unrestricted rights of establishment across a bloc of approximately 480 million people. Instead, the

[Edward Morello]

agreement focuses on facilitating movement across the frontier while preserving Gibraltar's own immigration rules.

Perhaps the greatest misconception about the treaty concerns sovereignty. The Government of Gibraltar state that there are no sovereignty concessions. The British Government state that sovereignty was never on the negotiating table. Article 2 explicitly preserves the position of both the UK and Spain on sovereignty and jurisdiction. Three independent legal opinions commissioned by the Government of Gibraltar conclude unequivocally that the treaty makes no concessions whatsoever to Spain or the European Union.

The agreement also protects Britain's strategic interests. The operational autonomy of the military base remains entirely unaffected. Protecting unrestricted military access was a red line throughout negotiations, supported fully by the Ministry of Defence and the Defence Secretary. In the highly unlikely event that Spain should ever seek to terminate the agreement, it cannot do so unilaterally. Under article 66, termination would require a qualified majority among European Union member states followed by action by the European Commission. That provides important legal certainty for Gibraltar's future.

I want to say something briefly about the wider UK-EU relationship. Gibraltar demonstrates something important: where the UK and the EU work together pragmatically, solutions can be found that benefit everyone. It shows that close co-operation with our European neighbours delivers tangible benefits. Britain's long-term future should lie at the heart of Europe, because our economy, our security and our young people's opportunities are stronger when we work alongside our closest neighbour and ally.

I praise those who made this agreement possible. Officials from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, Ministers, the Governor's Office, His Majesty's Government of Gibraltar, the European Commission and Spain have spent many years negotiating what the Minister has rightly described as a practical and lasting solution. This treaty will protect Gibraltar's economy, safeguard British sovereignty, preserve military interests, strengthen regional stability and, above all, respect the democratic wishes of the Gibraltarian people.

9.58 am

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship once again, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing this timely debate, and for his comprehensive report on his visit to Gibraltar. His experiences there closely match my own.

On that note, I draw attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. In June last year, I had the pleasure of going to Gibraltar at the invitation of the Government of Gibraltar. While I was there, Guy Dumas, an employee of the Government of Gibraltar, showed us around, and he and I got on so well that I ended up recruiting him as my parliamentary assistant. He has provided enormous assistance with my speech for the debate, for which I am very grateful. He is flying back to Gibraltar in just over a week's time to marry the love of his life, Holly, and I am sure we all wish them well in their marriage.

There has been one cloud—the levanter cloud, as it is known in Gibraltar—hanging over the Rock since 2016. As has already been mentioned, Gibraltar did not vote for Brexit; 96% of Gibraltarians voted to remain in the EU, but they have had to deal with the consequences. And rightly so, because they are part of the British family. After a decade of uncertainty since the referendum, a positive future is finally beginning to shine through those clouds.

Much of the focus in the lead-up to the agreement was on the key issue of sovereignty, which is completely understandable. Gibraltarians are proudly British. They have reaffirmed that in two referendums, in which 99% voted to remain part of the United Kingdom. Thankfully, as has already been stated, article 2 of the draft agreement says that the agreement is "without prejudice to" the legal positions of the UK and Spain regarding sovereignty over Gibraltar. The House of Commons Library notes that the agreement includes that term and that the Government of Gibraltar have obtained legal opinions confirming that the agreement makes no concessions over the issue of sovereignty. From an entirely legal perspective, an important box has been ticked.

I will focus my remarks on a different principle: Gibraltar's right to self-determination and the democratic will of its people and its elected Government. My visit to Gibraltar last year began with an unexpected detour. As anyone who has visited will know, the mile-long runway, combined with the strong winds across it, means that planes often cannot land and have to take a detour to Málaga. That was my experience, too.

That meant I had to enter Gibraltar via the land border, which is a routine experience for everybody living on the Rock and the surrounding area. Thankfully, I did not experience a particularly long queue to cross from Spain into Gibraltar, but I know that is not always the case. There are over 15,000 cross-frontier workers in Gibraltar, and that border is the only land entry point into Gibraltar. Delays of minutes can quickly become hours, and those hours are taken away from time with family or time at work. With this agreement, the routine passport checks that have caused those queues will come to an end. The agreement is intended to ensure that the free circulation of people and goods continues, and it removes those physical barriers at the border. As a Labour MP, I welcome any agreement that improves the lives of working people.

During my visit, I met Gibraltarian Government Ministers, the chamber of commerce and the Federation of Small Businesses. I spoke with businesses, just as the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham described, and with many others. At that point, the agreement had not been announced—it was announced a few days later—but they all spoke about the implications of any potential agreement. They also spoke about Gibraltar's turbulent history, with Spain being a factor. Their feelings were definitely mixed. There was a mix of hope and anxiety, and there was an acceptance of the reality facing them. There was anxiety among the business community about the effects that new tax arrangements might have on their businesses.

The controlled border, while frustrating in the way I described, provided a sense of security, and some worried that removing those routine checks could affect crime on what is a very peaceful peninsula. They also acknowledged that the alternative to the agreement is a

hard border. Some of the people I spoke to had lived through the closed frontier years of 1969 to 1985. They did not have to imagine what a no-deal outcome would look like, because they had already lived through it, and they were cautioning me and the people I was with against it.

What struck me was that there is both a passion for their home and a practical approach to the reality they face. I remember speaking to one of our drivers during the visit. We discussed the agreement, and although he had concerns—the ones I have set out—he was very practical. He told me that he crosses into Spain every single weekend and that if the agreement would make that easier and save him hours of queuing, then he was all for it.

Gibraltarians are a thoughtful and politically minded people. I know that because I am pleased to be a member—a secret member—of the "Speak Freely" Facebook group. I hope they do not kick me out after that declaration, especially as I am not a resident of Gibraltar, but it has been wonderful to follow the political discussions. I have no doubt that some of that political awareness comes as a result of years of vigilance with a neighbour that claims sovereignty over their Rock. The visit left me in no doubt that while Westminster scrutiny is absolutely valid and welcome, and while we have to ratify treaties here, it should not override the wishes of the people of Gibraltar.

The UK, the EU, Spain and Gibraltar announced the political agreement days after my visit, and the draft agreement was published this February. Gibraltar's Parliament subsequently passed a motion supporting ratification. Every single one of its 17 Members voted in favour of ratification—that is the kind of consensus we can only dream of in this place. There can be no doubt that the agreement has democratic legitimacy from the Government of Gibraltar.

I recognise the desire of Members, who no doubt have the interests of the Gibraltarian people in mind, to scrutinise the agreement to the fullest. The UK has a constitutional duty towards Gibraltar, even though Gibraltar is almost entirely self-governing, but if the agreement commands the support of Gibraltar's elected Government and every single Member of its Parliament, we must give considerable weight to that democratic judgment. Our Parliament can and should scrutinise, but it should not substitute its own judgment for the democratic will of Gibraltar, particularly when the agreement protects sovereignty and military autonomy.

I want to say a word on military autonomy. Gibraltar continues to play a key strategic military role. Defence is one of the United Kingdom's reserved constitutional responsibilities, so I fully understand why Parliament must carefully scrutinise that aspect of any agreement, but here, too, a very important box has been ticked. The UK military base is not affected by the agreement, and those are not my words; they are the words of the outgoing commander of the British forces in Gibraltar, Commodore Tom Guy, who said that the agreement is positive from a military perspective because it protects the key principle of "military autonomy", and our armed forces will

"continue to operate to, through and from Gibraltar unhindered".

Under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, treaties must be laid before Parliament before ratification, but the political principle, I hope, is clear: the power to decide Gibraltar's future should rest with the people of Gibraltar. Our Government and Parliament should respect their wishes.

I have only two questions for the Minister, who I know is very highly regarded on the Rock. Can he confirm to the House and to the Gibraltarian people that there will be a legally binding mechanism to ensure that no UK Government will be able to withdraw from the agreement without Gibraltar's consent? In a similar vein, can he confirm that no future UK Government will be able to block Gibraltar from withdrawing from the agreement if it is the democratically expressed will of the Gibraltarian people? That would be the strongest way to ensure that Gibraltar continues to control its own future.

Next week, the levanter cloud over the Rock may finally begin to lift. Gibraltar may feel different, but British sovereignty has been protected, and military autonomy is completely unchanged. Now it should be the Gibraltarians who determine their future in accordance with the principle of self-determination.

10.7 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing this incredibly timely and crucial debate. It is nice to see some representatives of Gibraltar in the Public Gallery, as well as one of our old friends from this House. It is good to see the Minister in his place, and I wish him well in his job. He always gives us encouragement, and he will no doubt do the same today.

When the Minister stood up in the main Chamber back in February to outline the massive 1,000-page document, I was reminded of a wise old saying that my dear mother used to repeat when I was a wee lad with black, curly hair—I had hair at one time, believe it or not. That saying was, "Once bitten, twice shy." The hair is long gone, but the wisdom of that saying firmly remains. My mother is 94 years of age and next Tuesday, 14 July, she will be 95 if God spares her until that time. The people of Northern Ireland have been bitten hard, which is why "once bitten, twice shy" comes to mind.

I should have said that it is a real pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards). We might be on different sides of the Chamber, but it is remarkable how much he and I agree on. If there was a party somewhere between Labour and Conservative, I think we might find ourselves in it, or maybe we will just be in both—well, he cannot be, but that is by the way.

As I said, the people of Northern Ireland have been bitten hard. We have seen what happens when the United Kingdom signs a treaty with the European Union in good faith, only to find ourselves a slave to foreign diktats, with our internal trade disrupted, our state aid hampered and our constitutional place in this great Union of Great Britain and Northern Ireland chipped away.

I have been to Gibraltar only once in my life, and that was with the armed forces parliamentary scheme. I remember that Gibraltar drips Britishness, and I mean that constructively and positively. We were encouraged to meet the Royal Gibraltar Regiment and to know that

[Jim Shannon]

we are a part of them. There is a bit of England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland in Gibraltar. It is all there, and Gibraltar is very close to our hearts.

When I look across the water at our loyal, steadfast fellow Brits on the Rock of Gibraltar, I do so with an eye of deep caution. I will make my point constructively and respectfully to the Minister. He knows I am very fond of him; in fact, we all are. In the past, he has reassured us that the agreement will bring "fluid" borders. He told us that it will boost the economy, eliminate long queues and align import duties so that ordinary people can do their daily shopping without a mountain of paperwork.

I do not doubt the good intentions of the Government and of the Minister in particular. The Chief Minister of Gibraltar and his Parliament have worked tirelessly, and they have even asked for a referendum on the final text to let the people have their democratic say. I praise them for that, and I thank them for all they have constructively done to try to find a way forward that protects them. We want to protect them as well.

We must look at the fine print of these 1,000 pages. The treaty proposes a hybrid governance model. It pulls Gibraltar into the Schengen area and places it under significant levels of EU law. We are talking about dual border control checks at Gibraltar airport, involving not just Gibraltarian officials but Spanish officials having their way on British territory, which concerns me.

What real safeguards do we have? If the European Court of Justice is given the final say on the interpretation of these laws, as I understand it will, how can we truly look the people of Gibraltar in the eye and say that their British sovereignty is uncompromised? That is the question. We cannot allow Spain to use the European Union's legal machinery to slowly strangle the Rock's independence and British identity, just as the Northern Ireland protocol attempted to separate my Strangford constituency and Northern Ireland from the rest of Great Britain.

The people of Gibraltar are fiercely, proudly and unapologetically British. Over the years, they rejected joint sovereignty by almost 99% in two separate referendums. That is the sort of election result we all need, and what encouragement it would be if it were to happen. They fly the Union Jack with a pride that matches any town or village in my constituency. I put up my Union flag over the weekend, as it is a special occasion with 12 July coming up—we always have it in place at this time of year.

Gibraltarians have stood by the United Kingdom through thick and thin. Their strategic military base remains a vital asset for NATO and the defence of the realm. The Rock, by its nature, conveys strength. When I was there with the armed forces parliamentary scheme we had the opportunity to go through some of the tunnels in the rock, and I can understand why it is a bastion of military strength.

While the treaty moves towards formal signature and parliamentary ratification under the CRaG process, I urge the Government not to rush this. Examine the treaty line by line and listen to the community's concerns. I am a man of Scripture, as I know you and many others in the House are, Sir John. Psalm 62 says:

"He only is my rock and my salvation, my fortress; I shall not be…shaken."

The Rock of Gibraltar is that very place; it stands firm and will not be shaken. We must stand steadfast and ensure that the United Kingdom's sovereignty over Gibraltar is not just a symbolic phrase written on a piece of paper to save face, but a practical, iron-clad reality on the ground. Let us not make the same mistake twice; let us protect the Rock, its people and our great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

10.14 am

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): It is a great pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) on securing this important debate. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I had the great pleasure of visiting Gibraltar in July last summer, perhaps shortly before the hon. Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards), and, like him, I got to experience the new border control operations that will be in place. I had the great pleasure of meeting multiple representatives, who spoke positively about the experience and the way in which the United Kingdom Government had ensured that, at every single stage of the negotiation that led to the agreement, Gibraltarians were present and gave their consent.

The Liberal Democrats welcome this agreement. It achieves the objective that matters above all others: preserving British sovereignty over Gibraltar while providing a practical solution to the problems that have hung over the territory since Brexit. I spent much of my academic career—I am a recovering academic—researching borders, sovereignty and contested territories, and I have spent time in Gibraltar recently and in the past and spoken to people who live with the consequences of the treaty, so I know all too well that borders are rarely just lines on a map. They are systems for managing movement, trade and security. When those systems fail, ordinary people end up paying the price.

That is precisely what happened after Brexit. Gibraltar found itself excluded from the trade and co-operation agreement, leaving 38,000 people living with years of uncertainty. As we have heard, the people of Gibraltar did not choose that outcome. Not only have they repeatedly rejected the prospect of joint sovereignty, as they did in 2002, but they overwhelmingly voted to remain in the European Union in 2016. Whatever our views on Brexit, we should recognise that Gibraltar has spent the past six years managing the consequences of decisions that it did not participate in making.

The treaty reflects one of the oldest truths in geopolitics: geography cannot be wished away. Gibraltar is politically British, geographically Iberian and economically dependent on the daily movement of people across the frontier. Good statecraft—of which these proposals are an example—reconciles those realities, rather than pretending that we can override them. The treaty deserves support—albeit not uncritical support—because it starts from the correct constitutional principle, which is that the freely expressed wishes of the people of Gibraltar are paramount.

That principle is reflected in the agreement. Article 2 contains what many legal experts have described as the strongest "without prejudice" sovereignty clause ever

included in an EU agreement relating to Gibraltar. Three independent KCs have concluded that the treaty makes no concession whatsoever on sovereignty. That legal certainty matters for all the reasons that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) outlined. That is why the agreement enjoys such strong unilateral support from Gibraltar's Chief Minister and other representatives in the Parliament. Gibraltar's Parliament and all three living former Chief Ministers agree that this is an appropriate deal. That consensus is highly unusual—Westminster might take note.

The agreement is equally clear on defence. The MOD has confirmed that the UK retains full freedom to operate from Gibraltar. British military capabilities remain sovereign and unconstrained, with Spain unable to impede British personnel or equipment. At a time of growing geopolitical instability across Europe and the Mediterranean, preserving Gibraltar's strategic role in NATO is essential.

However, the possession and preservation of sovereignty alone is not enough. Sovereignty must also work—it must be practical. We have heard observations today not only about Gibraltar's strategic importance, but about the sheer intensity of everyday cross-border movement: 15,500 people cross the frontier every single day. Those people staff Gibraltar's hospitals, restaurants, financial services, construction industry and public services. Almost all food and medicines arrive in Gibraltar by road through Spain. That is why a functioning border is not just a convenience but an economic necessity. Gibraltarians understand better than most what happens when borders cease to function. Many have spoken to me about their recollections of the years after 1969, when the Spain frontier was closed, severing families, disrupting livelihoods and isolating Gibraltar economically and politically.

Even after that frontier fully reopened in 1985, political tensions have, at times, caused lengthy queues and disruption at the crossing. I have waited in those queues at various times. Gibraltar endured them for years, but its economy today is very different from the economy of the past. Thousands of workers now cross that frontier every day to sustain its economy and public services, which is precisely why this agreement matters so much.

The treaty has become even more necessary because Europe itself is changing the way its borders operate. The EU entry/exit system requires biometric registration of third-country nationals entering the Schengen area. That may work tolerably at airports—actually, I am not sure that it does, given the words of the chief executive of Aeroporti di Roma this week—but at one of Europe's busiest land borders, it risks creating queues measured not in minutes but in hours.

Had this been left unresolved, Gibraltar would have faced severe disruption through no fault of its own. The agreement prevents that outcome and removes routine immigration and customs checks at the land frontier while keeping Gibraltar outside of the Schengen area. Gibraltar retains its own immigration laws and authorities. At Gibraltar international airport, British immigration controls will be carried out by Gibraltar officials before a Schengen check under the agreed arrangements. Spain has no unilateral power to refuse entry.

Equally important are the safeguards for Gibraltarians. Residents and Gibraltar identity card holders cannot be refused entry into Gibraltar, detained under those arrangements or subject to the EES or ETIAS systems. Those guarantees are practical expressions of sovereignty. The economic benefits are also equally significant. Without an agreement, Gibraltar faces prolonged uncertainty and significant economic harm. With the agreement, estimates suggest about £200 million could be added annually to Gibraltar's economy—that is about 6% of its GDP—while boosting investment and confidence at no additional cost to the UK taxpayer.

The agreement also creates opportunities beyond the land frontier. Direct air services between Gibraltar and European destinations could strengthen tourism and economic connectivity. With more than 9.4 million visitors entering Gibraltar annually across the border, compared with around 184,000 by air, smoother movement would benefit Gibraltar's economy while reducing friction for communities on both sides of the frontier.

Concerns have understandably been raised about the Schengen 90/180-day rule for air arrivals. However, it is worth saying that visitors stay on average just 3.4 days in Gibraltar—a small fraction of the 90-day allowance—and many already continue into Spain and use part of that allowance there. For most travellers the practical impact is therefore likely to be minimal. There are, however, still issues that deserve scrutiny.

Will the Minister clarify precisely how the Schengen 90/180-day rule will apply to British citizens spending time in Gibraltar? It is important that we avoid creating constitutional tests that have never existed elsewhere in the British family of overseas territories and Crown dependencies, with which the United Kingdom has never operated unrestricted freedom of movement. Territories such as the Falklands—as I know all too well—have long maintained their own immigration laws and entry requirements, reflecting their distinct constitutional status and circumstances. Gibraltar has likewise always controlled its immigration arrangements.

The question is therefore not whether Gibraltar should have border controls, but whether those controls serve Gibraltar's interests while fully preserving British sovereignty. Notwithstanding the clarification that I just sought from the Minister, the treaty strikes that balance. Implementation must be undertaken in close co-operation and partnership with Gibraltar's Government and its business community. Ultimately, this agreement will be judged by whether the borders work smoothly for those who depend on it every day.

Gibraltar illustrates a wider truth about Brexit. Like the Windsor framework, this agreement is an intelligent and pragmatic attempt to solve problems that Brexit created. Geography has not changed—Gibraltar remains politically British while being physically connected to the European continent, and good diplomacy recognises both those realities—but we cannot continue to resolve the consequences of Brexit one border at a time. I contend that the United Kingdom needs a broader reset with our European colleagues.

If I may be so bold, I suggest a growth and defence partnership with our European neighbours—something I have spent a lot of time trying to fashion over the past few months. That would involve entry into the single market and a relationship with the EU's customs union, which would restore and revive our relationship and solve many of the challenges that we have spoken about in the debate. I welcome this agreement, which protects

[Dr Al Pinkerton]

sovereignty, Gibraltar's economy and British strategic interests, and, above all, respects the wishes of the people of Gibraltar.

10.25 am

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I draw the House's attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I visited Gibraltar as a guest of the Government of Gibraltar.

I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing this important debate at a pivotal moment for Gibraltar. It is somewhat extraordinary that, although the provisional application of the UK-EU Gibraltar treaty is expected in a little more than a week's time, Parliament has still not been afforded a meaningful opportunity to scrutinise an agreement of such significance.

Let me begin by making one thing absolutely clear: we welcome the fact that a deal has been reached. Businesses in Gibraltar and across the UK, frontier workers, and British citizens travelling to Gibraltar need certainty. Above all, Gibraltar deserves certainty about its future. This agreement helps to provide that by giving businesses, residents and those who rely on the frontier a clearer framework for the future. I am also proud of the work undertaken by the previous Conservative Government. Those negations were never straightforward, as I know from personal experience. They sought to balance Gibraltar's prosperity with the practical realities of the frontier, our constitutional responsibilities as a sovereign power and our unwavering commitment to Gibraltar remaining British for as long as the people of Gibraltar wish.

Welcoming a treaty does not mean dispensing with scrutiny, however. On 23 April, the Government of Gibraltar confirmed that the treaty had received unanimous approval from all EU member states, and that provisional application is expected to begin on 15 July. We know, because the Government of Gibraltar have helpfully kept parliamentarians informed, that the treaty will be formally signed before then, although even now no date has been publicly confirmed. We also know that the final sections of the frontier fence will be removed on 15 July, allowing fluid movement across the land border for frontier workers, residents and visitors, before the treaty proceeds towards full ratification in the following months.

Those are constitutional, economic and practical developments of huge significance, yet it has been the Government of Gibraltar, rather than His Majesty's Government, who have kept Parliament involved as events have unfolded. That should concern every Member of this House, regardless of their party, because Ministers are accountable to this Parliament for United Kingdom treaty obligations. Since the agreement was announced, Members of both Houses have had to rely on urgent questions, oral questions and written parliamentary questions simply to establish the Government's intentions. I know that the Minister is aware of that.

When the draft treaty was published on 26 February, the Minister assured the House that the Government welcome scrutiny, but the answers that we have received have too often amounted to little more than references to previous statements or generic replies that fail to engage with the substance of the questions being asked. That is not meaningful scrutiny, and it is not how Parliament should be treated.

The question before us is no longer whether there should be a treaty; it is whether Parliament will be permitted to scrutinise it properly before it takes effect. The Government have repeatedly said that they are committed to transparency and respect for Parliament. If that commitment means anything, it must surely apply to a treaty of this constitutional significance.

We are now only days away from provisional application, and fundamental questions remain unanswered. Parliament still does not know when the treaty will be signed, when it will be laid before Parliament under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010, whether elements of the agreement will begin operating before Parliament has completed its scrutiny, and what opportunities Members will have to debate it further. These are not procedural technicalities. The CRaG exists because Parliament recognised that international treaties should be subject to democratic scrutiny before they bind the UK. If substantial parts of the treaty are allowed to take effect before Parliament has had a meaningful opportunity to consider it, many will understandably question what practical value that scrutiny is intended to have.

