

**Wednesday
15 July 2026**

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES
(HANSARD)**

Wednesday 15 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.

House of Commons

Wednesday 15 July 2026

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

SCOTLAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Pride in Place

1. **Maureen Burke** (Glasgow North East) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to support regeneration in Scotland through the Pride in Place programme. [900943]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): Our Pride in Place programme is supporting local people to shape the future of their areas. We are investing up to £480 million in 24 Scottish neighbourhoods over 10 years, including Springburn and Sighthill in north-east Glasgow. Alongside this, our Pride in Place programme impact fund is investing £12 million in eight Scottish local authorities to improve public and community spaces. That includes £1.5 million for Glasgow City.

Maureen Burke: In my constituency, the Pride in Place programme will be stewarded by Jim Hope BEM. Jim has decades of experience in community engagement, and has been involved in a range of projects that have brought local people together. Does the Minister agree that the key strength of the Pride in Place programme is not only that it is investing £20 million in long-forgotten places, like Springburn, Barmulloch and Balornock, but that it is trusting local leaders like Jim to shape the future of their areas, putting power directly into the hands of those who know their communities best?

Kirsty McNeill: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I am absolutely delighted that somebody of Jim Hope's stature has been appointed to lead Pride in Place investment in north-east Glasgow. It is a great example of those who know their communities best being empowered to lead, and I will follow the progress made in north-east Glasgow with very keen interest.

Defence Skills: Fife

2. **Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): What steps he is taking with Cabinet colleagues to promote skills development in the defence industry in Fife. [900944]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): As part of the £50 million Scotland defence growth deal, we have confirmed £5 million for the Arrol Gibb Innovation Campus at Rosyth, helping to develop

the advanced manufacturing skills needed to support the Type 31 frigate programme and future development opportunities arising from the new defence investment plan. This builds on an earlier £340 million investment in the Rosyth dockyard.

Melanie Ward: Given the threats that our country faces, in March the Secretary of State announced welcome funding for two defence technical excellence colleges, one to be in the east of Scotland. Fife college at Kirkcaldy, in particular, stands ready to absorb new funding and rapidly scale up provision to plug the gap in entry-level skills for the defence industry in Scotland. Can the Secretary of State update us on progress towards getting a Fife-based DTEC off the ground?

Mr Alexander: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a tireless advocate for the people of Fife and, indeed, for its outstanding college. Our officials are in discussions with both the colleges sector and the Scottish Government, and hope that they will match the £10 million of funding that this Government have committed so that we can get on with building those skilled defence workforce jobs in the future. If only we had a Scottish Government who were investing in defence skills rather than dithering on defence! The responsibility and the opportunities of this time are huge.

Young People

3. **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Scottish Government on supporting young people. [900945]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): Too many young people are spending their early years of adulthood out of work or education. The youth guarantee is our commitment to ensuring that every young person across Great Britain can access support in order to earn or learn. Last month we launched the youth jobs grant, which will provide a £3,000 incentive for employers to recruit eligible young people aged 18 to 24 who have been on universal credit for six months.

Graeme Downie: Young people make a hugely positive contribution to our communities, but for months, sadly, we have seen physical assaults and antisocial behaviour at Dunfermline bus station, perpetrated by a small minority of young offenders. Innocent citizens, both young and old, have been badly hurt, and many are afraid to use the bus station at night. Although justice is devolved, the local Member of the Scottish Parliament has not said a word about the matter. Does the Minister agree that the behaviour of this minority does not represent Scotland's young people, and will she do everything she can to force the SNP Scottish Government to do more to protect local people? What steps can the UK Government take to support the vast majority of young people who are making positive choices and deserve hope, opportunity and a bright future?

Kirsty McNeill: There is simply no excuse for this kind of senseless violence and antisocial behaviour, and I am very saddened to hear about the impact that it has had on my hon. Friend's constituents. I agree that the vast majority of young people want to improve their lives and contribute to their communities. This Government have committed more than £1.5 billion to support nearly 1 million young people and create up to 50,000 opportunities for them to earn and learn throughout Great Britain.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): The Minister will know that the Secretary of State is regularly to be heard talking about his many, many good friends. Does she believe that the Prime Minister-elect is one of those good friends, and, while we are on the subject of young Scots, will it not be awkward when the Secretary of State's job is taken by another young Scot in the shape of the hon. Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks)?