For those reasons, I hope the Minister will answer some straightforward questions today. Will the Government commit to providing time for a full, substantive debate on the treaty in both Houses before provisional application begins? When precisely do Ministers intend to lay the treaty before Parliament under CRaG? What assessment have the Government made of the constitutional implications of allowing provisional application before Parliament has completed its scrutiny under that Act? Do Ministers genuinely believe that the standard 21-day scrutiny period is sufficient for an agreement of this constitutional, economic and strategic importance? I believe those are reasonable questions that parliamentarians should not have to drag out of the Government.

This debate is about more than process. As we have heard, companies involved in cross-border trade need certainty and clarity about customs arrangements, regulatory compliance and border procedures. Ministers have spoken about the opportunities the agreement presents, but opportunities must be matched by preparedness. Businesses cannot prepare for new arrangements if Government guidance does not arrive until implementation is already under way, and Parliament cannot properly represent those affected if Ministers do not provide the information necessary for proper scrutiny.

The Government should therefore answer some practical questions today. Can the Minister explain in clear terms whether any new checks, controls or administrative procedures will govern the movement of British troops or military equipment to and from the military base? Given Gibraltar's strategic importance, Members will rightly wish to understand exactly what arrangements are envisaged. Will the Government set out the precise process by which British goods will enter Gibraltar under the new arrangements, whether by land, sea or air, and explain how they differ from the arrangements that businesses operate under today? What engagement have the Government had, both before and since the treaty was announced, with British businesses that export or import goods into Gibraltar? What

assessment have Ministers made of the readiness of those businesses for implementation, and what support is being provided?

The Government have spoken confidently about the benefits of closer co-operation with Spain, but what contingency plans are in place should Spain seek to create difficulties or exert pressure once the frontier fence has been removed? Gibraltar's scrutiny and prosperity should never depend on good will alone. The Minister should also explain the rationale behind the governance arrangements for Gibraltar airport in the treaty, including the proposed operating structure, and why Ministers believe those arrangements are in Gibraltar's long-term interests. What discussions have His Majesty's Government had with the Government of Gibraltar regarding the parliamentary lock that the Gibraltar Parliament has indicated it wishes to have over implementation of the treaty? How do Ministers intend to respect Gibraltar's democratic institutions as the agreement process progresses?

I would like to place on the record my appreciation for a significant recent development. The Government of Gibraltar have announced that Gibraltar has been removed from Spain's list of non-co-operative jurisdictions, bringing to an end a designation that had remained in place since 1991. That is undoubtedly welcome news, and it represents another positive step in strengthening Gibraltar's international standing. Once again, however, many Members first learned of that through media reports rather than from the Government. Gibraltar occupies a unique constitutional position, and the UK retains responsibility for its external relations. It is therefore entirely reasonable for Parliament to expect timely information from our Government on developments of such significance.

No one in this House wishes to see unnecessary delay or to undermine the progress that has been made. However, supporting Gibraltar and scrutinising the Government are not competing objectives; they are complementary responsibilities. I hope the Minister will use this debate not simply to repeat previous statements, but to provide the timetable for scrutiny that Parliament has been seeking for many months. Please tell us, Minister, when the treaty will be signed, when it will be laid before Parliament, what opportunities Members will have to debate and vote on it and why the Government believe that Parliament should be expected to scrutinise a treaty only after key parts of it have already begun to take effect.

Again, I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham for securing this important debate, which has provided an opportunity to discuss the treaty. But as I have set out, this debate should not take the place of the vital, detailed scrutiny of the treaty that this place deserves. I await the Government's setting out the detail; now is the Minister's opportunity to do so. If the Government are confident that the treaty commands support, they should be confident enough to subject it to full parliamentary scrutiny before its provisions take effect.

10.35 am

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): I am genuinely grateful to the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) for securing this debate. I pay tribute to his work as vice-chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Gibraltar, and to that of its chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin). I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions, which have been broadly in the spirit that I and the people and Government of Gibraltar would have hoped for: reasonable, fair scrutiny with broad support. It is important to emphasise that, because it sends a strong signal that complements the strong support of the democratically elected Parliament of Gibraltar for the draft UK-EU agreement.

I will respond to specific points as I go, but will start by paying a tribute to all those involved in the process over many years: His Majesty's Government of Gibraltar—the Chief Minister, the Deputy Chief Minister, the Attorney General and all their officials and teams—and our teams in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, particularly the senior officials who did sterling work in taking us through the detailed process. The treaty is a big one, with many associated administrative and practical arrangements. I know there have at times been frustrations about the length of the process and the detail, but it was important to get it right. This is about the future of Gibraltar and our relationship with the EU, Gibraltar and Spain.

I also pay tribute to our friends in the EU and Spain for the constructive spirit they have shown throughout the discussions and negotiations. We have come to a conclusion that is beneficial for people, which is what we all sought to do. My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) made a party political point but an important one: in the end, this was about people and businesses, their lives and their ability to move, to trade and to get on, without the uncertainty caused by Brexit.

Gibraltar was not included in the EU-UK trade and co-operation agreement that was negotiated by the previous Government following the UK's departure from the EU. That meant serious uncertainty for the people and businesses of Gibraltar, which is why we have worked together to find a practical and lasting solution that protects Gibraltar's economy and way of life for the long term, while crucially safeguarding our sovereignty.

We had previously reached the provisional and political agreements, and have been involved in the detailed process for some time. We have now achieved an agreement that ensures the free circulation of people and goods between Gibraltar and the EU by removing the physical barriers on the border between Gibraltar and Spain. I cannot overemphasise the importance of that, not least because of what the people of Gibraltar went through for so many years. That will mean jobs, investment and stability, not just for Gibraltar but—it is important to emphasise—for the whole region. That involves EU Schengen area rules relating to border checks being applied in Gibraltar and a customs union being established between the EU and Gibraltar. That will bring certainty to the territory.

Let me turn first to some of the questions about scrutiny; I will answer the questions from the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), in detail in due course. The CRaG Act 2010 gives statutory form to long-standing constitutional conventions on the scrutiny of treaties and is the process we are legally obliged to follow to ratify treaties. Despite the very particular approach of the CRaG system, transparency has been at the heart of

[Stephen Doughty]

our approach. I gently rebuff some of shadow Minister's comments, because we published the draft text of the agreement on 26 February, and I gave an oral statement to the House on the same day. We have had this debate today and I have appeared before Committees and answered many questions. We have attempted at all stages to be transparent and open. I have offered private briefings to shadow ministerial colleagues and the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel).

Wendy Morton: Will the Minister set out the timeline today and assure us—

Stephen Doughty *indicated assent.*

Wendy Morton: He is nodding, so I will sit with bated breath.

Stephen Doughty: I will come back to the timeline in due course. It is quite right that throughout the process Parliament has provided scrutiny, as it has been doing in this debate, which is very welcome.

Edward Morello: Perhaps it is useful to point out that the Foreign Affairs Committee does not, as standard, hold evidence sessions on every treaty that is laid before Parliament under the CRaG process. The Minister and the Chief Minister very kindly appeared before us to give evidence, and frankly a lot of the questions that the shadow Minister asked were probably answered in that evidence session.

Stephen Doughty: Indeed; that is a fair point, and I appreciate the hon. Gentleman making it. We did appear before the Foreign Affairs Committee, and we have endured scrutiny in the media and from businesses and others—and quite rightly so. On my visit to Gibraltar, I met with the leader of the opposition, businesses and others, who had legitimate and reasonable questions to ask. We have done our best to answer those transparently and in good faith.

What matters most at this point is providing clarity and certainty for the people and businesses of Gibraltar, which is why I am pleased to say that the UK and EU will provisionally apply the agreement from 15 July—next week. This is an important milestone for Gibraltar. The UK and the EU, along with Gibraltar and Spain, are committed to fully ratifying the treaty as soon as possible, and we are all working at pace to achieve that.

My understanding is that the process in the European Parliament will take place this autumn, up to December. We will be operating under a similar timeline, in accordance with the discussions we are having with the relevant Committees and others regarding the CRaG process. Once signed, the treaty will be provided immediately to the UK Parliament, and I will make the appropriate statements to signify that moment. We will then have the CRaG process and ratification. I hope that satisfies Members who asked about the timeline, but I will go into a little more detail later.

Much of the legislative and operational work to bring the agreement into force is being led by His Majesty's Government of Gibraltar, and they have made very strong progress in a short space of time. They have already put in place their main primary legislation and are working tirelessly on the many practical steps needed to apply the agreement. I am pleased to say that there is very strong co-operation between the Spanish and Gibraltarian authorities across areas of shared implementation, including the physical infrastructure works required at Gibraltar's airport. We stand ready to assist in whatever way we can, and have done so throughout the process.

It is important to emphasise, as many Members have, that negotiations on sovereignty were never on the table during the treaty negotiations, and that was not in doubt. The agreement is about technical arrangements that govern Gibraltar's relationship with the EU. I appreciate the compliments paid by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Dr Pinkerton), and others about article 2 of the treaty, which makes it clear that the agreement in no way affects our sovereignty position on Gibraltar and cannot be used to challenge it.

As I set out both in opposition and now in government, we remain committed to the Gibraltar double lock, which means we would never enter into arrangements under which the people of Gibraltar would pass under the sovereignty of another state against their freely and democratically expressed wishes, and we would never enter into a process of sovereignty negotiations with which Gibraltar was not content. The sovereignty of Gibraltar is protected in the treaty for the long term. If it had not been, we would not have agreed it.

Many Members raised important points about the military base. Safeguarding the operational autonomy of the UK's military facilities has been a red line for the UK Government throughout our discussions. The agreement protects that autonomy and allows our facilities to continue their vital contribution to regional security and prosperity. The Ministry of Defence has been closely involved in the negotiations at every stage. We have the full backing of the Defence Secretary and defence teams on this agreement. I am glad that that was confirmed by colleagues' experiences of engaging with the Commander British Forces in Gibraltar.

The agreement also removes immigration checks at Gibraltar's land border with Spain. That is crucial for the nearly 15,000 people who cross the border every day for work, and for protecting Gibraltar's economy. To unlock the benefits of a fluid border, travellers arriving at the airport will undergo dual immigration controls. Under this system, visitors have the benefit of crossing freely into Spain without checks. Time spent in Gibraltar will therefore count towards the EU's 90/180 days requirement. The Government of Gibraltar have assessed that the significant impact of an open border outweighs any challenges that might result from it. Because Gibraltar automatically already applies a period for UK residents coming into Gibraltar, it has been pointed out that, practically, this means very little. It does not, of course, affect the residents of Gibraltar itself. The agreement delivers a solution that the Government of Gibraltar want, and the Chief Minister has been very clear on that.

The treaty has a series of benefits for wider relationships. The shadow Minister rightly pointed out the welcome announcement regarding non-co-operative jurisdictions from our friends in Spain. That is important to Gibraltar and is a testament to how things have moved forward. We have seen tangible and positive developments in our

relationship with our friends in Spain across a whole series of issues that matter to people here in the UK, including our co-operation in business, security and trade. That is welcome. The treaty is, of course, one of the crucial aspects of the reset in our relationship with the European Union. This agreement is good for Gibraltar and for the United Kingdom, and it is good for all the people, including our people. Right hon. and hon. Members have accurately reflected the work and statecraft that has gone into it and the practical benefits it will deliver. This marks a turning point.

Before I conclude, let me respond to some of the specific points that have been made. I have answered the questions about the timing of the CRaG process, but Members will appreciate that bringing a treaty of this complexity into effect has required a set of interlocking processes. We are not the sole guardians of the process; there are processes in Gibraltar, Spain and the European Union, and the treaty can be signed only once those processes—including the EU's translation of the text into 23 other official languages—have concluded and been aligned. Rather than delaying the publication until that point, we chose to bring forward the draft treaty so that Members could scrutinise it and see the detail.

I assure Members that the text published in February remains substantively unchanged. The intervening period has been used for legal verification, technical checks and the preparation of authentic language versions. That is one of the reasons why the final treaty will be published and signed imminently. The provisional application will take place from 15 July, and we will then make the appropriate statements in this House and start the CRaG process, in line with discussions with the secretariat of the European Affairs Committee regarding the practical arrangements.

Wendy Morton *rose—*

Stephen Doughty: I am conscious that in between there will be a recess. I will ensure that that does not affect this House's ability to have the proper period to scrutinise under the CRaG process. That may be what the shadow Minister was going to ask.

Wendy Morton: It was along those lines, but for absolute clarity, does the Minister envisage the treaty coming forward before we break for recess?

Stephen Doughty: I do envisage the treaty coming forward, but I want to ensure that we do not start the clock and then Members feel they do not have a chance to scrutinise it over the recess. The minute that the treaty is signed, it will be provided—within appropriate transmission times—to both Houses. We will ensure that we are in close contact with the Committees and that we have an agreement on the CRaG process, and we will make the appropriate statements. Sir John, you will know that the timing of statements and debates in the House is a matter for the usual channels between the Government and the Opposition, but I do not want to shy away from scrutiny, and that is why I welcome this debate. We will not try to curtail the CRaG process in any way. In practical terms, this treaty will have had far more pre-scrutiny and Committee scrutiny in this House than many other international treaties. I hope that provides some assurance to colleagues.

Members asked a number of other questions. I have covered the questions about article 2 and sovereignty. I was asked about future scenarios that might emerge with respect to the relationship between the UK and Gibraltar. It is important to emphasise that the Gibraltar Parliament unanimously passed a motion calling on the UK to ratify the treaty, subject to the existence of a concordat assuring that the UK can exercise its powers in the treaty only with the consent of His Majesty's Government of Gibraltar, and that the people of Gibraltar have the right to determine in a referendum whether the treaty should be terminated in the future. Obviously, we hope to never get to that scenario, but it is important that we have those safeguards in place.

To answer the questions that my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley asked, I quote from my letter to the Chief Minister on 2 March:

> "It is therefore politically inconceivable that in any normal circumstances, should a democratically elected Government in Gibraltar or indeed the Gibraltarian people determine that this agreement does not serve their interests, His Majesty's Government would not take action."

I hope that provides assurance, as it is certainly the tenor of my discussions with the Chief Minister and, indeed, of the discussions he has had in the Gibraltar Parliament.

I have touched on the questions about the 90-in-180-day rule, but for the record, under the agreement, non-resident British nationals can visit Gibraltar for up to 90 days, as is the case today—there is no change in that—but, as visitors will be free to enter Spain without checks, time spent in Gibraltar will count towards the 90-in-180-day requirement of the EU. Importantly, immigration into Gibraltar is and will remain the responsibility of the Government of Gibraltar. The agreement provides a unique solution, a fluid border, and puts different procedures and processes in place.

On the military base, there are lots of details, but I was asked a specific question, so I want to be clear that UK military personnel entering Gibraltar will not be subject to Schengen checks under the proposed arrangements. That will enable our facilities to continue their vital operations without interference or interruption. The posting of UK military personnel serving in Gibraltar and their families will not depend on Schengen border checks; as is the case now, the UK will decide who will serve in Gibraltar. We also have important agreements on goods entering the base. As colleagues will understand, we do not disclose sensitive operational details, but we have agreed special arrangements to ensure the functioning of the new arrangements.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Minister for his comprehensive response. I asked him about officials from Spain being at border control posts alongside officials from Gibraltar to oversee that work, and about the impact and influence that they may have. Can he confirm that that will be the case? What influence will the Spanish officials have? Will they oversee or counteract Gibraltar border control and customs officials?

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman asks a good question. The practical checks that take place at the airport are not dissimilar to the juxtaposed controls at St Pancras and elsewhere. We tried to come up with a practical solution to the new arrangement, and it is one

[Stephen Doughty]

that has the full agreement of the Government of Gibraltar. Everyone arriving at the airport will undergo Gibraltar immigration controls carried out by Gibraltar officials, followed by Schengen entry checks carried out by Spanish officials on behalf of the EU. On completion of those checks, individuals will be able to enter both Gibraltar and the Schengen area.

As I said, that set-up is similar—it is not exactly the same—to how we make the arrangements work practically at St Pancras. Of course, 18,000 people use Eurostar every day, and we have heard about the 15,000 people crossing the border in Gibraltar. The Government of Gibraltar and the different authorities are working closely on a whole series of practical and physical arrangements for how things will work—I will not go into the detail of all the different maps, plans and architect's drawings that we scrutinised in great detail.

As was rightly pointed out by the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, another benefit of the agreement is that, subject to commercial interest, new flight routes into Gibraltar from other areas within the Schengen area could open up. Again, this will provide an economic boost and benefit. I pay particular tribute to the Deputy Chief Minister, who has taken a keen role in relation to the airport and its functioning over the years; it has been at the heart of the agreement throughout.

On customs checks and the business impacts, I recognise the points made by Members about the questions they have been asked by businesses. The UK Government and the Government of Gibraltar are confident that overall, the economic benefits of the agreement will massively outweigh any issues with changes. Obviously, there will be implementation periods for the taxation arrangements, which are for Gibraltar to decide on; for example, there will be a period coming up to the VAT rate changes.

On customs checks for businesses, to allow for free flow across the Gibraltar-Spain border, goods in Gibraltar must meet EU standards. Over half of all goods in Gibraltar arrive from the EU and already meet those standards, as do many others that arrive from outside the EU. They are going to be pre-cleared away from the land border by relevant customs officials. The Government of Gibraltar fully support that new model, which brings in the benefits of an open border and protects Gibraltar's economy.

Points were made about security. I think there is a steadfast commitment on both sides to work together, with practical arrangements between law enforcement agencies. None of us wants anything going on in Gibraltar or indeed over the border in Spain that will put anyone at risk. We all know the types of threats, which we share. That is at the heart of the wider discussions we are having with the EU about how we better align on law enforcement and security and defence.

I want to conclude by thanking everybody for their scrutiny, which has been hugely important. I thank the all-party group for its consistent engagement over many years, and I thank friends in the Gallery for their engagement. I really do think this is a milestone moment in finalising something that was left undone by Brexit. The agreement will have practical benefits for the people of Gibraltar, for the people of the whole region, for the United Kingdom, and for the UK and the EU. There are wins across the board in the agreement. I very much hope that Members will engage with the CRaG process as it goes forward. I will keep the House fully informed, as appropriate, the minute the treaty is signed and deposited. With that, I thank Members for their contributions.

10.56 am

Martin Vickers: At the outset I expressed the hope that this would be an interesting and informative debate, and I think all Members would agree that that has been the case. The essence of the debate, as we have just heard from the Minister, has been about sovereignty, which was one of the most important issues that we debated on our recent visit. One thing that the Chief Minister was keen to point out at the airport was the positioning of the flags. As people progress through the various stages at the airport, flags remind people that they are on Gibraltarian/British territory, with the Union flag and the Gibraltar flag prominently displayed.

Most importantly, though, the Chief Minister said the treaty is about the people of Gibraltar and the benefits that they will accrue from it. Clearly, they want the certainty that it provides, but there are also day-to-day benefits. One that I noted when we met the Health Minister was that the treaty will allow ambulances to move more freely between Spain and the Rock. That is clearly a practical advantage to the citizens of Gibraltar, whose loyalty to the British Crown is certainly appreciated by those of us who have been to Gibraltar for national day. That is something that we want to maintain.

I thank all those who have taken part in the debate, and in particular the Minister for his comprehensive response, and I thank everyone—those on the British side, as well as the Chief Minister and his colleagues in Gibraltar—who took part in the treaty negotiations. We have had an interesting and informative debate this morning and I look forward to further discussions. As the Minister outlined, the process will continue.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the draft UK-EU Agreement on Gibraltar.

Defibrillators in Police Vehicles

11 am

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered defibrillators in police vehicles.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I am delighted to have secured this debate on defibrillators in the back of police vehicles. I have been pushing for this for some time, and it is helpful that the debate is taking place on International Paramedics Day, when we celebrate the work of people who intervene to save lives.

I pay tribute to Naomi Rees-Issitt, who tragically lost her son Jay on new year's day 2022. Jay was unlucky in a number of ways. He was unlucky to have a cardiac arrest at the age of 18. He was extremely unlucky that the defibrillator that could have saved his life was only two minutes away, locked behind the gates of a school. His friends who were with him supported him with cardiopulmonary resuscitation, but he was unlucky that the ambulance was significantly delayed. Jay was unlucky that there was a stabbing incident in Coventry that evening, which meant that many ambulances had been relocated to deal with that incident. Jay was also unlucky that there was a backlog of patients being unloaded from ambulances at the nearest hospital, which, again, resulted in delays to intervention for his cardiac arrest.

The ambulance arrived 24 minutes after Jay's collapse. Sadly, it was too late. The police vehicle turned up 14 minutes after his collapse, however. According to the coroner, it was a one-in-a-million situation: if there had been intervention with a defibrillator at that point, Jay would have recovered from his cardiac arrest. That demonstrates the need for defibrillators in the back of response vehicles. They could have a serious impact, saving hundreds of lives up and down the United Kingdom.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): My hon. Friend is making a fantastic speech. Does he agree that as well as defibrillators, there should be bleed kits in the back of police cars? Yeovil town council has introduced bleed kits across the town, as well as defibrillators. Does he agree that we need both in police vehicles?

Steve Darling: I have raised that very issue with Devon and Cornwall constabulary. Following an awful incident, a grieving mother is trying to ensure that we have stab kits across the United Kingdom. As I am sure my hon. Friend has done, I have corresponded with Avon and Somerset police on this issue. Bleed kits can save lives. I have had conversations with the security staff who support us. It is quite shocking to learn what they have in their bags in case there is an incident at an MP's constituency surgery or another event. Such measures should not be focused solely on people like us; we need to make sure that there are opportunities to support people out in the community.

Going back to the serious issue of cardiac arrests, the medical evidence shows that for every minute without intervention, there is a 10% reduction in survival for individuals.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. By equipping every police vehicle with a device, such as the CU Medical iPAD SP1 or the Defibtech Lifeline AUTO, we will expand our chain of survival on the roads. Our police officers are trained in cardiopulmonary resuscitation. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we must give them the physical tools to ensure that when a father, mother or child collapses on our streets, they have the best possible fighting chance of returning home to their loved ones—the very thing he is trying to achieve?

Steve Darling: The hon. Member makes a valuable point. Resuscitation Council UK highlights that if there is an intervention within three to five minutes, the chances of survival are between 50% and 70%. It really is all about timing and how we can significantly impact that.