Kirsty McNeill: It is absolutely no surprise to me that a representative of the Scottish National party does not want to talk about its own record on young people. Shamefully, youth worklessness is much more intense across Scotland—including the hon. Gentleman's constituency and mine—than it is elsewhere in the UK, because the SNP Scottish Government simply have not invested in young people's futures.

Dave Doogan: I note the Minister's doughty protestations on behalf of the Secretary of State, but noting that is one thing. What message does she have for the 800,000 young Scots who were unable to vote in the 2014 referendum about her party's continued dogma preventing young people in Scotland from having a say on their constitutional future?

Kirsty McNeill: The people of Scotland were given a choice on our constitutional future, and we gave an emphatic answer that we believe that we are part of a stronger United Kingdom.

Independence Referendum

4. **Pete Wishart** (Perth and Kinross-shire) (SNP): What discussions he has had with the First Minister of Scotland on a second independence referendum.
[900946]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): Still none.

Pete Wishart: If these are indeed the last Scottish questions for the Secretary of State, we on these Benches will miss him almost as much as his Scottish Labour colleagues will do. If it is his swansong, when is he going to bring something—anything—to the table to help break this constitutional logjam? It could be an idea, a suggestion or a proposal. Here is a last question for him: if we are in a voluntary Union, which they all say that we are, what is the means for Scotland to leave it?

Mr Alexander: I am glad to see that SNP Members are staying classy, as usual. On the matter of personnel choices, I am not sure that my first go-to source would be the First Minister, because of course he appointed Peter Murrell to be the chief executive of the Scottish National party. *[Interruption.]* They do not like the answers to their questions, Mr Speaker!

On the SNP's continuing obsession with independence, I simply say that this is surely a better time to focus on delivery. In May, nearly a third of patients in Scotland waited in A&E for more than the target of four hours, with a staggering 16,612 people waiting over eight hours and 6,978 people waiting more than 12 hours. That is the worst performance since records began. The SNP's manifest failure on delivery is the elephant in the room—or should I say the camper van in the drive?

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

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): The Scottish Secretary will be aware that no NHS board in Scotland has met its target for starting cancer treatment within 62 days since 2012, that Public Health Scotland data shows that one in seven Scots are on an NHS waiting list, and that the Scottish Government's own figures show that home completions fell by 10% in the year to March—and do not even get me started on lifeline ferries to our islands. Does the Scottish Secretary agree that it is time for the SNP Scottish Government to start talking about delivery and acting on delivery, and to stop talking about division?

Mr Alexander: The Chair of the Scottish Affairs Committee speaks with her characteristic wisdom and authority on these matters. It seems that the only output that is rising on the SNP's watch is the number of statements being issued by solicitors on behalf of their high-profile clients.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I will not be overly effusive about the Secretary of State or the Minister, because that might not be helpful for them in the next few days; when there was a previous change of Prime Minister, as soon as Anna Soubry stood up and said that I had done a good job at the Scotland Office, I knew I was doomed!

Will the Secretary of State make it clear to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) that devolution in itself is not the answer? It is about how it is used. We recently saw that in Scotland, when the Scottish Parliament voted in favour of another independence referendum and against an inquiry into SNP finances.

Mr Alexander: I am not sure whether paying generous tribute to the right hon. Gentleman for his question and the wisdom thereof will impair my prospects. Of course, devolution provides us with the tools, but one of the great tragedies of the last two decades in Scotland is that, regardless of whether it is the education system—where we used to be the envy of the world—the national health service, or the capacity to build and operate ferries, all too often Scotland has gone backwards on the SNP Government's watch. There is a pretty basic explanation for that: for them, government is simply a way station on the route to independence, so they are not interested in delivering truthfully for the people of Scotland.

Torcuil Crichton (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): Regardless of how we divide on the referendum, I wonder if colleagues on the SNP Benches will find it in their hearts to put political division aside at 8 o'clock tonight? I did not come of age in time for the 1966 world cup finals, but the older boys in my primary school were all nicknamed after the England world cup squad, so we had Nobby Stiles and Charlton in our Scottish playground. That is a Hebridean example of respect and rivalry. Does the Secretary of State agree with today's *Daily Record* editorial, which says that

"there is always room for friendly rivalry with neighbouring nations,"

but that

"Bringing...politics into football does nobody any"—

Mr Speaker: Order. Good job. Come on, Secretary of State.