A survey that the all-party parliamentary group for defibrillators undertook with all police forces across the country found that less than 10% of response vehicles have defibrillators as standard. That is really disturbing, because the police are often the first on the scene, as was the case with Jay. Naomi's Our Jay charity has done stellar work in assisting both Bedfordshire and Warwickshire police to get defibrillators in a number of their vehicles. That had an immediate impact on saving lives. Within days of them being put in the back of vehicles, there was clear evidence of the impact they made. I hope the Minister will take that into account.

Another important element is that when mapping out where defibrillators are in communities, we often find they are in more affluent areas. The more deprived communities have fewer defibrillators, for whatever reason.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): The hon. Member is giving an impassioned speech. I share his sadness about the loss of Jay, whom he mentioned in his opening remarks.

In my constituency we did a defib dash, where I encouraged constituents to understand where their nearest community defibrillator was. The average return journey was 12 minutes by foot. In semi-rural constituencies like mine, adding a defib to the back of emergency vehicles would make a massive difference. Does the hon. Member agree that rural and semi-rural constituencies face an issue of access to defibs?

Steve Darling: The police are so often the first on the scene. It ends up being a postcode lottery, whether it is because of communities are rural, coastal or more deprived. I say to the Minister that by getting defibrillators in the back of police response vehicles, we will remove some of that postcode lottery from the system, because the police would be there to support people in their hour of need. They will also have the tools to support people more powerfully, rather than simply being able to undertake CPR. That will be a massive change for people.

I have talked to a local Devon charity called Jay's Aim, which offers support across the south-west of England. It undertakes training for community groups on this issue and provides boxes in towns where people can access defibrillators. It shared with me that a number of the defibrillators boxes are, for good reason, hammered by the police. When the police go to an incident that may need a defibrillator, they quite rightly grab and use the one in a box near the police station. The charity has to replace loads of pads as a result. If that is not a canary in the coalmine, showing that there is a need for our policing service to be equipped with defibrillators in all response vehicles, I do not know what is.

[Steve Darling]

In conclusion, I hope the Minister will ensure that we take the luck out of these situations and, through public policy, make real changes that impact on people's lives. I am aware that in response to a written question on 27 April she said she was considering the pros and cons of providing defibrillators in the back of police vehicles, and would set out next steps. I hope she will use this debate to clearly set out some of those steps. I encourage her to ensure that it is not just standard but mandatory for all police response vehicles to have defibrillators.

11.11 am

The Minister for Policing and Crime (Sarah Jones): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling) on securing this important debate. I am grateful to him for doing so, and to other Members for contributing. I know that if this had been a wider debate, other Members would probably have wanted to speak in it—several Members feel very strongly about this issue.

The hon. Member for Torbay talked at length about the Our Jay Foundation and about the death of Jamie Rees, or Jay, who died when he was just 18. I have had the privilege of meeting Jamie's mum, stepdad and godmother on two occasions. I discussed what they are doing and trying to achieve, and what the Home Office can perhaps do. For someone to be able to experience the death of their child and put it to positive use, in order to try to get something positive out of their child's death, is enormously powerful and very brave. Indeed, not many of us would be capable of doing that if we lost a child. I join the hon. Member in praising Jamie's family for what they are doing; it is enormously powerful and enormously impactful.

As the hon. Member said, the foundation has been raising money; I think it has raised about £800,000 to fund defibrillators and it has now funded hundreds of them. It also has an evidence base, which was shared with me, showing the number of lives that have been saved as a result of those defibrillators. There is a conversation to be had here, and it is one that we are actively having.

Last year, the Home Office funded 750 defibrillators that we gave to police—that happened before I became the Minister, so I cannot claim any credit for it at all. There was no stipulation on where the defibrillators were placed. Some will be in police vehicles and some, I suspect, will be in police buildings, but we provided those 750 defibrillators. I know my predecessor as the Minister for Policing and Crime, my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), met representatives of the Our Jay Foundation as well and was very moved by them. Providing those defibrillators was a step in the right direction.

As I understand it—I will write to the hon. Member for Torbay if my statistics are wrong—27% of police vehicles now have defibrillators. He cited a figure of 10%, so I will check that and write to him if I am wrong, but I think it a slightly higher proportion than that.

We are having a conversation with police. If there is a debate here—and I have talked to the foundation about this—it is because there is a slight nervousness from some parts of the police about the role of policing versus the role of other emergency services. There are also questions about the ability to train police in many different aspects of first aid, and where their role ends and that of the ambulance begins.

Steve Darling: I thank the Minister for allowing me to quiz her further. Can she expand on that point? Is the pushback from the National Police Chiefs' Council, from lower levels within policing or from Government Ministers? Anyone can use a defibrillator, because it walks them through it. This is not about additional training on how to use defibrillators; it is about the availability of defibrillators where there is a crisis. Defibrillators need to be in the right place at the right time, and I cannot think of a better place than the boot of a police car.

Sarah Jones: It is not a comprehensive view across policing; there is a general concern about the role of policing versus other emergency services. We often have a wider debate within policing about the huge quantity of time that is spent responding to mental health issues, when other services should be doing that, so there is a general nervousness about that.

I am in the process of writing to police forces and having a conversation with them, so that we can answer the hon. Gentleman's point and find out whether there is a concern when it comes to defibrillators. The Our Jay Foundation would say that, where it has engaged with police forces and given them defibrillators, that has been welcomed and it is useful. I want to find out what the concerns are, if they exist, and I am in the process of doing that.

I have said to the Our Jay Foundation—and I also say it to the hon. Member for Torbay and others here today—that of course we want every piece of first-aid equipment that could possibly save lives to be as widely available as possible. In police cars there are already first aid kits, and a lot of police officers carry tourniquets. It is not uncommon for police to conduct CPR on people relatively regularly; that has to be their job when they arrive before other emergency services.

The step to then funding defibs—since we are talking about the funding question here—and putting them into all response cars or a proportion of response cars is the next stage we will look at. There are two stages. The first is talking to police to see what they think. As we have already given the police 750 defibs, it would be interesting to understand what they have been using them for.

Moving on to the next stage, we are going through a very significant period of reform, setting up a national police service. That service will procure the kit we need for the whole of policing, so it presents a really good opportunity to consider what should be standard in all our police vehicles, response cars and uniforms, and to have a conversation with the police. We are going to have a national police service and make decisions nationally about what we need across the police service, and whether we want to use some of our funding to put defibs into all police cars.

Steve Darling: I know timescales are tricky, but can the Minister provide some rough timescales on the different steps? I understand that the new national

police force and procurement are a bit more distant, but can she tell us what timescales she is working to, at least on the first steps she alluded to?

Sarah Jones: We will engage with policing over the next few months, so that will be done relatively quickly, and we will see what people come back with.

The national police service is not that far away. We will hopefully introduce legislation in September to set it up, and there are things that we will be thinking about, doing and working towards before we set up the establishment itself, to bring together aspects of the organisations that will become part of it. For example, BlueLight Commercial, which does a lot of the procurement now, will become part of the national police service. This is an opportunity for us to ask collectively what a good police car looks like and what kind of car we need, and to have a conversation about whether we put defibs into all police cars. There is obviously a cost, and if that money is spent on defibs it will not be spent on something else, so I want us to make the decision in the right way.

I suspect the hon. Gentleman will come back to me even if I do not do this, but I am happy to let him and the APPG know how our conversations go with policing and how we progress this work. I cannot promise that we will do what he and the Our Jay Foundation want, but I can promise that we are actively looking at it. We have already invested in defibs for policing. The Our Jay Foundation is building an evidence base from what it is doing with police forces, and we will take that very seriously.

Of course, we want to do everything we can to save lives. The hon. Member for Yeovil (Adam Dance) talked about bleed kits, and we are looking at those. There are campaigning organisations, also run by people who have sadly lost loved ones, putting bleed kits into police cars and many other public places, and those are also very useful when it comes to saving lives. We have decisions to make and I am actively looking at these things. I am very happy to keep talking to the hon. Member for Torbay as we progress.

Question put and agreed to.

11.22 am

Sitting suspended.

Societal Impact of AI: Government Policy

2.30 pm

Esther McVey (in the Chair): It is a rather glorious day, so if people would like to remove their jackets, they should please feel free to do so.

Neil Duncan-Jordan (Poole) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government policy on AI and its impact on society.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I think we all agree that AI is a transformational technology with the potential to bring many benefits to our society, but to fully realise them we will require the Government to look at radical changes to taxation, welfare and our industrial strategy. Everyone in the UK needs to benefit from a managed AI transition that puts workers and human dignity at its heart. It must make the world fairer, not more unequal, and it should give UK citizens a meaningful say in decisions that will affect their lives.

Evidence from the New Contract, a pro-worker AI campaign organisation, reveals that the public are deeply suspicious about AI. Around six in 10 people expect the gains to flow to wealthy investors and big corporations, while just 7% think they will be shared fairly across our society. Understandably, seven in 10 workers are worried about the impact of AI on their jobs. Even the Foreign Secretary said recently that AI poses a Hiroshima-style threat to humanity unless global rules are put in place.

In today's digital age, a cartel of technology giants—Google, Meta, Microsoft, Amazon and Apple—wield extraordinarily influence over our lives online. These platforms have become so embedded in daily life that meaningful participation in society depends on using their services. Similarly, the digital infrastructure that facilitates our work and public services is now an essential layer of the economy, but that gives oligarchs like Elon Musk enormous power to distort public discourse. We have effectively subcontracted our right to information to a handful of big tech gatekeepers.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful point about big foreign tech companies. Does he believe that our dependency on six tech companies in all aspects of our lives poses a national security threat and needs to be assessed as such?

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention; I will deal with AI sovereignty a bit later in my speech.

We should ensure that, like a socialist Government's approach to energy or water, the public have a stake in the development of AI technology, to ensure that the value it creates is captured and shared for the good of society as a whole. Previous waves of technological change have brought with them huge economic disruptions, but the human and social costs that followed were not inevitable. They were the product of political choices, as Governments left workers and communities to absorb the shocks alone.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): The last time we saw a change of such potential scale was when we moved from being a manufacturing

[Lee Pitcher]

economy to being more of a service economy. There were trade-offs at that time, and some people, cities, towns and villages were left behind—including in my constituency. Does my hon. Friend agree that on this occasion we can plan because we know it is coming? We need to be thinking about jobs, access and skills for younger people, and ensuring that the benefits are felt right the way across the country and not just clustered in one place.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend's point about no place being left behind as a result of the AI revolution. I will develop that point a later. We can already see the first signs of AI impacting on work here. We have record numbers of young people not in employment, education or training because many entry-level jobs have disappeared.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. I spoke to him beforehand; he knows where I am coming from. My concern is for the young people of today looking for the jobs of tomorrow. My grandchildren will have to prepare themselves. We must try to equip young people. In the last few days the *Belfast Telegraph* reported that this may be the first time in a century that young people have lower scores in tests for memory, focus and reading than their parents. Is it not time for the Government to acknowledge the challenges and ensure that there are employment prospects for young people? If the hon. Gentleman's objective is that, it is the right way to go.

Neil Duncan-Jordan: Yes, young people and their employment prospects are intrinsically linked to the debate about the future of AI. The hon. Gentleman is right that we have to get that right for those people to have a future.

We also need the Government to introduce a raft of measures to manage AI-driven changes to work. Those measures should include an employment levy on companies that replace large numbers of workers with AI, training subsidies for displaced workers, redeployment programmes to move workers into sectors with skills shortages, and a job subsidy scheme for workers and companies at the sharp end of industrial change, along with, of course, stronger social security support for those who face unemployment.

We know that if it is left to the market, firms will often reach for the crudest form of automation, stripping out roles and degrading the work that remains. The alternative is that we start to advance the case for dignified work, and recognise that that will mean having meaningful worker involvement in every step of the process. The involvement of workers in adoption is often what turns a promising tool into a productive one. That is why I agree with the TUC that the Government should strengthen the Employment Rights Act 2025 to give workers a real say in decisions. There should be a duty on employers to disclose their use of AI, and a right for the workforce to be consulted and negotiate over how AI is introduced.

One of the biggest challenges of AI is to ensure that everyone gets a fair share of the gains. The AI and big tech corporations in the US stand shortly to become some of the wealthiest and most powerful private actors in history. Their wealth has been built on public research and public investment, as well as all our shared written inheritance, which has trained the models they use.

The fact that our tax system taxes income from work far more heavily than income from capital gives firms a direct tax incentive to automate a worker out of a job rather than employing them, and could see AI facilitate a further shift of national income away from labour and towards capital, eroding the tax base that funds the public services that we all need and want.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is focusing on employment and big tech companies; does he agree that we need to go a step back—back to school, teachers and training? Teachers need to prepare their pupils for the future with AI, and for what that means. Does the hon. Gentleman feel that that is something not for this Minister but perhaps for a Minister in another Department?

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his second intervention—let us see whether he can make it a hat trick before I finish. The reality is that AI is here now. We have to deal with how it impacts on today's workers and future workers as well. This is not one generation against another, and I know the hon. Gentleman understands that.

The Government could seek to equalise tax treatment, actively explore widening the digital services tax to include AI companies, which it currently excludes, and raise the level of the tax from 2% to the European average. We cannot allow the use of machines to be made artificially cheaper than employing people.

It is important to look at AI sovereignty, which the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) mentioned earlier. The UK is growing increasingly dependent on US tech, and owns little of the data infrastructure and AI models on which the future economy will increasingly rely. This repeats the pattern of recent decades in other sectors, whereby essential national infrastructure has passed into overseas ownership and money has flowed offshore, leaving British people with less and less control over the essentials of a good life. That dependence not only creates security risks, as has been mentioned, but prevents the UK from capturing and distributing any AI windfall.

We need to give UK companies a meaningful chance to compete. The Competition and Markets Authority could use existing powers to take on the concentration in the cloud market, which underpins the AI companies' business models. A progressive sovereign AI programme should involve an industrial strategy that seeks to expand public investment in the sector and impose strict conditions on private access to public assets, alongside active support for models such as co-operatives, public interest companies and other democratic ownership models, so that the gains of AI can be captured and shared throughout the UK.

At the heart of this debate is the role of the public. Big decisions about AI, such as where data centres are built and how AI is deployed in public services, are being taken with little democratic input.

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): I apologise in advance, Ms McVey, that I need to go to a Select Committee so cannot attend the full debate. My hon. Friend is, as usual, right about everything. Does he

agree that public resistance to the construction of data centres is due not just to concern about the impact on the environment, but to underlying public scepticism about the breathlessness with which politicians talk about economic growth driven by digital technology when we have an economy that has a completely unsustainable food system, is not delivering genuinely affordable homes, has rubbish public transport in many parts of the country, and is not delivering the basics?

Neil Duncan-Jordan: One data centre, even a modest one, uses the same amount of electricity as 100,000 homes. The bigger the data centre, the more electricity it uses. Very few of them run off renewables, so that is another issue we need to address. The communities that host the infrastructure see the costs, in water, energy and land, without getting any of the benefits that we have discussed.

These big debates are why the Government must embed ongoing public and democratic oversight of the AI transition and legislate for community benefit where infrastructure is built, including a share of the value created locally. We must ensure that the AI revolution does not lead to more power being in the hands of a few who can determine our future. Governments must build independent, publicly funded alternatives to ensure that AI is developed for the common good. Only public investment can support AI that prioritises social and environmental challenges. We need an "AI for the people" strategy—one that starts to recognise the challenges we face and has the ideas to meet those challenges head on.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I will call the Front Benchers from 3.30; I will not impose a fixed time limit, but about six or seven people want to speak.

2.43 pm

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I rise in support of much of what the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) has said. He has done a service to this Chamber, and Parliament more generally, by highlighting the threats that AI will bring.

Perhaps I can set the scene by reminding Members present that it took 25 years for Parliament and successive Governments to recognise that the internet must be regulated. That is extraordinary. When I was in the IT industry back in the '80s and '90s, I became aware of the concept of the internet—before it was widely spoken about—and even then I knew the harm it might do.

In 2000, at the beginning of the new millennium, I was privileged to be able to speak at the Spalding Gentlemen's Society, with which I do not imagine you are familiar, Ms McVey, but suffice to say it is a learned society of the old school—it now does admit women, you will be pleased to know. It has a lecture programme on all manner of things, and I was pleased to be invited to give the first lecture of the millennium. Then, I warned of what the internet might do. Most of the audience, by the way, disbelieved what I said. It was a very civilised meeting—it was not raucous in any way—but they could not quite come to terms with what I predicted.

What I predicted then has come to pass. What has occurred is the distortion of public discourse, the enabling of widespread fraud and the provision of the means for every imaginable form of harm, from hardcore pornography being available to children, to internet gambling addiction, suicide sites and much more. Now, the prospect of AI will make all that still more chilling. As the recognition of what is real and what is invented is increasingly blurred, it will become more and more difficult for people to navigate the inevitable vicissitudes that pervade every life.

Imagine a future where the once secure certainty of what really exists is so undermined that people can no longer believe what they are told and have no place to go to establish that certainty—the basis on which we all gauge reality and are able to live reasonably productive lives. I see wellbeing being affected by that detrimentally; unless the Government take very urgent and extremely serious action, that will happen far more quickly than anyone here envisages.

Iqbal Mohamed: Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that one of the primary obligations of any Government is to keep their citizens and the people living in their country safe from all avoidable harms? AI is a major potential cause of harm, and it is avoidable. Does he agree that the Government cannot wait 25 years to catch up?

Sir John Hayes: I absolutely agree. That is why I began by describing what has occurred over the last quarter of a century and the misunderstanding—a pervasive one that affected all political parties and Governments of all kinds—that a dangerous fascination with novelty was more important than the certainty that I have just outlined.

The hon. Member for Poole is right to issue a clarion call for action. Let me go into a little more detail. He is right, for example, that we have allowed a handful of multinational corporates, which have displayed a carelessness to the effects of what they do, to wield immense power—more power than national Governments. It is increasingly difficult for Governments to pull levers that affect these people, because they exist beyond the purview of this House or of any Government Minister. They have shown by their example that carelessness, and only when they have been prevented from doing harm have they ceased to do so.

I am delighted that the Government are now taking steps to prevent children from accessing social media and mobile telephones; I would like to go much further, actually, and I hope the Government will. I called for the ban on phones in schools, along with many other Members of this House, a long time ago. But AI makes all that more serious, because the AI available through that technology, which has the ability to distort the very nature of reality, will be immensely difficult to control. And yet we must try to do so. Legislation is not always the only means of doing that but, as the hon. Gentleman set out, it certainly must play a part.

Umberto Eco described the internet as the "empire of imbeciles". Over time, it has become impossible to distinguish experts from idiots, and every bar-room bigot now has an audience of millions. Most people had a sense of proportion; my parents were working-class people who left school at 14, but they had a very good sense of what really mattered. Now we have elevated trivia to an extraordinary degree and, as a result, that sense of proportion, which was once taken as read, can no longer be guaranteed.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): On the point about proportionality, a lot of concerns about AI have rightly been raised in the debate, but let me sound a more positive note about public services. In my constituency, North Kerrier integrated neighbourhood team, which covers one of the most deprived regions in the UK, is using Brave AI to identify frailer and more vulnerable patients earlier and thereby prevent avoidable hospital admissions. Given the opportunities of AI, and the risks the right hon. Gentleman is talking about in great detail, does he agree, particularly in relation to healthcare, that the right approach is proportionate regulation, so that we do not stifle innovation, but maintain public trust and safety?

Sir John Hayes: I know from my dealings with the hon. Gentleman that he is a good and effective Member of Parliament who takes a very responsible view of these things, but we must not let the virtues that he describes blind us to the vices. That is what happened with the internet. When I made that speech back in 2000, when people said, "But I can reunite with my family in Australia." I replied, "Well, if they really wanted to unite with you, they wouldn't have gone to Australia in the first place." I remember Friends Reunited—as though we want to get in touch with people we were at primary school with. They look so different; that is frightening in itself. Why would we want to revisit our ancient history?

But that is all an aside. I think the hon. Gentleman is right, and of course it is true that there will be the advantages that he describes, particularly in the research field. My fear is that they will obscure, in the eyes of those who have the power to make a difference, the points that the hon. Member for Poole made. I hope that does not apply to this Minister, who I am sure is far more clear-sighted than that suggests.

Parliament and the Government need to act quickly and decisively to deal with the points that the hon. Member for Poole made and that I have attempted, imperfectly, to amplify. It is critically important to understand that although innovation may matter, ethics matter more; that science and technology are morally neutral and have no implicit ethic; and that what really counts is not what is new, but what is true.

2.53 pm

Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate. I am very grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing it, and I agree with many of his remarks and those made by other speakers. I particularly agree with his remarks about the New Contract initiative.

The UK's AI sector has grown 23 times faster than the rest of our economy. We must ensure continued investment and the realisation of productivity gains from appropriate use, but we must also secure greater domestic control and resilience, and mitigate near and later-term risks from inappropriate use, if we are truly to become an innovation nation. I believe that we must change our approach to AI, and I want to spend the time that I have setting out the case for doing that.

Above all, we must seek sovereignty as if we actually mean it. Supporting UK niches, such as photonics and quantum, is key to sovereignty and to boosting growth from Southampton to Sheffield and from Belfast to Birmingham, but we must recognise how crucial access to frontier models is to our sovereignty. The recent debacle with Fable 5 and Mythos 5 only serves to underline that. The sovereign AI fund needs a clearer rationale. It should be developing UK companies and partnerships, and public stakes should genuinely put our people and our places first.

We must also work more concertedly with allies to develop joint sovereign capability. AI development needs to be part of an economic security reset with the EU, and we need to be able to participate in the Scaleup Europe Fund. Interestingly, Mistral AI's chief executive recently claimed that the EU has at most two years to build its own AI or become permanently structurally dependent on the US or China. The UK must be included in that EU-level debate before it is too late.

Delivering stronger sovereign control and resilience also means the Government putting their money where their mouths are and supporting UK AI and UK partnership AI in procurement. All Departments should be assessed publicly on that, and the Competition and Markets Authority should be engaged on how to ensure more advanced market commitments to support our sovereignty. We can learn from other countries on that. Look at France, which recently dropped Palantir from its intelligence services. Of course I realise that changes cause disruption, but we cannot work purely on the basis of cost or short-term capability any more. We have to make assessments on the basis of control and resilience, given their significance for our national interest.

In public services, we must move beyond no, low and performative adoption to appropriate and transparent adoption that puts people and places first. It is critical that the UK can deploy sufficient compute to support those aspirations. I hope that the AI Energy Council can develop plans for a line delivery of renewable energy and data centre projects, as well as fixing difficult issues such as demand modulation to unblock additional capacity. There can genuinely be a win-win here, but for that and greater adoption to be achieved, I agree with what others have said: we have to face up to public concern about the risks. We need only look at what is happening in Scotland right now to see that.