Mr Alexander: There is a serious point to start the answer, which is that I have always believed that to be pro-Scottish, you do not need to be anti-English. We should be bigger and more generous than that. We are all immensely proud of Steve Clarke, Andy Robertson and the achievement of getting to the world cup. I think we could look across the North sea to Norway for a demonstration of grace in the circumstances in which they left the tournament. Be assured that I wish our friends, our neighbours and our sometimes rivals well this evening at 8 o'clock.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State's reassurance on the constitution. The people of Scotland do not want another divisive, distracting and damaging referendum on ripping our country apart. That said, this Labour Government do have a bit of a habit of changing position on certain issues, with 25 U-turns in only two years. So can I ask the Secretary of State to confirm that, whatever else changes and whoever holds the keys to Dover House this time next week—and even if it is the one and only thing they stick to—there will be no referendum and no consideration of one? Will the Government dismiss out of hand immediately any move towards breaking up of our United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Mr Alexander: Yes. Ours is a politics of solidarity, co-operation and togetherness. We had a manifesto commitment not only opposing independence, but opposing a further referendum, and we stand by that mandate.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): Some 54% of Scots now back nuclear power, and the SNP tells them that they cannot have it. In May, over half of Scots—57%—voted for parties committed to the Union. Now, I know that some parties might describe that as nearly 60%, but it is definitely a majority. However, the SNP's answer, as we are hearing, appears to be another referendum. There is a pattern whereby a majority of Scots disagree with the SNP, and the SNP decides the majority is wrong. Will the Secretary of State back the single transferable vote so that Scots get what Scots vote for?

Mr Alexander: This is now almost a matter of ancient history, but in the forgotten referendum that took place under the last Labour Government, I was proud to campaign alongside the hon. Member's party's former leader Charles Kennedy in favour of the alternative vote. In that sense, I think there are ways that we can improve the working of our democracy within the United Kingdom, without leaving and separating ourselves from the United Kingdom.

Devolved Powers

5. **Lara Bird** (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): Whether he has had recent discussions with Cabinet colleagues on the devolution of further powers to Scotland.

[900947]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): I welcome the hon. Member to her place and congratulate her on her recent by-election victory.

This Government's focus is to make the existing devolution settlement work effectively. For too long, we have watched centralisation of decision making taking place at Holyrood, pulling powers away from local communities across Scotland, and it is time that changed. I remind the SNP-led Scottish Government that there is actually a nation outside of and beyond Holyrood: it is called Scotland.

Lara Bird: Devolution appears to be all the rage at the moment, and the Secretary of State will know fine well that the Scottish Parliament recently voted to devolve energy powers back to Scotland. So in this new spirit of renewed co-operation and trust that we are apparently about to start to see, can I ask the Secretary of State when the UK Government will respect the vote of the Scottish Parliament and devolve energy powers back to Scotland?

Mr Alexander: The SNP seems to respect every vote, apart from the constitutional referendum, in which 84% of the Scottish people exercised their democratic choice. The hon. Member she says that devolution is all the rage. With respect, some of us were early adopters. I campaigned for, voted for and supported the Scotland Act 1998 in this House, arguing for a two-Parliament solution to Scotland's effective governance. Energy policy is one of the areas of policy that is held here at Westminster, albeit that there are important planning considerations in Westminster, but on the substantive point that the centralisation of powers in Holyrood needs to be reversed, I certainly do agree. The hon. Lady seems to have no comment on that. She is obviously replicating the pattern of behaviour of a certain former First Minister.

Lillian Jones (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): For 23 years, I proudly served in Scotland's NHS, working alongside dedicated hard-working brilliant nurses. Under the SNP Government, those very nurses are paying higher income tax than colleagues anywhere else in the UK. Does the Secretary of State agree that instead of demanding more power, the SNP Government should use the powers they already have to concentrate on delivering better public services and better value for Scotland's taxpayers?

Mr Alexander: I could not agree more. My own mother worked for many years in the NHS in Ayrshire, at Crosshouse hospital. The Scottish Government are, alas, letting those dedicated NHS workers down. After 19 years in power, they must account for their record on public services, from NHS waiting lists to declining school standards. We used to have an education system that was the envy of the world. The priority should be on delivery, not division.