First, on unemployment, half of all UK workers feel that they will lose their job to AI. From what I can see, there is very mixed evidence about that so far, beyond the field of software development. Pleased as I was to see the Early Careers Jobs Alliance and the AI adoption insights agreement from the Government, we must go further. Lessons should be learned from the consultation on the social media ban, "Growing up in the online world: a national consultation".

I would like to see the Government launch a consultation on starting work in a world of AI, so that we can involve young people who are worried about that, gather their good ideas and show that the Government are engaging with that crucial issue. We should be doing far more in our schools and colleges to prepare our children.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): AI is increasingly being used to make cutting-edge assistive technology for people with special educational needs and disabilities, but the industry is a bit of a wild west, and access for young people in areas such as Yeovil is uneven. Will the hon. Member join me in urging the Government to publish guidance for schools on best practices for AI assistive technology for SEND?

Anneliese Dodds: The hon. Member raises a really important point, and it is part of a broader picture. My understanding is that something like only half of all schools have an appropriate AI policy. Simply saying to students, "Don't use AI", having an unorganised approach to it, or just taking a company's word for it without a broader set of guidance and frameworks for deployment is not supporting our children and young people. Saying, "Just don't use AI", when we know children and young people are using it, is not fair to them, and will do a disservice to our economy in the future.

Our children and young people need to understand how AI works, as well as the risks of cognitive offloading and the negative impacts on social interaction from inappropriate use. I also want to see us encouraging international discussion in the OECD and the United Nations about taxation—taxation of permanent establishment, capital gains and the cost of human labour compared with tokens. That does not need to have an immediate impact; we could set a threshold of employment impact to trigger a token tax, for example. However, we cannot run away from this debate, especially given how much services dominate our economy.

Secondly, we have to engage with concerns about the safety of frontier models. As I said many months ago alongside the Centre for Countering Digital Hate, just regulating applications after harm has been done is unacceptable. Grok should not have been able to produce 3 million non-consensual nudified images in the first place. New York, California, Illinois and the EU have moved towards approaches requiring mandatory assessment of frontier models, and we should too. We should place the AI Security Institute on a statutory footing as a first step, and we should use our presidency of the G20 next year to reinvigorate global attempts at co-ordination, which started with the Bletchley conference but have effectively stalled since. We can work with EU countries to do that as well as with nations from India to Brazil.

Thirdly, and finally, although AI can release huge productivity gains, we have to recognise that unscrupulous and inappropriate use is already imposing huge costs too.

Sir John Hayes: I am interested in the right hon. Lady's comment on productivity, because it is one of the prevailing macroeconomic challenges facing this Government and previous Governments, as the stalling of productivity has been a problem across western economies for a while. It is true that AI might help, but it could also harm. Equipping people with skills is critical to building productivity, and dependence on AI may actually undermine people's confidence and their skills over time.

Anneliese Dodds: I absolutely agree. That phenomenon of so-called cognitive offloading and the lack of scaffolding in skills is a genuine concern. Equally, we see how rapidly and accurately AI can assess tumour scans, for example, working with human beings to deliver the highest possible quality of healthcare. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) about the potential there. We need to have a sensible approach to this issue.

I also want to mention some additional harms. We are now seeing ubiquitous slop on the internet, AI-enabled fraud and cyber-attacks, and the impact of AI summaries on local media use as well, so I want to see the CMA using its powers for competition-focused action on strategic market status services. I want the Government to adopt a maximalist approach to the "Watch this Space" White Paper, and I want us to stop treating bots as separate, because AI is increasingly going to be integral to our interface with the internet, as well as to so much else, so we need to adopt a safety-by-design approach to online regulation, and that needs to recognise the increasing ubiquity of AI.

3.2 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan), as well as his two friends and allies who have just spoken, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) and the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds), on bringing this important subject to Westminster Hall. This is in danger of turning into one of those rare debates in Parliament where one learns something from everybody who speaks and we all come away better informed and equipped.

This subject is enormous, and it is only a 90-minute debate. It obviously will not be the last time we discuss these matters, and I freely confess to not being an expert on the subject. Like many colleagues, I am trying to educate myself more to understand better the implications, including the upside for productivity, the implications for energy and water, and the effect on all manner of things in the public and private spheres, such as healthcare, education, international relations, and foreign and security policy and so on. I am no expert, but one thing I have learned is that no one knows what the societal effect of AI is at this moment in time. A lot of people have a story to tell, but no one really knows. That is one of the reasons why we have to keep coming back to these subjects as our understanding iterates and evolves.

Iqbal Mohamed: The right hon. Gentleman says no one knows, but throughout history, when we have approached technologies or situations that we have never experienced before, we have done scenario planning and risk assessments, and we have prepared as best as possible for scenarios that may be plausible or possible. Does he agree that when it comes to AI, we have been absolutely asleep at the wheel and that planning has not happened?

Damian Hinds: I agree with large parts of what the hon. Gentleman says. The timeframes are obviously shorter this time than they were for say, the industrial revolution, the printing press or any of the other massive changes that we have seen in the past. When Gutenberg invented his printing press, I am not sure it was foreseeable to even the most far-sighted, omniscient individual what all the effects of that would be. That does not mean we do not try to scenario-plan and to think about the different possible outcomes and try to mitigate them.

Labour market effects are probably what we as politicians worry about the most, along with all the other implications, like the consequences for income distribution, intergenerational fairness and so many other aspects. People already say that AI has had a big impact on job markets, particularly on the graduate job market. I honestly do not know whether that is true or not. It strikes me

[Damian Hinds]

that it is quite an easy thing to say: if a company is not doing that well this year and is not employing graduates to the same extent that it used to, it is a great thing to say, "Well, we're investing in AI." I do not see how a professional services firm, with the current technology deployment, would be able to substitute people for AI in quite that way.

In the future, it is true that there is a scenario in which there is mass unemployment. But it is also true that when there have been huge upheavals previously, labour markets have adapted, albeit over time, and sometimes it is that gap that makes the difference. Labour has found its way into different sectors—

Clive Lewis (Norwich South) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his excellent speech. There are lots of things about AI and its impact that we do not know. But one of the things that history teaches us is that if vast amounts of power and wealth are handed to a handful of individuals, corporations or even the Chinese Communist party—this is not just about corporations; it can be about states as well—the outcome is usually not good for the vast majority of people. I think we can all agree on that. We do not need to know whether AI will be beneficial or hostile, or become super-AI. What we can see is that when a small group of people are allowed to define what reality and knowledge are, that in itself—well, we have all read "1984".

Damian Hinds: I agree with the hon. Gentleman; this is, of course, not a left versus right argument. For example, the antitrust regime in the United States exists precisely to prevent the concentration of power. Indeed, all the companies in the list we heard earlier were American. We did not mention ByteDance or Huawei, which we could easily have done. As the right hon. Member for Oxford East said, sovereign capability is obviously important, too.

On labour markets, there is also a risk—actually, the hon. Member for Poole did not do this, but I thought that he was going to keep saying, "Universal basic income, universal basic income." He did not, but a lot of people do. Universal basic income is a policy prescription that those people calling for it tended to believe in years earlier, before they had even heard of AI, and now it fits this scenario. I do not know what the outcomes and therefore the mitigations of AI will need to be, but we must keep an open mind.

Sir John Hayes: Will my right hon. Friend give way?

Damian Hinds: I had better press on, because we have a number of colleagues to get through.

Regarding generative AI and its effect on information integrity, which my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings referred to earlier, we should bear in mind that so far the massive growth in fraud, misinformation and disinformation has all been done with cheapfakes. People talk about deepfakes, but it is done with rubbish, which can still take in large numbers of people. Just imagine what happens when such fakes become convincing. For example, there is the email that says, "I am stranded in Bermuda", or whatever it is, "and I need you to send me £100 overnight." Imagine when that scam actually involves a video of someone's child saying it to them.

However, we soon realise that those things seem relatively benign when people start talking about agentic AI and super-intelligence, whereby machines take control of a situation, which some people have described as being ultimately an existential threat to humanity.

I do not know what all the answers are, but I think that as politicians—as the House of Commons—we need to ensure that our organisational architecture is equipped to consider all these questions as they evolve. However, I do not think that our Select Committee structure today is equipped in that way. For example, I do not think that having a Science, Intelligence and Technology Committee, which obviously covers technology, is a suitable way to address all these matters, and I also do not think that it is appropriate to expect every other Select Committee to develop such expertise themselves. Somehow, we need to meld the two structures. We must have some form of super-Select Committee—a support team, or something like that—to work with all the other teams or Committees across the piece.

I will finish by mentioning two specific things that we can do right now, because there is a ticking bomb with AI, specifically regarding children. In education now, if someone asks the typical year 9 pupil, "How many of your friends use AI to help them do their homework?", that child would just laugh and say, "All of them." The idea that we have some sort of issue where we have to encourage children to use AI is just nonsense. It is also crazy to suppose that we can just say to them, "Don't do it," and they will comply. Every child in the country learns computing in primary school. We need to make sure that the curriculum evolves so that children get to understand how the thing works, how it generates its content, why it might hallucinate, why it tries to flatter the questioner and why we cannot fully rely on it.

There is a real danger. Cognitive offloading is a fancy term, but it basically means relying on a machine to do the work for us. One way we can mitigate that effect with schoolchildren is ensure that when they do their exams at the end of the year, they do them with a piece of paper and a pen in exam conditions. I am afraid there is a move across exam boards to make more exams digital. Of course, they will say that the computers are not attached to the internet and children cannot do this, that and the other, but pen and paper is the safest thing. Of course, there should be exceptions for children with a special educational need or disability that means they need to use a keyboard, and exceptions for computer science, but in general, children at school doing their public exams should do them on pen and paper. That will make sure it happens lower down the school as well. It will also ensure that children continue to write. This sounds like a stupid thing to say, but people already ask, "Why is my child learning to write with a pen, because by the time they grow up nobody will be doing that?"

Finally, we are about to make the same mistake with chatbots as we did with social media. I am talking about anthropomorphism, where a computer program develops a personality of its own and develops relationships with people. I welcome the development of an age-appropriate design code for chatbots, but it is not enough. The regulatory regime we have in this country, with Ofcom and the Information Commissioner's Office, relies on there being evidence of harm. The evidence will not come before the harm. We need to change that system and adopt a precautionary principle when it comes to protecting children.

3.12 pm

Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I have rewritten my speech because I do not want to repeat all the things that have been said. I think we are in agreement, although we may have different perspectives.

I want to take us back to 80 years ago, to a country house a few miles from Milton Keynes in my constituency. A handful of mathematicians built a machine that cracked the enigma code, and it gave birth to modern computing. That was Bletchley Park, where Britain proved that it could outthink the world. That inheritance still runs through Milton Keynes in the data centres rising on our edge, the British Standards Institution at Knowlhill—the oldest standards institute in the world, whose kitemark has told people that a product is safe since 1903—and a plethora of AI start-ups that outnumber Oxford or Cambridge.

Britain is standing at another one of those moments, as we see with our economy and our military tech coming together and pushing forward either for the good of the nation or for its ultimate damage. The potential benefits of artificial intelligence are enormous, and not only for the private sector. AI is a tool that can pull our public services back from years of managed decline. The technology will allow us to detect diseases earlier and cut NHS waiting lists. It will free nurses and other public servants from back-office grind for work that only people can do.

However, every country can see that prize, and the question that decides whether Britain leads or merely buys in is whether we make the technology or just import it. A maker exports its products, services and ideas around the world, as we did in world war two, but the UK is at risk of becoming an AI taker and simply handing over the keys to giant US tech firms that are buying up our best young AI companies. It is still our technology; it is just being bought up, packaged and sold back to us so that we become indebted.

As we are talking about the impact on our economy and our society, I want to point to Palantir, which has the contract with the NHS. We know that UK companies could do exactly the same work, because I and many Members present have spoken to them. Even more concerning is that the Ministry of Defence now uses the company. With the activist Government in the US turning off technology and restricting its availability outside the US, that puts at risk not only our NHS but, most importantly, the defence of our realm against Russia, for which others may have more sympathy than we do.

There is also a social cost, as people look at a company such as Palantir and say that it does not reflect their values. It is used by US Immigration and Customs Enforcement and by Israel to target Gaza. That has a huge impact on public trust. It is also bad for the UK economy and innovation, because it crowds out UK firms that could have those public contracts. That is just one example of a dependency that is putting us at risk both socially and economically.

It does not have to be that way. British AI firms need three things to succeed: customers who will buy their products, the ability to increase supply to meet demand, and a USP that British AI is the most trusted. The Government can help with all three. First, we have to act as a good customer. Why should those NHS and MOD contracts not go to British AI firms? Not only would that increase trust, but those products would be developed in a way that meets our needs; we would not be buying something that had been developed elsewhere. That would also mean that we had to invest in the entire British AI stack—it must be British from start to finish.

The second issue is supply. We need to make sure that we have the compute power we need and that we are not relying on US firms again for that. We are overly reliant: despite the fact that we part-own Crown Hosting, that accounts for only 6% of public sector data; the rest is nearly all on Amazon Web Services, which is a significant risk. We need to look at how we diffuse the supply of compute power—the underused capacity—to increase that.

Finally, we need to increase AI take-up across British businesses by building trusted products. The British Standards Institution is at the heart of that. It does not always have to be about regulation; it can be about standards that lift everything up. What attracts the world to the BSI is that it is known for doing that and its standards become international, so we get first-market advantage.

This partnership model of an industrial strategy is mission-driven, creates public trust, evaluates the impact on society and creates opportunities for our ideas and innovation to flourish. That is something we did with the innovations at Bletchley Park. We need to become an innovation leader again—an AI maker, not just an AI taker, which puts us at risk.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): As three Members wish to speak, the time limit for speeches is three to four minutes, because we are going to the Front Benchers at 3.30 pm.

3.18 pm

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Responsible AI, done right, could be the saviour of humanity. Irresponsible AI, done wrong, could lead to the destruction of humanity. There is, to my knowledge, no effective, self-regulated industry anywhere in the world that puts consumers and the planet before profit and shareholders.

I thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing this important debate. As he and many Members have highlighted, a handful of companies run by men answerable to no electorate and standing before no constituents are making decisions right now that will shape healthcare, education, employment, childhood and the economy more than most Acts of this Parliament ever will.

I will focus on topics that have not been covered and speak about safety and economic risks. I have spent 20-plus years in the pharmaceutical regulatory industry, and we can learn much from it. We regulate medicines before they reach a single patient. We do not wait for harm; instead, we test, we license and we monitor. That is the entire logic of the GxP framework that underpins pharmaceutical safety in this country, yet AI is being deployed in our hospitals, schools, courts and welfare system with no comparable safety regime at all, not because the risk is smaller but because the oversight is simply not there.

[Iqbal Mohamed]

I put the following demands to the Government. First, where GxP protects patients from medicine, we need GAIP—good AI practice—regulation to protect patients from algorithms. Any AI system used in healthcare must meet a statutory standard before it touches a single patient record or clinical decision. The AI Security Institute already evaluates frontier models for biological, chemical and cyber risk, but only if the AI companies allow it to. That is progress, but progress in security assessments is not the same as regulating delivery in the healthcare industry.

This Government brought Palantir into the heart of our NHS; in doing so, they handed a US surveillance contractor that is complicit in genocide the keys to patient data that belongs to the British public, not to a share price on Wall Street. I ask the Minister to guarantee the British public that their NHS data will never be given to or allowed to be stolen by Palantir or any other private company.

Secondly, the Government must mandate independent statutory testing for AI before its release, and a yellow card scheme that would be a national register where safety incidents, near misses and harms caused by AI were reported, tracked and acted on exactly as we do for adverse drug reactions. It must not be the manufacturer marking its own homework and hoping that nobody checks; self-certification does not work and must end. Thirdly, every AI system developed in this country must have a kill switch that is triggered automatically the moment a system takes unauthorised action and that any human being can trigger manually at any time without obstruction or AI override.

This danger is not only about safety but about who pays the bill as AI unfolds. More than 300,000 private-hire drivers in this country face displacement by robotaxis. I ask the Minister how the Government will fund public services going forward. There are dangers, but there are opportunities from AI. We must try to access them as much as possible, but we must address the societal, economic and safety consequences that AI poses.

3.23 pm

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing this crucial debate. The quality of the contributions reflects how timely this conversation is.

Artificial intelligence is no longer a distant future challenge; it is here, shaping our economy, public services and daily lives. The challenge is how we ensure that these changes work for people, strengthen our communities and deliver benefits that are shared across the country and internationally. The UK has an opportunity to lead by embracing innovation and making sure that the right safeguards are in place to protect our communities, build confidence and ensure that the benefits are shared.

It is vital that we recognise how we can share in that new economy, and that we act now to safeguard public value and wealth generation. Every day, through our public services, our NHS, our transport network and countless interactions with the British public, we generate data that has enormous value. AI is the technology that unlocks that value, but the resource it is built on is our human data, which belongs to us all.

As I outlined in a recent article, we must learn the lessons from the past on this. In the past century, Norway decided to turn the national resource of fossil fuels in the North sea—the original driver of modern industrial development—into lasting public wealth. In the UK, we did not invest the revenues from North sea oil; we spent it to cover day to day costs. We must not make that same mistake twice. Rather than allowing the value created by AI from public data to flow permanently into a few private hands, we must ensure that British public services share in the wealth generated from that value—from the national assets we have created—by creating a national data wealth fund.

The Government have already recognised the strategic importance of data through the national data library and the AI opportunities action plan. Those are welcome steps forward, but we must do more to build the institutions that capture this value before it slips through our hands. I fully agree with the comments made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) about the need for real sovereign AI capabilities and urgent collaboration with our European allies.

Keeping our communities safe and defending our democracy are essential parts of the AI challenge. I recently met the Minister for AI and Online Safety to discuss the growing impact of AI on children and young people particularly. We need to ensure there are strong safeguards around AI-generated content. If we cannot trust what is shown to us online, and if we cannot distinguish between what is real and what has been artificially created, the consequences can reach far beyond individual users and can undermine trust in our democratic institutions themselves.

That brings me to accountability. Companies with influence over what millions of people see should be held accountable and made responsible. Social media is not a village noticeboard. It is driven by algorithms that control what is recommended and amplified to millions of people every day. Technology companies act as editors: they decide what people see, what spreads, what is promoted and what disappears. AI will increasingly determine the information that people consume not only through social media, but through search engines, digital assistants and the services people use every day. That is why transparency, accountability and effective regulation are crucial.

As AI use grows, so too does the demand for further infrastructure, as I have outlined before. Data centres will become increasingly important to Britain's economy. As the Member for South East Cornwall, I know that nature is not a blocker to growth. With careful planning, meaningful engagement and strong environmental protections, we can protect the landscapes that make Cornwall special while creating skilled jobs, attracting investment and ensuring that local communities benefit from a new technology, which, concentrated in companies in London as it is, can often feel very far from South East Cornwall.

The economic revolution is happening whether we welcome it or not, but our responsibility is to ensure that we are ready to unlock the opportunities, that we protect children and vulnerable people, and that we hold the powerful platforms to account. I am ready to

ensure that the remarkable technology being developed today strengthens my community and does not leave them behind.

3.27 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing a debate on a question that will shape every community in this country, including mine. I will try to focus on topics that have not been covered, including infrastructure.

In my Mid Dunbartonshire constituency, AI has recently been brought to the forefront of local debate. At Westerhill, near Bishopbriggs, a developer has proposed a 300 MW AI data centre with 500 MW of battery storage—nationally significant infrastructure on our doorstep. My constituents' response has rightly been one of caution—not hostility and not blind welcome. They have serious concerns and questions: "What jobs will this bring, and for whom? What happens to the environment, to the grid, to water and to energy bills?"

Developments on this scale must be good neighbours and deliver community benefit that people can see, as well as skills, local employment and investment in the places that host them—not just high fences and, as the hon. Member for Dewsbury and Batley (Iqbal Mohamed) said, profits that are disseminated at a distance. That is how they will be judged by the communities who host them.

This is an international issue, and it has so far been dominated by US policy. Last month, the United States showed the first sign that it may not see us as being part of its team when it comes to AI access. On 12 June, the US Government ordered one of the US's leading AI companies to cut off access to its two most advanced models for anyone who is not a US citizen—the first time that export controls have ever been applied to AI models. Access for British businesses and researchers was switched off overnight not because of anything we did, but because Trump decided to cut us off.

That is not a partnership; a vital technology that can be withdrawn at another Government's whim is a chain around Britain's neck. We cannot build our public services, our security and our economy on systems that can be cut off at a whim. It is clear that the UK must build its sovereign capacity—the data centres, skills and software needed to ensure that we are not locked out of the AI race.

Communities such as mine, which are being asked to host the infrastructure of that future, should share fairly in the rewards, and we must build public trust. The Liberal Democrat approach would make that possible, based on a cross-sector, principle-based framework to give innovators certainty and the public confidence, and to give transparency wherever AI is used in the public sector, so that people can understand the impact it is having on their lives.

3.30 pm

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I wholeheartedly thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for securing the debate. Its richness shows that we need also to have it in the main Chamber, because the Government need to tackle this issue head-on. Before I dive in, I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

The Government have done some work, but it still seems that AI policy is done by announcement, rather than by taking a real, strategic overview of how it will power our society, and there is still no sign of an AI Bill. As has been talked about today, AI is everywhere, and the Government must tackle it head-on. They need to see that it is a tool that can be used to benefit our society or that can lead to our society's demise.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): On the demise of society, AI can fuel the threat of disinformation, which can inflame tension and distort debate. We have seen that in Epsom and Ewell. Does my hon. Friend agree that AI must be regulated and that the Government must bring forward the AI Bill?

Victoria Collins: Absolutely, and that has been at the core of a lot of our debate today.

AI can drive inequalities, break down our society, security and safety, and take away jobs, or it can be used to tackle our biggest problems, empower individuals and drive growth. AI is a bit like the electricity of today—a supercharged version of electricity—and we need to think about where we are going to direct it. At some point, we started using electricity to light our cities and to power our homes, businesses and industries; now we need to think about where we will direct AI, and how we prepare people for that future.

The hon. Member for Poole and others talked about the future of our economy, tax and wealth, and there are key examples that highlight how important that is. We have started talking about donkeycorns; Members may have heard of unicorns, but donkeycorns are billion-dollar companies with one or two people. There is a legend that OpenClaw was a one-person company that was sold for £1 billion. That is a real shift in our economy, and we need to tackle it head-on.

As Liberal Democrats, we believe in embracing that progress and change, but we also believe in empowering individuals. When it comes to AI, we thought about tackling that big picture, which is why we launched a project called "Everyday AI". We brought together over 100 global stakeholders from industry and civil society—to look at a Liberal vision for AI and how Britain can thrive in the age of AI. We looked at backing British innovation, empowering people and building trust, and building infrastructure for success.

As the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) said, no one knows where we are going. As a Member of Parliament and a politician, I often feel it is difficult to sound neither utopian nor dystopian about this issue. However, it is crucial that we ask the right questions, and keep on asking them, to make sure we are going in the right direction.

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Victoria Collins: I am going to advance, because I want to hear from the Minister.

Crucially, we need to lean into the opportunities and challenges, and I will share some of our proposals, which I would be happy to discuss with the Minister

[Victoria Collins]

afterwards. When it comes to leaning into the opportunities, it is about helping start-ups and small and medium-sized enterprises to thrive with AI, with AI procurement guides, skills tax credits and capital expenditure reliefs for AI software and adoption.

We need to look at supporting our university spin-outs and the incredible research in this country; quintupling proof of concept funding; having a standardised national framework for negotiating IP between universities and staff; and moving towards full IP ownership by researchers and research teams. We have to help to grow these things here in the UK.

As mentioned by the right hon. Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) and the hon. Member for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), we must use Government procurement to support UK tech. It has to be a catalyst for British sovereign tech. We are calling for a trial increase to 30% for the social value in procurement contracts. That would align with our strategic goals on digital sovereignty and AI, while maintaining open borders.

When it comes to tackling the challenges head-on, we need to look seriously at the cyber-security threats that have been talked about today. The hon. Member for Poole talked about the impact of big tech companies, and Mythos was a wake-up call. We hear that China is now developing such models, but I am most worried about those we are not hearing about.

We need to prepare for the future of work and fuel our creative industries, because we are nowhere without them. When it comes to NEETs, we have to realise that we are at a squeeze point, because companies are looking at how AI is bringing down costs. However, I would gently add that this is not the time to increase the cost of employment; that will not tackle the employment question.

We need to look at establishing safety by design in AI systems and models. We must tackle harm from chatbots through a harm-based framework, but enforcement is crucial. The AI Safety Institute is now the AI Security Institute. It is such a shame that that focus has been diminished, because we should be looking at AI ethics, as well as safety and security. We have to ensure that AI systems are not used for harm.

Members talked about AI fraud, which is a massive, serious problem in the UK. Revolut told us that the UK accounts for 22% of its customer base but 68% of its fraud costs. We are not tackling that massive problem properly, and AI is supercharging it. We are therefore calling for an online crime agency and AI labelling. We are also saying that social media companies, where a lot of AI-enabled fraud starts, should be financially liable for it.

We must tackle the energy question for AI datacentres and their role in the community, which my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) mentioned. We have to make sure they add value to our communities, and the AI Energy Council must tackle those issues head-on. On public services, we need to make sure a person stays in the loop.

Ultimately, we need to prepare for a future that is arriving very quickly. Underpinning that, we are calling for a national people strategy. Things are changing very quickly, so we need a single, coherent framework, from primary school to the workplace, with regional input. We must realise that the skills we need for an AI future are not just technical skills, but critical thinking and analysis.

We must also look at a digital sovereignty strategy, as many Members have said. We need to look at our tech stack to ensure that we do not have a single point of failure. A resilient tech stack would be good not just for our security and for businesses, but for our tech and our economy, so we absolutely need to look at that.

We cannot give up on frontier models; we need to start looking at them now. A point was made about proportionality in models. We do not all need massive, complex models that require massive amounts of energy to solve most of our problems. Most companies probably need simple models. They can be UK models, but if we do not start now by backing and investing in them, we will be left behind very quickly.

Finally, we need to move quicky on smart regulation. The Financial Conduct Authority has a fantastic approach to fintech that looks at output and standards. We need a flexible approach to AI, because things are moving quickly. We also need a digital Bill of rights.

We need to unlock the benefits by addressing the challenges head-on. According to the Ada Lovelace Institute, 91% of the public feel that it is important that AI systems are developed and used in ways that treat people fairly, and almost 90% are calling for an independent regulator for AI. Will the Minister listen to those concerns, take back the many great ideas that have been raised today and speak to his colleagues across Departments? AI is an extremely powerful tool, and we must embrace it. The Government must tackle this head-on. Where will they let the power be focused?

If anyone is unsure how quickly AI is going to change, I am repeatedly reminded that this year is the slowest we will ever see in AI development. If a plane going around the world is 1° off, it will be 500 miles off course. We need to decide now the direction we are going in with AI. We need to look at that holistically. We are here to support that Government work and make sure it empowers society, so that Britain can really be the leading nation on trustworthy, innovative technology.

3.39 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) for bringing forward this interesting debate, and all the Members on both sides of the House who have taken part. I recognise many of those who have participated in many debates such as this and who will, I am sure, participate in many more to come.

I will start by thanking my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes)—I wish I had attended his lecture in 2000, not least to have had the experience of being in a room where everyone disagreed with him, which must have been rather unique—for making an important point about how slowly Parliament regulates and responds to change.

My right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made a similar point about our responsiveness to this rapidly evolving sector. I also very much welcome his point about education and the challenges involved, particularly given his experience in

the sector. However, more than anything, I welcome his point that nobody knows what the future outcomes will be—a point I shall come back to a bit later.

I want to focus the bulk of my remarks on employment. I share the desire of the hon. Member for Poole to look at how to support and enhance employment through the AI transition, and we do need to have more such discussions. However, I am saddened that one core proposal from Labour Back Benchers is a plan on who or what we should tax now. I regret that the hon. Member's plans for an employment levy, which he is very passionate about and has written about previously, would not work to protect jobs—protectionism never does. It would simply put a brake on the ability of organisations, large and small, to adapt to AI, and leave us behind our competitors, losing jobs across all sectors.

The history of protectionism is, sadly, frequently a very tragic one. With each technological intervention and change, there are often calls for protectionist approaches, and when they come in—

Iqbal Mohamed: Will the hon. Member explain how this will work, then? Human beings at work pay national insurance, income tax and pension contributions, and then they can support their families. AI agents and AI-powered robots do not pay any of that—there are no tax receipts for the Government—so how will Government fund public services in that scenario?

Dr Spencer: I thank the hon. Member for his challenge regarding a future hypothetical that has yet to be realised. I think I will be able to address some of his points, but I think the premise he is setting is a bit beyond the scope of this discussion. However, I can give some concrete proposals for protecting human jobs. As a starter for 10, rather than inventing a new tax, we could start with some old ones, and rather than inventing new regs, we could start with some newish ones.

The Labour Government's approach has been to make it as difficult as possible to employ human labour by increasing national insurance contributions from employers; making it more difficult for younger people to compete in the workplace by increasing the minimum wage; and increasing employment regulations, making it a greater gamble for businesses to take on new starters. To support jobs in the UK, we should, before looking at AI, look at the Labour Government's policies, which are uniquely designed to make it more and more difficult to employ a person over a machine.

We are right to think about the workforce implications of the adoption of AI, but the future is always unclear and uncertain; that is the challenge of working in this sector, and I am very mindful of that position of humility as I move on to the following, more specific remarks.

Other technological disruptions, while displacing jobs, have ultimately led to more jobs through elasticity of demand. As costs decrease through automation, demand increases. That is the story of what happened with mass manufacturing in the automotive sector: to begin with, people were concerned that mechanised manufacturing would reduce jobs in the sector. Of course, the car sector exploded because the cost of a car went through the floor, and as a net result there were more jobs in the automotive sector. The issue was that they were different jobs; it is more of a transition than a replacement.

There are signals and concerns that the current decrease in the number of youth jobs is due to AI. However, as my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire said, it is unclear whether that is due to AI replacement, the current prevailing economic circumstances, or a mixture of the two. The data remains unclear, but I appreciate that we need to be thinking now about what possible futures could unfold. Equally, our tech sector provides growth and jobs. The UK could be the world's fastest AI adopter, but only if it is not punished with burdensome taxes and regulations. We are already seeing a hint—just a hint—of what AI can offer, especially in the research and health sectors. Our economic future needs AI, or we are going to be left behind.

Before I come to my final questions for the Minister, let me touch on AI and tech sovereignty, which is increasingly being talked about in the media and in this place as people focus on it more and more. AI and tech sovereignty, as described in this debate and in other forums, is illusory. We work and operate in global supply chains, with technology enmeshed around the world. Whether it is microchips built by TSMC in Taiwan, microchip etches created in the Netherlands, quantum tech built in the UK or frontier models, most of which are based in the States, our sectors are completely and utterly enmeshed.

Rather than talking about tech and data sovereignty, we should be talking about resilience and leverage. What are the core functions and features that we want to have on domestic soil? We can have a discussion about that. What should it be necessary to have on British soil, and what are the core technologies on which we want to be elite? We want to be world leaders, and to be indispensable to the world so that it looks to us, as opposed to the other way around. We need resilience and leverage rather than to chase the illusory rainbow of tech and data sovereignty.

Given my remarks about regulation and competitiveness, can the Minister rule out any part of the UK being brought into the EU AI Act? That would reduce our competitiveness with the EU. Will the Minister summarise the impact on the UK AI sector of Government taxation and employment policies? Have they been positive or negative? If they have been negative, to what extent? Can he confirm that there will be a decent statement before recess, as has been promised, on social media and the regulation of chatbots? Has he spoken to the virtual Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), about the importance of anti-protectionist policies in the UK's AI sector?

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I call the Minister, mindful that I would like to give some time to the hon. Member for Poole to wind up the debate.

3.48 pm

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Mr James Frith): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Poole (Neil Duncan-Jordan) on securing the debate, which speaks directly to the kind of country and society that we want to create for everyone we represent, and our friends and family—the type of country and society we want to live and thrive in.

The Government recognise that AI is, as Members have said, already changing our economy, the delivery of public services, our expectations of each other and

[Mr James Frith]

the ways in which we interact and engage in debate. For me, it is not merely the latest thing, or the something new and shiny that is so attractive to politics and politicians; in my mind, it is equivalent to a new atmosphere in which we now all expect to feature and play our part. We see the potential of AI in everything from scientific discovery to better public services and stronger economic growth.

The Government have a clear responsibility to make sure that the change at the heart of this debate reinforces rather than weakens the fabric of our society. That includes standing up to big tech firms when we deem it necessary—examples will follow—when they facilitate harm to UK citizens. As so many Members have powerfully made the argument for, it also includes developing sovereign capability—determining what comes next and honing it for best benefit. As we bring this debate to a close, it is important that we continue to consider those questions. We must collectively decide how we build a better society in an AI-enabled world. AI must serve us, and not the other way round.

The Government recognise the pressure to internationally compete on AI. That means we need to actively shape the transition towards it to secure benefits for the UK while managing risk or, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Oxford East (Anneliese Dodds) put it, exert the domestic control that we need. That is why we are working hard to ensure that the UK has the capability, access and influence it needs in the technologies that will shape our economy, public services and national security. It is why we established the sovereign AI unit with £500 million to enable the Government to back promising UK firms. The UK already attracts the third highest private investment in AI.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): The Teesside region has the potential to bring nationally significant investment in new AI data centre infrastructure. We welcome that investment and we are open for business, but will the Minister commit to meet colleagues at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that the governance arrangements around the Teesworks site attract business, rather than deter it?

Mr Frith: If I am considered worthy to meet in a few weeks' time, I will be very happy to do so.

This is not about self-sufficiency or about turning away from trusted international partners; it is about ensuring that where the UK has genuine strengths—in research, talent, creativity and innovation—we can translate them into long-term economic benefit. Significant private investment is now flowing into areas that would have seemed like science fiction even a decade ago, including therapies that slow or reverse biological ageing and AI-accelerated drug discovery that could compress timelines for curing major diseases. If realised, such developments would profoundly reshape expectations of health, work and the role of the state. That is why the Government have already committed to ambitious plans to transform services and digitise government, as set out in the road map for modern digital government published earlier this year.

Sir John Hayes: I hear what the Minister says, but there are no specific laws governing the standards of AI, there is no dedicated regulator to deal with AI development, and there are no sanctions on companies that knowingly use AI for malevolent purposes. Those things are all needed now.

Mr Frith: The Government's principle is to regulate at the time of deployment or at use. I understand the right hon. Gentleman's argument, but it is important that we strike the right balance between innovation and regulation. Of course, as I will come on to discuss in more detail, where there have been examples of harm we must call that out and call in those who caused them.

The Government have already committed to ambitious plans to transform services. For a radiologist, that means access to the best tools for detecting cancer—tools that can save lives and cut waiting lists in our NHS. The public sector is where it is perhaps most crucial that the Government ensure that we embed frameworks, standards and guidance to ensure that AI is deployed in a way that is fair, transparent and accountable. We are doing so with the data and AI ethics framework, the AI playbook, and transparency standards that ensure the public can understand how systems are used.

We are also supporting UK firms that provide third-party AI-assurance ecosystems, demonstrating that AI systems are safe and reliable as well as creating new jobs. That is critical not just for risk management but for building businesses, building confidence in those deploying AI, and building trust in the systems we use. To the points that were made about the job market, AI has the potential to enhance job roles and the performance of each of us at work, but it is necessary and reasonable, as my hon. Friend the Member for Poole pointed out, to distinguish the jobs that are most at risk—those least likely to be enhanced and most likely to be replaced. That is a very reasonable proposition. We recognise that one of the primary areas where people will interact with AI is in the labour market.

To zone in on labour markets, and the issue of young people and entry-level jobs, an estimated 12.8% of all people aged 16 to 24 in the UK are not in education, employment or training. That goes well beyond data-entry or access-level jobs, or a potential shift of culture in relation to entry-level jobs. To date, there is little conclusive evidence that AI is reducing employment. However, the International Monetary Fund estimates that around 70% of UK workers are in exposed occupations. Around half of those exposed workers are in high complementary roles, where AI will enhance rather than replace their work.

The Government are committed to supporting the worker experience through the AI transition, and have a proud record of advancing workers' rights. To that end, earlier this year the Government established the AI and the future of work unit, bringing together expertise from across Departments and industry to monitor how AI is affecting jobs, wages and opportunity in real time. We are putting in place the institutions, data and cross-Government co-ordination needed to ensure that AI transforms the labour market, that workers are supported and that opportunities are widely shared across society.

We are also investing in people, because the opportunities of AI will be realised only if the workforce are equipped to harness them. That is why we have launched one of

the most ambitious skills programmes anywhere in the world. Our AI skills boost programme is already delivering results. In an answer given to the House last week, I referred to the early careers funding and work on curriculum reforms to come, such as an AI-inclusive GCSE in computing.

This is about ensuring that workers at every stage of their career, and whether in small businesses, large firms or public services, have the tools that they need to thrive in an AI-enabled economy. AI will have—is having—seismic impacts on our working lives and productivity, and we must embrace the democracy this gives us. We must democratise access to AI to ensure that communities across the country reap the benefits. Central to that effort is ensuring that support is delivered to the graduates and young people entering the world of work for the first time. Much has been made of the rising level of NEETs. Programmes such as TechLocal are creating new jobs, traineeships and professional training, while scholarships and fellowships are supporting the next generation of researchers and innovators.

Nobody is waiting 25 years to tackle the threats, however. AI harms are very real, and we do not sit idly by when it comes to tackling them. We are not standing still. The AI Security Institute is conducting world-leading research to understand the capabilities and impacts of advanced AI. In response to the generation of vile and degrading non-consensual sexual deepfakes on Grok earlier this year, the Prime Minister himself, and the Government, stood up to Grok and X and won that fight. We have criminalised the creation of non-consensual sexual deepfakes and legislated to require platforms to remove them. Separately, we have banned nudification apps and criminalised AI tools designed to create sexual abuse material, as well as learning the importance of sovereignty when considering the recent switching off of the latest Anthropic AI tool.

I was asked a specific question about the social media ban. I was a proud early adopter of the policy and I am pleased to say that it remains the Government's intention to update the House before recess.

The UK is proactively responding to the AI revolution—we are shaping it. AI has extraordinary potential to improve healthcare, accelerate scientific discovery, personalise education, strengthen public services and drive economic growth. We will harness the opportunities across every region and community to shape UK society for the better for all.

3.59 pm

Neil Duncan-Jordan: I thank all Members for their contributions to an excellent debate that showed we need to have more of this discussion. I will make some very quick points. First, we need to act with speed, as I think was accepted by a number of Members. As the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) mentioned, we cannot wait 25 years.

We also need clear democratic oversight of what is happening. We cannot allow people we do not know and do not control to make our futures for us. We have to be in control of our own destinies. That is very important and will require global regulation. We will have to work with other authorities across the globe to come to the necessary arrangements.

Finally, the protections we will need must ensure that the next industrial revolution, which is already here in effect, benefits everyone and not just a few.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Government Support for Bus Services: West Dorset

4 pm

Edward Morello (West Dorset) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Government support for bus services in West Dorset constituency.

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. It is my privilege to bring this debate to the House.

This issue may seem niche, but it matters a great deal to my residents. It has generated a huge number of queries, social media comments, emails and constituency casework since I became an MP, reflecting just how deeply it affects people's daily lives. Buses determine whether my constituents can get to work, reach college, attend a hospital appointment, visit the high street or simply remain independent. When services are reduced or withdrawn, it can cause real anxiety for those who rely on them and, as I recently saw through casework, their families, too. That is especially true when it comes to reaching vital hospital appointments or when there are further cuts to essential routes, as we saw when the X53 and X51 services were significantly reduced due to last-minute increases in the subsidies demanded by the bus company, which the council could not afford to meet, when changing to a winter timetable.

In the spirit of constructive opposition, I welcome the direction that the Government have taken. I welcome the introduction of the new local authority bus grant, bringing together previous funding streams into a single multi-year settlement. I welcome the recognition of rurality in the funding model, as well as the extra funding that has been provided to local authorities. Long-term funding provides certainty. It allows authorities to plan strategically and move away from the stop-start cycle of short-term funding announcements that has characterised this area for too long.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing this debate. As he is well aware, West Dorset is similar to my constituency, with market towns and many townlands rather than towns, and the profitability of public transport can be questionable. However, does he agree that the bottom line is not the ledger, but connectivity and the end of rural isolation in an affordable fashion? Does he agree that we are not getting the balance right for our rural constituencies, which are the backbone of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Edward Morello: The hon. Member rightly touches on a lot of the issues that I will come to, all of which I know are as pressing in his part of the United Kingdom as they are in mine.

I thank the Minister for the constructive meeting we had on these issues. For the first time, the funding formula explicitly recognises rurality. That is an important step forward, and one that I and many other rural Members have called for from our first days in the House. However, recognising rurality and adequately funding rurality are two different things. The scale of the challenge in rural areas is immense, requiring a sustained and significant effort to rebuild networks that have been hollowed out over many years. Rural bus services fell by 52% between 2008 and 2023.

Adam Dance (Yeovil) (LD): My constituency neighbour will know that in Somerset and Dorset, we get older models of buses no longer used elsewhere. At the same time, rural bus depots, such as the one in Yeovil, are closing. If a bus breaks down from Ilchester on the way to Dorchester, passengers have to wait over an hour for a replacement bus. Does my hon. Friend agree that if depots for repairs are going to be closed, we need newer buses in West Dorset and Yeovil?

Edward Morello: My hon. Friend and neighbour is right to raise the pertinent issues of older buses and the closing of depots, which are directly linked. I hope that has been heard by the Minister.

Across England, there were over 1 billion fewer passenger journeys in 2023 than in 2015. Bus service frequency in West Dorset has fallen by an astonishing 62%, and 10 of Dorset's 14 towns are already transport deserts or at serious risk of becoming one. That creates barriers to employment, healthcare and independence. Patients miss hospital appointments, which contributes to the £1.2 billion annual cost of missed appointments for NHS England. Young people miss out on opportunities, older residents become isolated, and communities slowly lose confidence that public transport will ever return.

That is why simply maintaining today's network cannot be considered a success; the scale of decline means that we must actively rebuild what has already been lost. Between 2026 and 2030, Dorset will receive £13.8 million in Government bus funding: the lowest allocation anywhere in the south-west. That is £10.9 million less than neighbouring Somerset receives and £7.5 million less than Wiltshire. Devon and Torbay alone will receive over three and a half times Dorset's allocation and Hampshire will receive nearly four times as much. It is therefore unsurprising that neighbouring authorities can expand services, modernise fleets and increase frequency, while Dorset is often forced simply to maintain what it has left.

The Government deserve credit for recognising rurality, but rurality now needs to be given greater weighting within the funding formula. Serving dispersed populations inevitably costs more per passenger than operating in dense urban areas. There is a significant difference between increasing the frequency of an existing service and recreating a lost route from scratch. The latter requires considerably greater investment before passenger numbers can even begin to increase.

Every summer, West Dorset's population increases by over 42% due to seasonal visitors. Around 4 million day visitors and 2 million overnight visitors place a huge additional demand on our transport networks, which were designed to serve a much smaller permanent population. Yet that seasonal pressure is barely recognised in the national funding allocations.

The Prime Minister in waiting takes great pride in the transformation of Manchester's bus network. However, the Bee network demonstrates the scale of the investment required. Greater Manchester receives about £41.42 per resident, compared with approximately £4.84 per resident in Dorset—over eight times as much in funding per head.

Transport for Greater Manchester manages a budget exceeding £480 million and subsidises almost a quarter of the network. That level of investment has transformed

services, and I want Dorset to have the same level of ambition. However, rebuilding transport across hundreds of square miles of villages, market towns and dispersed communities is significantly harder than doing so in a major urban area. If the Government truly wish to level up rural transport, the funding formula must recognise that restoring services in rural Britain costs more, not less, than maintaining them in our cities.

The consequences of poor bus services are perhaps felt most keenly by young people. The recent Milburn review identified transport as one of the main drivers of young people becoming detached from education, employment and training. The review found that in rural, deprived and coastal communities, transport itself had become a major barrier to opportunity for those without access to a car. The proportion of 17 to 20-year-olds holding a full driving licence has fallen to 29%, while for many families the cost of owning and insuring a car has simply become unaffordable.

At the same time, bus services have become less frequent and more expensive. Bus fares increased by 59% between 2015 and 2023. On average, young people are now 15% less likely to travel than they were just 15 years ago, which should concern every Member of this House. When the last bus leaves before a hospitality evening shift finishes, a young person cannot access that hospitality job; they have been presented with a challenge that they cannot overcome. That is why I was pleased to table amendments to the Bus Services Bill during its passage to improve connectivity for young people by providing free bus travel for 16 to 18-year-olds, to encourage better co-ordination between buses and trains, and to ensure that funding reflects the realities that rural communities face. Those amendments were not adopted, but I hope the Government will start to move in the positive direction that they indicated.

West Dorset has an ageing population, and many people rely on buses to reach GP surgeries, hospitals, pharmacies and shops. When the bus services disappear, independence disappears with them. Poor transport also increases pressure on the NHS, on social care and on local authorities—all these things are connected. That is why I believe we should return to a sort of "total place" thinking, which was first developed over a decade ago: looking across departmental boundaries, instead of operating within them. The Dorset total transport pilot brought together school transport, adult social care transport, public bus services and community transport.

With just £180,000 of funding, the pilot improved services in some areas while identifying longer-term efficiencies and introducing more flexible, demand-responsive transport. It also explored digital technology to better match transport supply with demand. Rather than allowing buses to sit empty after a school run or to return to depots, we should ask how those vehicles could transport patients home from hospitals, connect isolated villages or just provide additional journeys during the day.

We also need a more joined-up approach between different modes of transport. People should not wait 40 minutes for a bus because the train was three minutes late. We need a properly integrated local transport network with more regulated and co-ordinated bus services. In many rural communities, community transport is often the only reason people remain connected at all.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Interconnectivity goes across not just buses but other modes of transport such as trains. There is a petition in one of my rural areas where, pre-covid, trains ran every 30 minutes; that is now every two hours, and there is a big gap in the middle of the day. Does the hon. Member agree that we need strategic planning in the mayoralties across all modes of transport?

Edward Morello: I agree 100%—talk to anyone who has got off the last train from Crewkerne when the last bus stopped two hours beforehand. We are depriving our communities of the ability to get around, and of course there is an economic impact to that.

The CB3 community bus in Beaminster demonstrates exactly what local communities can achieve when volunteers, councils and residents work together. Similarly, the new LB1 evening service between Lyme Regis and Bridport has quickly proved a success, despite disruption caused by necessary works on the A35. I am also encouraged by proposals for further community transport in places such as Sherborne, which have my support, but parish councils and volunteers cannot continue to carry the burden alone.

The Department for Transport currently makes up to £3.8 million available annually for eligible community transport operators, but that is across the whole country. Given the scale needed, that is simply not enough. Instead, there should be dedicated, ringfenced grant funding specifically to help communities establish new community transport services where commercial routes have disappeared. A hub-and-spoke model supported by smaller community buses and demand-responsive transport could reconnect villages at a fraction of the cost of restoring traditional commercial routes immediately.

Importantly, that funding should recognise that the greatest cost comes at the beginning. Communities need capital investment to purchase vehicles, recruit drivers, establish a booking system and build passenger confidence. Once services become established and passenger numbers increase, public subsidies can reduce over time. Demand-responsive transport has already shown real promise in Wiltshire, where passengers can book flexible journeys through an app and AI software identifies the most efficient routes. Data suggests that these services have been particularly successful among younger users travelling between villages and market towns before they learn to drive. West Dorset would be an ideal place to pilot a similar, larger-scale approach.

For rural communities such as West Dorset, buses are fundamental to tackling social isolation, supporting economic growth and giving young people genuine opportunities. I hope that the Minister will listen to the appeals of my residents and ensure that rural Britain is no longer left waiting at the bus stop while the rest of the country moves ahead.

4.13 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for West Dorset (Edward Morello) on securing this important debate. He has been a committed champion of bus services and transport needs in his constituency, and I thank him for the constructive tone with which he has approached these subjects.

[Simon Lightwood]

Buses are at the heart of our vision for better and more integrated, reliable, affordable and accessible public transport. The Government have set out an ambitious plan to deliver better bus services, grow passenger numbers and ensure that communities that have too often been underserved can benefit from reliable public transport. Of course, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to local bus services. That is particularly the case in rural areas such as West Dorset, where there can be additional challenges to running a good local bus service.

The Bus Services Act 2025 puts decision making into the hands of local leaders across England, including in rural areas, so that they can determine how best to design their services for their communities and have greater control over routes and timetables. As the hon. Gentleman knows, since he was on the relevant Bill Committee, it expands the options available to local authorities, allowing each area to pursue the model of bus service delivery that best suits their needs while safeguarding the needs of passengers. The Act also tightens a requirement around the cancellation of vital bus routes, particularly those relied on by vulnerable and disadvantaged passengers. The Government are committed to monitoring the effectiveness of those measures, including the impact on rural services, with a review five years after their introduction.

We will provide meaningful financial support to improve bus networks totalling more than £3 billion over the next three years. That includes nearly £700 million per year for local transport authorities through the local authority bus grant. That funding can be used to support the introduction of new routes; for more frequent services; for safer, better, more accessible bus stops; for new electric buses; and for improved real-time information so that passengers can travel with greater confidence. It could also be used to increase the provision of community transport, for instance.

At the end of last year, we published individual multi-year settlements for local authorities under the local authority bus grant for the next three years. As the hon. Gentleman said, those allocations were determined by a new, revised formula. Gone are the days when it was a competitive funding bid—each local transport authority now receives funding. For the first time, the formula considered rurality to ensure that rural areas are not disadvantaged. Other parts of that formula include population size, levels of deprivation and the extent of current bus services.

I hear what the hon. Gentleman was saying about not just protecting what is there, but going further and building back. He has my assurance that we will continue to look at that funding formula to make sure that it is the fairest possible way to distribute funding across the country. We have already allocated multi-year settlements for the next three years, so it would be after that period. I am pleased to confirm that Dorset council will receive slightly over £12 million through the local authority bus grant for the next three years. That is nearly £200,000 more per year than the allocation in 2025-26, or roughly a 5% increase. Under the local authority bus grant, local leaders will be able to invest in transport priorities that are right for their area, such as enhancing bus services in rural communities.

Alongside the multi-year funding, this Government's bus reforms are fundamentally about giving local leaders more powers and more choice over how to deliver services. That includes unlocking franchising as an option for all areas. There is no one-size-fits-all approach. Different areas face different challenges because of their geography, population density and demographics. That is why work is under way to provide active support to local transport authorities that wish to explore franchising, particularly in rural areas.

The work includes our bus reform and franchising pilot programme, which supports authorities with feasibility assessments for bus franchising. The programme is designed to test different types of franchising model to understand how they could be best implemented to deliver improved bus services for passengers in rural locations. Case studies, guidance and templates from the programme will be shared with other local transport authorities, ensuring that learning is captured and can support other areas considering franchising. These products could be particularly important for small towns and rural communities, including in West Dorset, where members of the community may rely on buses as their only realistic public transport option.

We also know that in some areas, traditional stopping bus services may not be viable. We want to encourage local leaders to consider a range of options to deliver better services for passengers. That includes incorporating demand-responsive transport and community transport services into the local transport network. DRT has the potential to improve local transport in areas where demand is more dispersed over longer distances, which makes it harder to provide conventional fixed-route services that meet residents' needs.

Our franchising guidance outlines key considerations for LTAs exploring franchising regarding DRT, including how local bus services integrate with alternative models such as DRT. We have recently published guidance on best practice for local authorities to set up and deploy demand-responsive schemes, from planning and procurement through to launching and sustaining those services.

Making bus fares more affordable is one of the Government's transport priorities because that really matters to passengers. The Government continue to cap single bus fares at £3 on thousands of routes in England, outside London, until March 2027, helping millions of people access affordable travel and better opportunities. That cap can be particularly beneficial for rural passengers, helping to limit the cost of journeys where single fares can otherwise be significantly higher.

The Chancellor went further in May, announcing more than £100 million additional funding for the bus sector, to help children travel free this summer, and to continue supporting services. Under the offer, children aged five to 15 will be able to travel free on participating local buses in England throughout August, helping families to get out and about for less, at a time of increased cost of living. Further details will be announced shortly.

To pick up on the point about better integration, I draw Members' attention to a fantastic read—"Better Connected", the Government's integrated national transport strategy. That looks at how to dovetail buses with trams, trains, micromobility and active travel. I highly encourage Members to take a look at that, because we recognise the challenges they have mentioned today.

Adam Dance: My biggest concern is that we have no electric buses in Yeovil. There is nowhere to charge them because other depots have been shut down. How will we cope with an electric future if First Bus is closing depots?

Simon Lightwood: That will be a commercial decision for First Bus about whether to invest in those services. The option remains for local leaders to consider whether they want to pursue franchising and take greater control over that issue. They could also lift the ban on establishing new municipal bus companies. There are options there. I will continue to work across Government to ensure we get grid connections for future deployment of electric buses. Funding from local authority bus grants and other sources can be used to purchase electric buses.

In closing, I reiterate my thanks to the hon. Member for West Dorset for securing this debate, and to the other hon. Members for their interventions. Improving bus services, importantly in rural areas, is central to the Government's mission to drive growth and opportunity across the country. We know there is more to do, but we are taking meaningful steps to ensure that wherever people live—in a city, rural area or small town—they have access to the reliable, accessible and affordable transport that they deserve.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

National Youth Strategy

4.30 pm

Harpreet Uppal (Huddersfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the National Youth Strategy and youth enrichment.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I am grateful for the opportunity to highlight the importance of the national youth strategy and youth enrichment. I know that many colleagues share my commitment to ensuring that every young person is offered the support and opportunities they need to thrive.

Youth services are not a luxury, but an essential part of our communities. I commend the Minister and her team for the Government's national youth strategy and its £500 million commitment to rebuild the places, relationships and power structures that young people need to thrive. It aims to right the wrongs of previous Administrations and confront the challenges faced by more than 10 million young people.

We must be honest about the challenges. Having been born and raised in Huddersfield, I have seen at first hand the impact of austerity on young people. Too many have had their futures torn away from them. Youth services have lost around £1.2 billion in local authority funding since 2010, with more than half of council-run youth centres closing in that time. Kirklees council, which covers my Huddersfield constituency, saw a 70% decrease in funding from 2011 to 2025. That leaves just over £47 per young person being spent on youth services in our community.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): We know all about funding cuts in Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire—they were more than 90% in our local area—so I welcome this investment. However, does my hon. Friend agree that we must ensure we get the revenue funding as well as capital funding? That is what makes activity work on the ground.

Harpreet Uppal: My hon. Friend is quite right, and I will come to that point later.

Young people who have lost access to youth clubs have been shown to be 14% more likely to engage in criminal activity in the six years following closures. A recent project in Ashbrow in my constituency saw antisocial behaviour fall by an incredible 63%. Alongside policing operations, partnerships were developed with community organisations to support children and young people, alongside regular intervention programmes designed to support those most at risk. The evidence is clear: when youth services are cut, our young people and communities suffer; when they are funded, young people and entire communities thrive.

The youth strategy sets out a 10-year vision, but current funding commitments cover only the first few years, so will the Minister outline how the Government will ensure long-term investment so that organisations have the certainty they need? Will she also confirm how her Department will work alongside other Departments to ensure greater alignment between all Government reforms focused on young people?

Since being elected, I have had the privilege of visiting many of the youth work organisations in my constituency and have witnessed at first hand the life-changing work they deliver. They include Central Stars youth club, Yorkshire Community Development, Empower, Positive

[Harpreet Uppal]

Stepz, Team KickStart, Conscious Youth, Boxpower and Temple Well-Being, as well as the foundations of Huddersfield Town football club and Huddersfield Giants. I will also mention organisations working at the national level, such as the Duke of Edinburgh's award team, some of whom are here today—thank you for joining us [Hon. Members: "Hear, Hear!"]—the National Youth Agency and all members of UK Youth. All those organisations and many others deliver outstanding community-led services and policy work, often in difficult financial circumstances.

Crucially, many of the organisations also offer opportunities to access sustained enrichment programmes, such as volunteering, physical activity and skills development, which can help to close opportunity gaps, particularly for young people who face disadvantage. Enrichment should not be seen as a "nice to have"; activities outside the classroom also give young people direct exposure to environments that many have never previously accessed.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is generous in giving way, and she is making an important speech. The crisis of young people not in education, employment or training is one of the biggest problems we have in this country. Does she agree that youth clubs and the Duke of Edinburgh's award scheme are part of how young people get the skills that will help them to get into the world of work?

Harpreet Uppal: My hon. Friend is quite right. That is why it is so important that we fund and support these organisations sustainably.

As I was saying, enrichment activities help to raise confidence, skills and aspirations, while making future opportunities feel achievable. Last week, when I visited a school in my constituency, pupils asked me what services and activities will be available in their local area once the under-16s social media ban is in place. Importantly, access to opportunities should not depend on family income. Every £1 of public money invested in the youth sector generates between £3.20 and £6.40 in benefits for the taxpayer, while for every £1 saved from youth service closures, nearly £3 is lost in educational outcomes and increased crime costs.

The Duke of Edinburgh's award is a proven national enrichment programme that helps young people to develop skills and gain experiences that can have a lasting impact on their lives. Last year alone, more than 350 students from a range of backgrounds in Huddersfield took part in it. I was pleased to see the launch last month of the "Every Child Can" programme to fund enrichment activities, and the national youth strategy's commitment to halving the participation gap in enrichment activities between disadvantaged young people and their peers. Youth workers see enrichment as one of the most important commitments in the strategy, so can the Minister confirm how the Government plan to deliver on that pledge, and whether she has considered an enrichment premium or targeted funding to help to do so?

Alongside enrichment, many who work in the industry believe that the most significant policy change the Government could make would be to strengthen the statutory duty on local authorities to provide a sufficient local youth offer. I understand that the national youth strategy commits to "explore reviewing" that, but the youth sector is clear that it needs to be urgently prioritised. I ask the Minister: will the Government commit urgently to reviewing and strengthening the statutory duty on local authorities to provide a local offer, and will it be backed by dedicated funding and clear national benchmarks to define what sufficient youth provision means?

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I make a habit of agreeing with my hon. Friend, and I particularly agree with her on that point. When I speak with youth workers, they are clear that they do not want to reinvent the wheel. Youth work works; we just need more of it to be ringfenced and have dedicated funding. We are about to have a youth hub opened in my area as part of the youth guarantee, which is fantastic news. Will my hon. Friend join me in paying tribute to MBN Arts and Mike Ness? Last Thursday, they put on a summer exhibition for younger neurodivergent, to help them with their educational and creative pathways and into a brighter future.

Harpreet Uppal: That sounds like an excellent programme and I absolutely commend it.

Youth workers are central to delivering the national youth strategy, but the workforce are under acute pressure: more than 4,500 qualified youth workers have left the profession in the last decade, around 60% of the workforce has no recognised youth work qualification and only six undergraduate youth and community work programmes remain, down from 37 in 2013. The strategy provides a £15 million commitment for youth workers, including new qualifications and educational pathways, which is excellent, but can the Minister confirm how that will align with the Government's wider skills reforms to rebuild workforce capacity at scale and improve job prospects in the industry?

I also want to highlight the importance of Young Futures hubs, which reflect a growing understanding of the importance of youth services and provide accessible pathways into education, employment, volunteering and community participation. However, to be a success, the hubs must effectively support young people to re-engage with education and training, and create collaborative working partnerships. Can the Minister outline the steps the Government will take to deliver that long-term approach to youth engagement? I reiterate my previous requests for Huddersfield to be included in future phases of the programme; the Minister may need to pass those on to someone else, but that would be amazing.

Many young people and youth support workers have persistently been excluded from having a voice or influence in the national and local decisions that directly affect them. The national youth strategy will help to change that; it includes a commitment to placing young people's voices at its heart, and explicitly identifies youth workers as the people holding a fragmented system together. Those are major shifts, and a recognition that the sector has fought hard for. To deliver that ambition, youth participation must be built into implementation, not treated as a one-off consultation. Young people should have meaningful opportunities to shape and monitor delivery of the strategy at national and local level. That should include long-term, properly resourced mechanisms for youth voices and democratic engagement, particularly for those least likely to be heard.

I will take this opportunity to give a shout-out to my annual summer school for young people from Huddersfield; it was great to welcome them to Parliament this week. One of the main issues they raised in our sessions was the importance of their voices being central to the decisions that affect them. I heard that message loud and clear. Can the Minister confirm what long-term arrangements will be established to ensure that young people are meaningfully involved in developing and implementing the delivery of the strategy at all levels?

I thank the Minister for being here, and you, Ms McVey, for chairing the debate. I look forward to hearing contributions from other Members.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called. I will call the Front-Bench spokespeople at 5.10 pm. This debate is popular, so I set a time limit of three minutes and remind Members to keep interventions short.

4.41 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for securing this important debate. I am sure that all Members of this House will advocate for ensuring that the next generation has every opportunity to thrive, and to develop confidence and resilience. Youth enrichment is fundamental to building stronger communities, improving wellbeing, fostering social mobility and developing skills that needed by employers, communities and, of course, the country.

My first point follows a conversation that I had with GoWild Outdoors, which is a business that operates outdoor education activities for children and young people across my constituency and beyond. That business is extremely worried about the Government's decision to end the physical education and sport premium for primary schools, which gives primary schools direct control over funding, after the 2025-26 academic year and to replace it with the PE and school sport partnerships network. GoWild Outdoors told me that the change would mean not only a potential reduction in schools' autonomy over how PE and sport provision is developed, but a 22% drop in annual funding.

As a result, schools are already starting to cancel sessions from third-party providers, because there is a lack of clarity from the Government on how the new PE and school sport partnerships network will work and will impact funding. That lack of clarity is not just harming local businesses and third-party providers in my constituency, such as GoWild Outdoors; it is having a hugely negative impact on the children whose learning and wellbeing benefit from additional non-classroom provision. GoWild Outdoors asked me to ask the Minister for reassurance that the new scheme will not negatively impact the ability of third-party providers to deliver for children and young people who rely so desperately on the programmes that they provide, because the uncertainty is having a direct impact, right now.

My second point is about the Government giving mayoralties the ability to roll out a tourism tax and apply it to accommodation for youth organisations, such as the Girl Guides and Scouts. I seek reassurance from the Government that the tax will not apply to organisations that provide youth enrichment through accommodation that is generally provided through charitable means. Doing so will have a direct impact on the youth enrichment programmes run by the many great volunteer organisations that I am sure many Members of Parliament interact with across our constituencies. I would greatly appreciate the Minister responding to those implications of the tourism tax.

4.44 pm

Natasha Irons (Croydon East) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for securing this important debate. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on youth affairs, I know the importance of services for young people, and I welcome the Government's leadership on this issue.

When I meet young people in my constituency or through my work on the APPG, I am struck by how tough it is to be a young person in Britain today. Whether through the 73% cut in youth services over the last decade, a housing crisis that prevents some young people from moving on to the next stage of their lives and means that others grow up in temporary accommodation, or youth unemployment, our young people are growing up in a world that is economically challenging, internationally volatile and often hostile to them. Our young people are just as ambitious, just as determined and just as willing to work for their future as anyone who has gone before them, and in that context of hope, opportunity and ambition for our young people, the national youth strategy is so important.

Around £1 billion has been taken out of the sector since 2010, more than half of council-run youth centres have closed, and the statutory framework is often too weak. We have been left with a postcode lottery for youth provision, where spending on youth services can range from as little as £1 per young person in one area to £137 in another. Co-created with young people, and backed by £500 million of Government investment, the national youth strategy is a 10-year plan to provide young people with somewhere to go, something meaningful to do and someone who cares.

Although I wholeheartedly welcome this landmark strategy, for it to have a truly meaningful impact it must be backed by statutory protections for the services that our young people rely on. That is why I introduced the Youth Services Bill last year, which aims to strengthen the statutory duty on local authorities by introducing clear, measurable benchmarks for what sufficient youth provision looks like. It includes expectations around qualified staff and accessibility, and it embeds the conditions needed for long-term improvement through joined-up safeguarding, quality standards and meaningful youth voice in the design and delivery of services.

I have seen at first hand the impact of a lack of statutory protections for youth services. In Croydon, London's youngest borough, the council shut down the youth engagement team, a group of wonderful youth workers who were a critical link between the voluntary sector and the council. The lack of statutory protections meant that it could be closed down without real consultation with young people, the NHS or the police.

Protecting our youth provision is not about placing unrealistic burdens on local authorities; it is about making a practical investment in our young people's future and financial savings for our communities. As

[Natasha Irons]

has been outlined, for every £1 we save on youth services, we save up to £6.40 in social value. Although I wholeheartedly recognise and welcome this strategy, I urge the Minister and the Government to think again about how we can provide statutory protections for our youth services.

4.46 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship for the third time today, Ms McVey; I think we are getting to know each other quite well. I thank you for your courtesy and guidance. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this debate. I spoke to her beforehand. When I saw the title of the debate, I said, "I'm definitely going to Westminster Hall." People will say, "You'll be in Westminster Hall anyway." But I came racing down for this debate—I love this debate—and I am going to explain why.

It is nice to see the Minister in her place again. She gets all the good debates, and today she has a really super one. I look forward to her contribution. This year is the 70th anniversary of the Duke of Edinburgh's award, and a new national youth strategy will be in place. This is an opportunity to reshape what will be offered to the next generation to ensure that every child, regardless of their background, postcode or circumstances, is given the tools to become world-ready.

I wanted to come and speak in this debate because my three boys, Jamie, Ian and Luke, got the Duke of Edinburgh's award. When they were young men, Jamie got the gold and the other two boys got the bronze. I watched them march off with their impossibly heavy rucksacks into the damp, unpredictable weather, maps in hand, full of nervous energy. I watched them return tired, covered in mud, but standing just a little bit taller. I believe it taught them resilience—the hon. Member for Huddersfield outlined that incredibly well in her contribution—and it taught them how to look at a challenge, look at their peers and say, "This is something that we have to do together." It is not just about a single person; it is about doing it together. That is what the Duke of Edinburgh's award instils. As a father, I owe a great debt of gratitude to the legacy of the late Prince Philip, and to the ongoing devotion of the current Duke of Edinburgh, Prince Edward. Through the Duke of Edinburgh's award, my boys made friends for life.

Every year, Northern Ireland produces some of the highest completion rates anywhere in the United Kingdom for gold, silver and bronze. Our schools, our uniformed organisations, such as the Boys' Brigade and the Girl Guides, local youth clubs and even farmers clubs have been the engines driving this success. The charity's 70th anniversary goal is to reach 2 million more young people over the next five years—what a goal that is, and it is achievable.

In Northern Ireland, young people are unfortunately dealing with a mental health crisis. It is deeply concerning. We are dealing with pockets of severe deprivation where a child might never otherwise, without the award, get the chance to see the beauty of the Mourne mountains, let alone hike across them. The Duke of Edinburgh's award is the framework that catches young people when formal education is not enough, building their focus, memory and social awareness. It does all those things, and brings them together for us, ensuring that no child is left behind in my constituency of Strangford and across Northern Ireland, including in the inner-city estates of Belfast and the border regions.

Let us use this 70th anniversary not just to celebrate the past, but to build a robust, unbreakable foundation for the future of our youth. My three boys did the Duke of Edinburgh's award; they did well, and the award did that for them.

4.50 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair this afternoon, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this debate.

I welcome this Labour Government's national youth strategy, and how it recognises the importance of achieving good work and the emphasis that it places on trusted adults. Too often, those relationships have been seen as a soft offer—a nice to have—when in fact they are a key strategic asset in tackling youth unemployment. That is because today we risk having a lost generation. There are a million young people neither earning nor learning, with hundreds of thousands of them disconnected from traditional employment support and hidden from the system entirely.

A growing evidence base suggests that trusted adult relationships, whether with youth workers, coaches, mentors or others can act as the connective tissue to the wider support that will help to address the barriers locking young people out of education, employment and training. They can transform a young person's journey to employment through the continuity, advocacy and encouragement that many need to navigate a system that is often confusing and isolating. That consistent, person-centred support can be vital in identifying those hidden NEETs too.

On Monday, to mark Youth Employment Week, I hosted a roundtable with the Youth Futures Foundation where we heard the powerful testimony of its youth ambassadors: Aarya, Elaina, Grace, Niamh, Serena, Sharna and Yusra. They talked about the impact that the presence, or absence, of a trusted adult had had on them. I am living proof that trusted adults can succeed where traditional provision falls short. When I dropped out of school feeling like the world had ended, it was a local youth worker called Russell who helped to rebuild my confidence and set me on a positive journey. I would not be here representing the home that I love without the support that he gave me.

In a fragmented and often confusing landscape, trusted adults can act as a golden thread, bridging young people into the right support at the right time. They can also help to draw this Labour Government's offers together, aligning work across employment, education, skills, health and youth policy, delivering the system change required to tackle the NEET challenge.

Young Futures hubs can act as centres of excellence for relational practice, offering open access and co-ordinated support for young people across employment, mental health and crime prevention in every community. I would be grateful if the Minister could set out in her response how she is working across Government to deliver this

manifesto commitment, and how she thinks we can strengthen and support the role of youth workers like Russell, and trusted adults more generally, across this important policy area.

4.52 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for securing this really important debate. I also thank my two work experience students, Nicoleta and Lyra. They are both from Harlow and are in the Public Gallery today. They have prepared me a very thorough and informative briefing ahead of this debate, so my contribution might be slightly more informed than usual.

When I met with Nicoleta and Lyra before this debate, they spoke about their experiences of taking part in the Duke of Edinburgh's scheme, which obviously celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. I want to read out some of their thoughts on the scheme and the difference that it made to them and their friends and peers. Nicoleta completed the Duke of Edinburgh's bronze award while she was studying at Burnt Mill academy. She said:

"I would describe it as very insightful and gave me an opportunity to give back to community by mentoring primary school children as part of the volunteering section."

Lyra completed the Duke of Edinburgh's bronze award while she was at Stewards academy, which is also in Harlow. She said that

"taking part in a local theatre production as part of the skills section, was very insightful and ignited a new passion. As part of the volunteering being able to volunteer at Harlow Youth Council improved political interest and involvement with the town."

I think we can all agree that that is admirable and fantastic.

I have a few points with regard to the national youth strategy. I welcome the publication of the first long-term youth strategy that we have had in over two decades. Following a lot of lobbying from me and others, I am really pleased that young carers were included in that strategy, because it is hugely important that groups like that are listened to and their voices are heard.

I emphasise to the Minister the huge importance of prevention rather than intervention, and of ensuring that every young person, regardless of their postcode, has the opportunity to be involved in the schemes that have been mentioned. We can all appreciate, as Members across the Chamber have commented, the huge difference that taking part in schemes like the Duke of Edinburgh's scheme can make to young people's confidence and their ability to be part of the community.

Finally—I know I am running out of time—I am really delighted that Harlow will be the home of a Young Futures hub funded by this Labour Government. I am also delighted that this Labour Government have an ambition to halve the enrichment participation gap between disadvantaged young people and their peers.

4.55 pm

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. If we are going to make interventions that will have a real impact on lives and change opportunities and trajectories, we have to look at where we place those priorities. Of course, these transition points in life are those opportunities: the 1,001 critical days, the start of school and the transition between primary and secondary.

Then there are youth services, and I believe we are at a juncture where we need to bring our services together around our young people. We are doing incredible work on people not in education, employment or training and in the criminal justice space; we have the national youth strategy; and we are looking at young people's wellbeing and mental health. We need to bring those into one space, because ultimately they are about the relationships that young people build with trusted adults. They do not compartmentalise themselves, and these different areas are completely interwoven, so I urge more joining up of the different strategies as we move forward.

As part of that, statutory youth services should be returned and local authorities should have the obligation but also the necessary funding. Often, we are talking about the same children who need that security as they go through their teenage years. I am bringing the organisations together in York. We have so many brilliant organisations, such as the Scouts, Guides, churches, Door 84 and the Island—I could spend a few minutes just talking about them—but, ultimately, they are working in siloes because we do not have that integration. I have the jobcentre, the local authority and the police coming, and we want to ensure that we are able to lead on having one integrated service for youth in our city.

I look to the Minister at this point in the debate, recognising the way that these services were ripped of their funding in 2011 and lost so many youth workers across the board. We lost 60% of our workforce; we can rebuild that under her leadership, but we need to ensure that services are built and co-produced by the young people so that they can take a lead in determining their future and the outcomes they want to see.

As we enter this conversation as a city—I will also be bringing it to the Minister's door—I want to ensure that young people transition well from those years of exploration as teenagers into adulthood, with the securities that they need around them in every part of the system. That will take funding. I note the incredible £500 million, which will be transformative, but we must ensure that it is sufficient for the services that we need. Young people need opportunities and confidence as they grow into adults, and I want to ensure that our Government deliver that for them.

4.58 pm

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for introducing this really important debate on national youth strategy and youth enrichment. I truly welcome it because, as a former teacher and deputy headteacher, I saw the transformative impact that youth work, enrichment activities, sport, volunteering, the arts and outdoor education can have on a young person's confidence, aspirations and life chances, but I also saw the consequences when those opportunities were decimated. We have a growing number of young people who feel safe only in their bedrooms on digital devices. That has to change.

[Sureena Brackenridge]

For too long, young people have paid the price for over a decade of austerity. Local authority spending on youth services in England and Wales has fallen by 74% in real terms since 2010, while the number of local authority-run youth centres has fallen from 931 to 379. Investing in young people is smart economic policy, too. I know that education never stops at the school gates. Young people learn resilience through volunteering, teamwork through sport and confidence through challenge. That is why I welcome the Labour Government's commitment through the national youth strategy to ensure that every young person has somewhere to go. Backed by more than £500 million, it includes investment in youth spaces, a new enrichment entitlement and an ambition to halve the enrichment gap by 2035.

I particularly welcome the Government's recognition of opportunities that should not be based on family income, geography or background. I grew up in an area called Ashmore Park, and we had a youth club on my doorstep. I spent many an evening there—I will stop the conversation there. It was one of 30 local youth centres that were lost over 15 years, and we felt that hole in the community. But recently and despite those challenges, there are organisations in Wolverhampton and Willenhall that are delivering the vision that we set out in the strategy.

I must mention the Wolves Foundation in conjunction with Wolverhampton city council. A couple of weeks ago I went to one of their community space sport activities, had a go at basketball, shot a few hoops—I do not know whether that is the right phrase—and had a brilliant time. More importantly, so did the 50 other young people with the free activities in Heath Town. We are opening up the same in Tennyson Road, in Low Hill and the Scotlands as well. I must mention the Loft youth club at the Hive in New Invention. Across Wolverhampton, the Way Youth Zone has become a shining example of what investment in young people can really achieve.

I will finish by thanking the Duke of Edinburgh's award and all the staff and volunteers that take part to give young people a brilliant opportunity to really find themselves, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield for securing this important debate.

5.2 pm

Jim Dickson (Dartford) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this important debate.

In Dartford and our towns and villages we have an increasingly youthful population, with a quarter of households in the constituency comprising a family with children. Our young people do our community proud, from our brilliant Kent youth county councillors, including Madalena, Amelia, Sam, Stephan and Flourish; our Dartford youth councillors; Heritage, who got to the final of Monday's Poetry by Heart national competition; and so many others who star in our cultural and sporting life. And let us not forget eight-year-old Ruth, who wrote a brilliant and persuasive handwritten letter to me last week about YouTube.

Ahead of the Government's very welcome national youth strategy last year, it was a pleasure for me to work with the YMCA to host an event to discuss with our Dartford young people what they wanted to see in the strategy. The concerns they shared at the event were many and varied. They worry about their futures: how they will find affordable housing, cope with the cost of living and deal with growing challenges to their mental health and to their sense of community in a digital age. There was a strong feeling in the room that their generation needed better public transport, access to more varied job opportunities locally, and more places for them and other young people to come together.

Last year's national youth strategy was a wonderful document. It rightly promised a place-based approach to rebuilding a local offer for young people, and I hope that for Dartford it will mean more sports facilities such as a rebuilt Swanscombe Pavilion and more youth provision in the town centre. I hugely welcome the youth guarantee. The challenges faced by young people getting into the early stages of a career come through in the people I meet and the stories I hear across Dartford. It is welcome that Dartford will host one of the Government's new youth hubs, providing access to expanded employment and wraparound support services. But we need to go further, as others have said, to rebuild the youth services lost over the past decade and a half, and to give young people a chance to meet, create, play sport and learn.

One of the great underacknowledged dimensions to young people's excessive use of social media and its effect on their mental health is the loss of such opportunities. We owe it to young people in Dartford and across the country to give young people back the chance to grow, to take risks and to unlock their talent.

5.4 pm

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this really cool debate, and I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

In Gravesham, we have a good track record of listening to and working with our young people. Gravesham Youth Council is about to celebrate its 26th anniversary. The current chair of the council is work shadowing with me this week, and I am married to the first chair of the council, who was activated to enter politics because his youth club was closed by the then Conservative-run Kent county council. How things have changed—or not changed.

Under the last Conservative Government, that trend continued. Kent County Council used to have 36 youth centres; the number went down to 12, and now the youth centres are family hubs. There is limited open-access provision, as family hubs are not available exclusively to young people. Indeed, a young person needs a referral or targeted youth support to gain access to those services, rather than there being predominantly open-access youth services.

The national youth strategy aims to reverse that decline and to enhance youth services, which I really welcome. Last week, I attended an event hosted by Gifted Young Gravesham and organised by the charity The Grand, and there were representatives from nearly every local secondary school on the day, which was a

very hot one. When I spoke to school councillors during a consultation on growing up in the online world, I heard many of the same themes: social media disrupts sleep patterns, but also young people are struggling inside and need somebody to talk to. They want somewhere to go, but where can they go?

That is the digital isolation paradox, which is evident across the UK. One young person at that event said:

> "Social media is so extremely flawed - but it's all we have. If we had more places to go outside of social media, we'd be happy. But adults build these toxic platforms, and then got angry when they hurt us. They destroyed the places where we would connect and got angry when we stayed home."

That is the paradox, and that is where the national youth strategy is coming with more youth centres.

We are grateful to have been able to receive a youth hub, working with the Department for Work and Pensions in Gravesham and with the Gravesham Youth Council. I am fulfilling a promise by directly reporting back to the Minister, the Members and all the decision makers who are here today, to show that we are listening to and hearing young people.

I have to agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons) about how we can help to structure young people's voices. Young people's voices need support around them, and we have heard some really amazing testimony today from my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) about the impact of youth work. Youth workers are professionals who need to be protected by statutory requirements for local authorities to fund this quality and professional service. That can be done. Indeed, it has been done in Scotland with the Community Learning and Development Standards Council, and I urge the Minister to look into that.

I will end with a quote: "Young people are not a problem to be solved. They are potential to be unlocked."

5.8 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Ms McVey.

I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) for securing this important debate and I also pay tribute to all the other Members who have spoken in it for making really excellent speeches. Some very compelling points were made about the value and importance of youth services and youth enrichment.

I have no doubt that many in this Chamber share my core belief that every child and young person has some innate and special talent and ability in them, and that it is our job as families and as a wider society, through both the formal and informal support that we put in place, to draw out that talent and ensure that every young person grows up to thrive and contribute to our society and our economy. Youth services and youth enrichment are a key part of that, including, of course, the Duke of Edinburgh's award, which celebrates its 70th anniversary this year. It has helped so many young people to improve their skills and has equipped them to make valuable contributions to their communities and societies.

I congratulate all the young people across the country, and especially in my constituency of Twickenham, who have completed their bronze, silver or gold awards. I also offer huge thanks to all those people who give up their time to make the awards happen. I know some very hard-working teachers who give up their weekends to go camping and do all sorts of crazy things in all weathers. I am awestruck by them. I certainly would never do that, but I am not a camper. I thank all of them.

These experiences not only change individual lives, but strengthen our communities. Through volunteering in the community and completing expeditions, young people are countering the rising tide of isolation. Last year alone, young people participating in the Duke of Edinburgh's award contributed to an impressive 6 million hours of volunteering, with an estimated value of £45.4 million.

A number of Members have mentioned Alan Milburn's recent report on young people not in employment, education or training, and the scale of the challenge that we face. It is important that we challenge the narrative we hear all too often that young people are disengaged, lazy or selfish. Actually, they are anything but. This generation is growing up in an online world shaped by economic uncertainty, mental health challenges, rapid technological change and concerns about the future of our planet but, time and again, young people show us their determination, creativity and drive, especially when they are given the space and support to thrive.

The Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for a fair and long-term funding settlement to support youth work, resources and infrastructure. We very much welcome the Government's national youth strategy, particularly their promise to introduce multi-year funding settlements and halve the participation gap in enrichment activities between disadvantaged young people and their peers by 2035.

I note, however, the recent YMCA report, which found that spending on youth services by local authorities in England and Wales fell by 10% in a single year, in the largest annual reduction since 2016-17. At the same time, we know that children from lower income backgrounds have less access to enrichment activities outside school, and that schools are facing tighter budgets than ever. The Joseph Rowntree Foundation reported that almost one in five schools has cut back and stopped enrichment activities and clubs in order to provide support for pupils experiencing hardship.

I also draw the Minister's attention to a briefing from the Duke of Edinburgh's award, which notes the vital role that education providers play in successfully implementing enrichment targets, especially in the light of some of the cuts we have seen in youth services. With both schools and youth providers stretched to the limit, the Government's ambitions will be challenged. Achieving them will depend on practical support, sustainable funding and capacity.

We have already seen concerns emerging in West Sussex, where the county council has decided to stop centrally commissioning the award, leaving many schools unable to meet the administrative costs themselves. I would be grateful if the Minister could share whether she is aware of similar situations arising elsewhere in the country. I am keen to understand what discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Education on the ask from the Duke of Edinburgh's award for 80 hours of enrichment per year for every young person.

[Munira Wilson]

As we have heard, the evidence for investment is compelling. We know that enrichment activities can help to improve school attendance, and we have heard about the return on investment from youth services, reducing pressure on other public services. Without funding certainty beyond the three years currently promised, we know that youth organisations will struggle to run consistent programmes. *[Interruption.]* I am being asked to wind up, so I will just reiterate that the consequences of under-investment are clear and youth services are not an optional extra. The Liberal Democrats stand ready to collaborate with the Government to ensure that the right investment goes in for our young people and their future.

5.13 pm

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this important debate.

We all recognise that this issue is increasingly important to our constituents across the country. I spend a lot of time discussing it as both the local MP in Old Bexley and Sidcup and a shadow Minister. I have had the pleasure of having young people on work experience with me this week to keep me on my toes. It has been a busy week.

In 2022, the previous Government allocated £560 million over three years to fund the national youth guarantee, ensuring that young people aged between 11 and 18 in England had access to regular clubs and activities, something to do after school, experiences away from home and opportunities to volunteer. As part of that, we allocated £300 million to youth facilities, improving and developing 300 of them. We established the National Citizen Service; this Government cancelled it, but more than 750,000 young people participated in it and it had a 93% satisfaction rate—something this Government could only dream of.

As the Government well know, youth charities, like all employers, are subject to national insurance contributions, and the increase in contributions requires them to find additional funds. According to the National Council for Voluntary Organisations, these changes could cost the charity sector an additional £1.4 billion a year. For smaller charities with limited reserves and core funding, that will seem like an insurmountable challenge. As has been mentioned, this has led to a reduction in provision.

Youth work has huge economic benefits. Research has shown that every £1 of Government investment in youth work has a social return on investment of between £3.20 and £6.40. Moreover, it saves around £500 million annually by preventing antisocial behaviour, knife crime and associated criminal justice costs. As a Government, we established the youth investment fund, which delivered £300 million over approximately three years. This Government scrapped it, and announced a new national youth strategy, which analysis shows cuts the funding by around £50 million each year over the life of the strategy.

Yesterday, my hon. Friend the Member for Meriden and Solihull East (Saqib Bhatti) and I hosted a roundtable with those from the enrichment sector—it is great to see some of them in the audience today. The renewed national focus on enrichment is welcome and timely, but access to enrichment remains uneven, and Government funding cuts will only make that worse. We agree with those we heard from yesterday that the challenge is how we ensure that fantastic youth enrichment provision is accessible for as many young people as possible across the country.

As others have said, enrichment is not an optional extra; it is a vital way in which young people learn fundamental life skills that often cannot be taught in traditional learning environments. I have seen some of the Duke of Edinburgh work in one of my local schools, with pupils putting up tents and camping. The Duke of Edinburgh's award celebrates a milestone next week—70 years—and I am sure that many Members will be there to support that tradition.

Jim Shannon: Those opportunities allow many young people to enjoy camping—unlike the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson), who is not really a camper. Those who get the thrill of camping for the first time will always want to do it. My oldest boy did it, and now he goes camping every summer with his wife and the children. That is just an example of people acquiring something that lasts.

Mr French: I thank the hon. Gentleman for one of his famous interventions. I am pleased that his son enjoys camping; I am not sure I am as sold on a camping holiday in this weather. He is right that it teaches young people key life skills that they can take forward for the rest of their lives.

We all know the crisis we have, with more than 1 million young people not in education, employment or training. A good enrichment offer is a key way of reversing the alarming increase we have seen in recent years. The Government's national youth strategy has some noble aims, including halving the participation gap in enrichment activities between disadvantaged young people and their peers, and giving half a million more young people access to a trusted adult outside of the home by 2035—I believe passionately in the power of role models, and I would love to go on about it longer, but I am looking at the time, so I will not.

The warm words in the strategy are all well and good, but the funding must match them. Governments of all colours make big announcements, but the funding does not always match them. That is my concern: that the money being put forward is not enough to deliver the objectives.

Government can often be siloed, so I hope that the Minister will also commit to making a concerted effort to ensure that policies and programmes across Government are put into practice in a more holistic and strategic way in this area. There ought to be an understanding of the need for funding pots and programmes for enrichment to complement one another, to work in tandem, and not to duplicate efforts or to compete with other Departments' aims. Will the Minister therefore urge colleagues in the Department for Education to reverse the 22% cut to school PE funding and reverse the cut to

the opening schools facilities fund, which would help many youth clubs to have somewhere to provide their services?

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I call the Minister, hopeful that Harpreet Uppal will have a couple of minutes at the end to wind up.

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): Of course. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Ms McVey.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Harpreet Uppal) on securing this important debate, and I am grateful to all those who contributed to what is an important conversation. We heard some brilliant contributions that highlighted just how important it is to support young people across the country. This generation is the most connected but most isolated one, and our national youth strategy aims to tackle that and the challenges associated with it. Members made a number of points on spaces, places and funding, which I will address throughout my contribution.

A specific point put to me was around the importance of providing streamlined funding, particularly access to both revenue and capital funding. The Government have merged some funding regimes, and I am happy to write to Members with more details. The shadow Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) not only made important points but paid tribute to their work experience students. I add my thanks to those students for their contributions.

The hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) put two specific points to me, including one about GoWild Outdoors in his constituency and the changes to school sport. I understand the concerns about the decision to replace the existing PE and sport premium for primary schools; however, despite sustained investment through that premium for more than a decade, fewer than half of children get the 60 active minutes a day recommended by the chief medical officer, and persistent inequalities remain for girls and people from disadvantaged communities. That is simply not good enough.

The Government are determined to close those gaps in participation, which is why we have committed more than £1 billion in funding for PE and school sport over the next three years. That includes £580 million for a new PE and school sport partnerships network to replace the PE and sport premium, alongside investment in improvements to school sport facilities and transitional support for primaries. That change includes secondary and primary, and capital and revenue funding. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss that further, if it would be helpful. He also asked about the overnight levy. That policy is led by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, but of course, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and the Treasury have significant interest in it, and I work closely with my ministerial colleagues. The consultation on that is yet to be published, but I will happily write to him on that point in due course.

I will now take the opportunity to celebrate the 70th anniversary of the Duke of Edinburgh's award. Over the last seven decades, the award has changed the lives of countless young people; I saw that in action and at first hand when I visited Barnsley academy in Kendray in my constituency. We know the transformative power the award can have on young people: learning new skills, developing confidence and making friends are just a few of the benefits of completing the DofE award.

I am delighted to be attending the parliamentary reception for the 70th anniversary next week; it is great to see that some representatives join us today. I thank the teachers, volunteers and all those who have worked hard to achieve the award across the country. Just a few months ago, I visited Centrepoint just outside of the centre of Barnsley, which is working with homeless young people on their Duke of Edinburgh's awards. As the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) referenced, more than six million hours of volunteering is phenomenal, and just one of the contributions made by the Duke of Edinburgh's award.

As the Minister with responsibility for youth, I am proud of the conversations that the Government have had and continue to have with young people. Last month, I signed the power of youth charter to demonstrate our commitment to youth empowerment. That sends the clear message that we are listening and will act, and illustrates the importance that we place on youth voice, which was raised by a number of Members. We always said that our youth strategy would be not about young people, but made with and by young people. We wanted to know what mattered, and we listened. The voices of young people are right at the heart of the decisions that we made.

The Government's landmark national youth strategy is ambitious, long term and cross cutting. "Youth Matters" radically transforms how we work, to give every young person somewhere to go, someone who cares and a community that they feel part of. We have been clear about what that means: by 2035, we want to halve the participation gap in enriching activities between disadvantaged young people and their peers, and for half a million people to have access to a trusted adult outside their home. We have the ambition to halve the participation gap because we do not believe that a young person's background should determine the opportunities that they get. We are fiercely committed to breaking down barriers, and are working across Government and with partners to make that a reality.

David Williams: On closing that gap, research shows that for every £1 a year spent on a young person in a place such as Stoke-on-Trent or Kidsgrove, £10 a year is spent on a young person in inner London. I welcome all the investment via the national youth strategy, but how can we use the strategy to close the gap, to make sure that we lift young people from Stoke and Staffordshire up to those levels?

Stephanie Peacock: I totally appreciate my hon. Friend's point. Under the previous Government, my area of Barnsley saw some of the worst cuts in the country, but despite that, the then Labour council invested in the youth zone and free transport for under-18s. I know that the challenges in Stoke will be similar to those in Barnsley, and of course there will be pockets of deprivation in London and other areas. We want to ensure that every young person, whatever their postcode, gets the

[Stephanie Peacock]

support they need. Obviously, this is in the context of 73% cuts in England over the last so many years. That will not be reversed overnight, but we have an ambition to work towards reversing it.

The strategy is backed by £500 million of DCMS funding. That will include funding for new builds, refurbishments and capital equipment, so that organisations can improve or expand their services. I have seen the impact of schemes like that, from the reopening of the Double Six Youth Club in Sheffield, to Eloquent Dance in Birmingham.

The second ambition is increasing access to trusted adults—my hon. Friend the Member for Hertford and Stortford (Josh Dean) spoke about this—because we know how important it is for young people to have someone in their corner. As the Minister responsible for youth but also civil society and sport, I often hear about the fantastic work of youth workers, volunteers, sports coaches and many others. I have also seen that at first hand in places such as East Bierley Community Sports Association in Kirklees, which I visited a few weeks ago and which is just down the road from the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield. In the interest of time, I will not mention any more, but I have seen so many.

However, as many as one in five young people still does not have a trusted adult outside the home to talk to. We want to change that. Our recent joint investment with the King's Trust of £10 million will expand young people's access to a trusted adult. That money will be matched with corporate and philanthropic investment, bringing the total to £20 million to build young people's skills and tackle youth unemployment. We will follow that with £15 million, over the next three years, for youth workers, volunteers and others who work closely with young people. An additional £5 million will help organisations to spread good practice, improve data and build strong local partnerships.

Expanding enrichment is a key aim of our strategy. Young people have told us that they want more in-person opportunities, whether that be through arts and culture, sports, volunteering, or being outdoors in nature. We know that those experiences are invaluable for wellbeing, belonging, school attendance and future employment opportunities. That is especially true for disadvantaged young people. Those who attend after-school clubs achieve, on average, a two-points-higher total score in their key stage 2 assessments in English, maths and science at the end of primary school. That is the value of enriching activities, and that is why the Government recently published the enrichment framework to give every school and college the tools to offer high-quality enrichment. That framework is for all pupils, to ensure that access is not limited because of who someone is or where they are from.

Building on the enrichment framework, my Department will invest £22.5 million to support up to 400 schools to meet the benchmarks. That will help them to listen to the pupils in their school about what they really want, and to act on it. We will work with schools in some of the most deprived areas of England to ensure that where young people live is not a barrier anymore. We have also announced Every Child Can—an investment of £132.5 million of dormant assets funding to fund opportunities across the five key categories of enrichment. That includes ensuring that every school has access to a library.

When talking about enrichment, I think of organisations in my own area, such as the Barnsley Youth Choir, which is giving hundreds of young people amazing experiences, opportunities and skills, Beat the Street, whereby primary schools get together and get kids more active, or our brilliant new Base71 Youth Zone.

A number of Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), spoke about cross-Government work. We have a Young Futures ministerial group. Delivering for young people is a shared responsibility; we are not doing that alone. Across Government, we are working with incredible partners that are delivering on the ground and galvanising action—uniformed youth organisations, the Duke of Edinburgh's award of course, and many others. We are working closely with local authorities and developing a network of up to 50 youth hubs. We have already opened eight pilot hubs, and the learnings will inform the remainder of the programme. That includes how we align with other Government initiatives such as the Young Futures panels and the Department for Work and Pensions youth hubs.

My hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield, my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon East (Natasha Irons), who of course is the chair of the all-party group, and my hon. Friend the Member for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan), as well as others, spoke about strengthening the statutory duty on local authorities to provide a sufficient youth offer. We are already taking steps to address that. Our local outcomes framework outlines key priorities and accountability for local government. We will explore reviewing the statutory duty, but we must ensure that any change is properly funded in order to empower, not burden, local authorities.

Every time a young person discovers their passions and pushes themselves outside their comfort zone, that has an impact far beyond the youth club or sports pitch. It is a step towards them becoming a more resilient, positive and connected adult, and it is a powerful reminder of our nation's story—one that has produced world-famous musicians, actors, athletes, inventors and entrepreneurs. They all started as a young person who was told that they could reach their potential. This Government are ensuring that young people hear that same message again.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield and all other Members who contributed to the debate.

5.29 pm

Harpreet Uppal: I thank everyone who took part in the debate—I also join the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) in saying that I am not a camper either. I thank the Minister and her team for everything that they do, and all youth workers as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the National Youth Strategy and youth enrichment.

5.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 8 July 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

British Industrial Competitiveness Scheme

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): The Government are continuing to make progress on delivering their industrial strategy through publication of the response to a consultation on regulatory changes and scheme delivery for the British industrial competitiveness scheme.

BICS is the flagship policy of the industrial strategy that will address Britain's longstanding competitiveness challenge in manufacturing. The policy will support heavy industry, advanced manufacturing and manufacturing supply chains.

Following the recent consultation, the Government confirm that they will proceed with planned changes to the renewables obligation, capacity market and feed-in tariffs to implement BICS.

The consultation response also confirms key aspects of scheme delivery, including certificate length, application windows, further eligibility requirements and an update on the delivery of the additional payment announced in April. These measures will help ensure that BICS delivers the greatest possible impact for businesses in Great Britain.

The Government will shortly be announcing the launch of an online eligibility checker tool. This simple, free-to-use tool will allow businesses to input basic information and receive an indication of their likely eligibility for BICS. It will be accompanied by comprehensive business guidance.

To support the timely introduction of BICS, legislation will be laid before Parliament in the autumn. Applications will open on 1 October and close on 30 November for year one of the scheme. Eligible businesses will receive support from April 2027, subject to applying within this window.

I encourage hon. Members to engage stakeholders in their constituencies to raise awareness of the British industrial competitiveness scheme and to invite businesses to use the eligibility checker in the coming weeks to assess their likely eligibility and then apply when applications open in October.

[HCWS200]

Modern Industrial Strategy: One Year On

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): One year ago, this Government published the modern industrial strategy, a 10-year plan to increase business investment, drive economic growth and support high-quality jobs across the United Kingdom. The strategy backs the industries that will define the 21st-century economy and tackles the barriers that have too often held back investment, innovation and growth.

Businesses, trade bodies and investors told us that what they needed most was a long-term plan that provided certainty. They also told us that one of the greatest barriers to growth was not ambition, but friction. In response, we have taken action across planning, infrastructure, energy, skills, access to finance, and regulation to make the UK a better place to start, grow and scale a business.

Today, we are publishing a one-year update on delivery of the industrial strategy, setting out how we have taken co-ordinated action to start addressing these barriers to growth. This includes introducing major planning reforms to accelerate infrastructure delivery, reducing energy costs for thousands of firms, improving access to finance for growing businesses, investing in the skills needed by key industries, and strengthening the support available to companies seeking to start, scale and stay in the United Kingdom. Twelve months on, businesses are beginning to see the benefits of a more joined-up approach to Government, with over £380 billion of private investment commitments secured, more than 155,000 jobs supported, and reforms under way to remove barriers to growth across the economy.

The Industrial Strategy Advisory Council continues to play an important role in advising on delivery of the strategy and maintaining a long-term focus on implementation. In January we announced the appointment of Amelia Gould, Keith Anderson and Dana Strong to the council, and in April confirmed that Clare Barclay would continue to serve as chair. We are now confirming that Aislinn Rice, Dame Diane Coyle, the right hon. Greg Clark, Greg Jackson, Henrik L. Pedersen, Henry G. Overman, Kate Bell, Roy Rickhuss, Tunde Olanrewaju and Dame Nancy Rothwell (deputy chair) will continue to serve as members of the council. Chris Grigg, chair of the National Wealth Fund, and Phil Smith, chair of Skills England, will also continue as ex-officio members.

Supporting growth also means ensuring that regulation works for businesses and investors. Alongside the industrial strategy update, we are reporting on progress under the regulation action plan and introducing a new regulator sponsorship charter and growth goals for regulators, marking a shift from ambition to delivery. Our approach is clear: we are regulating for jobs, growth and investment, ensuring the UK's regulatory system actively supports economic expansion, innovation and competitiveness.

We committed to reduce the annual administrative burden of regulation by 25% by the end of this Parliament, equivalent to £5.6 billion in savings. We have already identified £2 billion in net annual savings, with £1.5 billion delivered and a further £0.6 billion in progress—we are now over a third of the way to our target.

Alongside reducing burdens, we are enabling innovation. Later this year, we will introduce legislation to create regulatory sandboxes, allowing businesses to test new products and services safely in controlled environments and providing clear pathways to market.

Sandboxes are being developed across key sectors, including AI, life sciences, maritime autonomy and last-mile delivery, helping ensure that the UK s areas of greatest opportunity are also its fastest-moving.

The regulator sponsorship charter and growth goals for regulators will further embed a pro-growth mindset across the regulatory system. This will ensure that regulators actively support innovation, investment and economic expansion alongside their core duties.

This marks a shift towards a more flexible, responsive way of regulating that keeps pace with innovation, rather than relying on fixed rules that can quickly become outdated. It means moving from barriers to pathways, from risk aversion to managed experimentation so that innovation can be tested, refined and scaled in the UK.

One year on, the industrial strategy is beginning to give businesses the certainty and confidence to invest, grow and create jobs. By working in partnership with industry, we are backing the sectors, technologies and places that will drive future prosperity, while building a more resilient economy in an increasingly uncertain world. Regulatory reform supports that wider mission, helping ensure that businesses can bring new ideas to market more quickly and seize the opportunities of the industries of the future. As we enter year two, we will continue to strengthen the conditions for investment and growth across the United Kingdom through the industrial strategy.

[HCWS199]

Enhanced Free Trade Agreement: Turkey

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): The fifth round of negotiations on an enhanced free trade agreement with Turkey took place in Ankara between 15 and 23 June 2026.

Economic growth is our first mission in Government, and free trade agreements have an important role to play in achieving it. A stronger trade relationship with Turkey can support jobs and prosperity in the UK, with trade between the two totalling £28.4 billion in the four quarters to the end of Q4 2025—an increase of 4.3% from the previous year.

To support this round of negotiations, I travelled to Turkey to meet with the Minister of Trade, Professor Dr Ömer Bolat, and Deputy Minister of Trade, Mustafa Tuzcu.

Negotiations were constructive, with positive progress being made in a number of areas.

Trade in services

Productive discussions were held across a range of technical areas, including digital trade, domestic regulation and telecommunications. The investment session saw valuable exchanges, reflecting the shared ambition and good will between both sides. Particularly strong progress was made in legal services, among other areas. Across sessions, negotiators engaged in detailed text-based discussions, testing areas of alignment, exploring respective levels of ambition, and identifying outstanding issues. Both sides continued to engage productively, building on progress made in previous rounds.

Trade in goods

Negotiations covered a range of market access and regulatory issues, including goods market access and sanitary and phytosanitary measures, along with others. Discussions focused on reviewing respective proposals, testing areas of alignment, and identifying remaining gaps, while maintaining and upholding the UK's high standards. Both sides reached agreement on modalities for market access offers. These sessions were positive and productive with both sides seeking a high ambition outcome to support businesses and drive progress forward.

Additional areas

Wider cross-cutting discussions covered intellectual property, Government procurement, trade remedies, environment, state-owned enterprises, among others, with intellectual property discussions in particular picking up pace—signalling a growing shared focus on this area. Key themes included strengthening protection and enforcement of intellectual property, as well as environmental co-operation and sustainability.

Concluded chapters

After five rounds of negotiations negotiating, teams have closed 11 chapters, along with agreement on multiple annexes and associated issues. They have made substantial progress towards an agreement that will strengthen bilateral trade and create the enabling environment that can increase UK exports to Turkey, supporting jobs across UK nations and regions.

The UK will only ever sign a trade agreement that aligns with the UK's national interests, upholding our high standards across a range of sectors.

The sixth round of negotiations is expected to take place in the autumn. Ministers will update Parliament on the progress of discussions with Turkey as negotiations continue.

[HCWS198]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Health and Social Care 10-year Capital Plan

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Today the Government are publishing the 10-year capital plan for health and social care. Long-term capital under-investment has left the healthcare system starved of resources to function at its fullest, with large parts of the NHS and wider healthcare estate operating in outdated, inefficient and occasionally unsafe infrastructure. This was made clear in Lord Darzi's report, which estimated a £37 billion shortfall of investment since 2010 compared with international peers.

The 10-year health plan set out the long-term vision for healthcare provision with the three shifts of hospital to community, analogue to digital and sickness to prevention as the core components of a new care model based on the NHS's founding principles. This capital plan will bring together our commitments into a single coherent framework that is aligned with the 10-year health plan, and ensure infrastructure is the enabler for transforming the NHS over the decade ahead.

The Government are fully embracing this challenge and have already taken steps to address the root causes affecting healthcare delivery. At spending review 2025, the Chancellor provided the largest ever health capital budget, as well as multi-year allocations to 2030 for capital funding streams overall and extended certainty on NHS maintenance budgets to 2035. The priority is now to get on and deliver our priorities within this—making the most of both the budget and the certainty that enables the most strategic investment choices.

We will enable the first shift from hospital to community by reconfiguring the estate so that patients see the appropriate staff in the right place, and we have already invested £102 million in the primary care utilisation and modernisation fund, with a further £200 million over four years to 2030. In addition, we will support the development of neighbourhood health centres, as well

as ensuring the secondary care estate can deliver the highest-quality healthcare for the most complex and specialist cases. Maintenance of the estate will extend beyond the current spending review via an investment of £6.75 billion over nine years to target the most critical building repairs through the estates safety fund.

The second shift from analogue to digital will be enabled through over £4.4 billion of capital investment over this spending review period, alongside over £6 billion of revenue funding into technological and digital programmes. This will enable seamless navigation between primary and secondary care such as through the NHS app and single patient record as part of an ambition to make the most digitally accessible healthcare system in the world.

The third shift from sickness to prevention will be achieved through continued investment into research and development as part of DHSC's non-NHS capital allocation over the course of spending review 2025. This will enable earlier identification of illnesses, allowing for earlier intervention and strengthening system resilience to future threats. This is backed by notable investments including a new state-of-the-art health security campus in Harlow, Essex, that will create 1,600 extra jobs, and up to £1 billion for pandemic preparedness to replenish and expand stockpiles, in line with lessons learned from covid-19. We are also continuing our investment into genomics, pledging more than £650 million over the next five years.

This plan also supports the Government's wider missions set out in the plan for change of driving economic growth and productivity, supporting the housing agenda, creating new healthy spaces to live and progressing towards net zero and clean energy. We will continue to commit to the NHS's existing net zero targets and increase its climate resilience through continued setting of standards, showing climate leadership, and working across the system to break down barriers to financing and delivering net zero investments.

The increases in funding will be supported by our capital reforms, to reduce the layers of approval and reduce the time from initial proposal to get spades in the ground. We have already set the additional freedoms and flexibilities through devolving more control over capital budgets to the NHS frontline. Through this plan, we are also placing much greater focus on the outcomes of spend, and on taking steps to continually strengthen our approach to evidence, evaluation and benefits realisation.

The 10-year capital plan provides the clarity needed to do things differently and allow capital to become a true enabler of healthcare reform.

[HCWS202]

New Hospital Programme Annual Report

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): Today the Department has published the first "New Hospital Programme annual report", covering the 2025 to 2026 financial year.

This report marks the first full year of delivery following the programme reset and the publication of a costed, phased delivery plan through the NHP plan for implementation in January 2025. It represents an important transition from recovery and stabilisation to sustained delivery under a clearer and more realistic framework.

The report sets out the progress made by the NHP during the last financial year, at both programmatic and scheme level. Over the reporting period, the programme has strengthened its governance and assurance in response to scrutiny from the National Audit Office and Parliament.

It has made progress across hospital schemes in multiple waves, and new delivery approaches have been implemented such as the Hospital 2.0 standardised design model and the Hospital 2.0 Alliance commercial framework, aimed at improving efficiency, increasing market capacity, and enabling faster delivery at scale.

Each scheme within the NHP presents its own complex challenges. Market capacity at all tiers continues to pose potential delivery constraints. The launch of the Hospital 2.0 Alliance is an important step in creating a commercial environment that protects the supply chain and enables concurrent delivery of several large hospital schemes.

Looking ahead to the 2026-27 financial year, the NHP will continue to progress schemes in line with the plan for implementation. For wave 1 schemes, focus will remain on business case development and preparing sites for main construction. The seven RAAC replacement schemes, while having been deemed safe to remain open beyond 2030 with appropriate mitigations in place, remain a priority and will continue to be a key focus for the programme in the financial year 2026-27.

Wave 2 schemes will focus on early works to support scheme readiness and de-risk future delivery, and for schemes in wave 3 there is focus on early pre-construction work to de-risk the delivery of schemes where it is necessary to do so at this stage.

A copy of the report has been placed in the House of Commons Library and is available on www.gov.uk.

[HCWS201]

Petition

Wednesday 8 July 2026

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Road safety in Wetheral

The petition of residents of Wetheral and the wider Carlisle constituency,

Declares that traffic calming measures, including the establishment of a 20mph zone, should be introduced to the village of Wetheral.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the relevant local authorities to introduce traffic calming measures in Wetheral, specifically the implementation of a 20mph speed limit through the village to improve road safety.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Ms Julie Minns, Official Report,* 16 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 803 *.]*

[P003207]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): The Government recognise the concerns raised by residents of Wetheral and the wider Carlisle constituency about road safety in the village.

The safety of all road users, particularly pedestrians and other vulnerable road users, is a priority for the Department. The Government support the use of 20 mph limits and traffic-calming measures where they have local support, are appropriate for local conditions and likely to be effective. Such measures can be particularly suitable in places where people and traffic mix, including residential streets, village centres and areas with significant pedestrian movement.

In England, responsibility for setting local speed limits and introducing traffic-calming measures rests with local traffic authorities. For roads in Wetheral, that authority is Cumberland council, except for any roads managed by National Highways. Local authorities have powers to introduce 20 mph limits, traffic calming, pedestrian improvements and other local road safety measures where they consider them appropriate, working with the police on enforcement considerations.

The Department for Transport provides guidance to support these decisions, including on the setting of local speed limits, which advises that speed limits should be evidence-led, self-explaining and encourage compliance. Local authorities are best placed to assess the specific circumstances on their roads, including collision history, traffic speeds, road layout, pedestrian provision and community concerns.

As outlined in the road safety strategy, the Government have begun reviewing and updating its guidance, including on setting local speed limits, to further support local authorities in making well-informed decisions.

While the Government cannot direct a local authority to introduce a specific speed limit or traffic-calming scheme, I would encourage the petitioners to continue engaging with Cumberland council so that the concerns raised can be considered as part of its local road safety responsibilities.

I am grateful to the petitioners for highlighting these important road safety concerns in Wetheral.

Written Correction

Wednesday 8 July 2026

Ministerial Corrections

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill

The following extract is from the Second Reading debate on the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill on 16 June 2026.

Kanishka Narayan:… Let me state in more detail the reasons for objecting on the mechanism. First, the provisions for information sharing are deeply discretionary for UK regulators. Secondly, the subjects in which they can pursue that information sharing are restricted to significant matters of national security and domestic crime prevention in the UK.

[*Official Report*, 16 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 781.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology, the hon. Member for Vale of Glamorgan (Kanishka Narayan):

Kanishka Narayan:… Let me state in more detail the reasons for objecting on the mechanism. First, the provisions for information sharing are deeply discretionary for UK regulators. Secondly, the subjects in which they can pursue that information sharing are restricted to **set purposes, including** matters of national security and domestic crime prevention in the UK.

ORAL ANSWERS

Wednesday 8 July 2026

	Col. No.
NORTHERN IRELAND	289
Community Cohesion	292
Great Britain and Northern Ireland: Trade Costs	296
Manufacturing Supply Chain	289
Recent Disorder	297
Seasonal Scampi Fishers	296
NORTHERN IRELAND—*continued*	
Troubles Legacy: Legislation	290
PRIME MINISTER	299
Engagements	299

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Wednesday 8 July 2026

	Col. No.
BUSINESS AND TRADE	19WS
British Industrial Competitiveness Scheme	19WS
Enhanced Free Trade Agreement: Turkey	21WS
Modern Industrial Strategy: One Year On	19WS
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE	22WS
Health and Social Care 10-year Capital Plan	22WS
New Hospital Programme Annual Report	24WS

PETITION

Wednesday 8 July 2026

	Col. No.
TRANSPORT	5P
Road safety in Wetheral	5P

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Wednesday 8 July 2026

	Col. No.
SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY	5WC
Cyber Security and Resilience(Network and Information Systems) Bill	5WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

not later than
Wednesday 15 July 2026

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

Volume 789
No. 29

Wednesday
8 July 2026

CONTENTS

Wednesday 8 July 2026

Oral Answers to Questions [see index inside back page] [Col. 289]
Secretary of State forNorthern Ireland
Prime Minister

European Entry and Exit System [Col. 311]
Answer to urgent question—(Alex Norris)

Maritime and Coastguard Agency [Col. 325]
Answer to urgent question—(Keith Mather)

Point of Order [Col. 342]

Royal Assent to an Act passed [Col. 342]

Public Procurement (British Goods and Services) [Col. 342]
Bill presented, and read the First time

Mental Capacity (Duty to Assess) [Col. 343]
Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Chris Coghlan)—agreed to
Bill presented, and read the First time

Backbench Business
Rearmament and Warfighting Readiness [Col. 345]
Motion—(Mike Martin)—agreed to

NHS Corridor Care [Col. 383]
General debate

Point of Order [Col. 422]

Petitions [Col. 422]

Greenhouse Gas Removals Sector [Col. 425]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Education [Col. 433]
Motion, on a deferred Division, agreed to

Health and Safety [Col. 436]
Motion, on a deferred Division, agreed to

Town and Country Planning [Col. 439]
Motion, on a deferred Division, agreed to

Westminster Hall
Draft UK-EU Agreement on Gibraltar [Col. 125WH]
Defibrillators in Police Vehicles [Col. 149WH]
Societal Impact of AI: Government Policy [Col. 154WH]
Government Support for Bus Services: West Dorset [Col. 179WH]
National Youth Strategy [Col. 186WH]
General debates

Written Statements [Col. 19WS]

Petition [Col. 5P]
Observations

Written Correction [Col. 5WC]
Ministerial correction