Andrew Bowie: Famously, we have not heard very much from the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) on his plans for government, although we do know that he seems to be a fan of devolution and its job-creating opportunities—for him. Well, I can tell colleagues from experience: devolution ain't everything it's cracked up to be. In Scotland, we have had 20 years of SNP mismanagement, and a pervasive and deeply

damaging devolve-and-forget mentality in London. Will the Secretary of State confirm that Labour will not be devolving any more power to Edinburgh?

Mr Alexander: I hardly think that the SNP mismanagement the hon. Gentleman rightly describes should damn devolution in the eyes of everyone in this Chamber. It is perfectly possible to drive a Ferrari into a ditch, which is pretty much what we have seen over the last 19 years.

Andrew Bowie: We have demonstrated that we are unafraid to step in and act when decisions taken by the Scottish Government are to the detriment of Scots and Scotland—for example, in the case of the Gender Recognition Reform (Scotland) Bill a few years ago. Will the Secretary of State commit today to urging the new Prime Minister to think long and hard about how devolution in the hands of the SNP is failing Scotland and Scotland's economy, and examine how, on this Government's watch, SNP Ministers have been able to jet around the world on taxpayer jollies, allow British civil servants to draw up plans to tear Britain apart, and spend countless hundreds of thousands pursuing a narrow, divisive agenda that is focused on pulling Scotland apart rather than growing it together?

Mr Alexander: An awareness of all those issues is not simply for the incoming Prime Minister, but for anybody who reads a newspaper in Scotland. What we have witnessed is a travesty of the potential of devolution. It is not simply the distraction of focusing on issues that are not devolved, but the SNP's abject failure in policy area after policy area that is devolved: ferries, hospitals, schools—the list goes on.

New Nuclear Energy Projects

6. **Irene Campbell** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the potential impact of new nuclear energy projects on economic growth in Scotland. [900948]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): Great British Energy Nuclear's technical study, which was recently published, confirms that Scotland possesses land areas with high potential for new nuclear development. Such projects could deliver significant investment and thousands of high-quality, unionised, skilled jobs. As a Government, we remain open to discussions with the Scottish Government on deploying these technologies to boost Scotland's economic growth and energy security.

Irene Campbell: New nuclear in areas such as my constituency of North Ayrshire and Arran could bring much-needed skilled jobs and investment to the area, but yet again Scotland is losing out. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that the Scottish Government should review and consider their stance on nuclear, given the findings of the report by Great British Energy Nuclear, which show the potential for new developments, including in Hunterston in my constituency?

Mr Alexander: Whether it is Hunterston in my hon. Friend's constituency or Torness in my own constituency, Scotland has a proud history of harnessing civil nuclear

power to bring jobs and growth to Scotland. Alas, the anti-scientific approach the SNP has adopted of denying us the future of carbon-free energy is one that will also, unless it changes, deny us the high-skilled jobs and investment required in North Ayrshire and across Scotland.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Many of my constituents work at Torness power station and are deeply disappointed that the SNP Government are blocking new nuclear development in Scotland. Does the Secretary of State agree that the nuclear industry provides highly skilled jobs and that it is a grave mistake by the SNP Government to block them coming to Scotland?

Mr Alexander: Yes. On that there is cross-party consensus. I can attest to that as the constituency Member of Parliament in Lothian East, where we have had decades of not just sustainable power that is carbon-free, but really high-quality jobs, excellent apprenticeships and stimulus to the local economy. I know the contribution of the hon. Gentleman's own constituents to the work in Torness. We want to see life beyond 2029-30.

City Region Deals

7. **Gordon McKee** (Glasgow South) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of city region deals in Scotland. [900949]

12. **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): What assessment he has made of the effectiveness of city region deals in Scotland. [900954]

The Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Douglas Alexander): City region and growth deals are having a visible and transformative impact on regional economies across Scotland. Built on more than £1.5 billion of UK Government investment, the deals play a vital role in fostering enduring economic growth, unlocking private sector investment, and improving infrastructure and job opportunities.

Gordon McKee: Cities such as Manchester and Liverpool have benefited enormously from their regional devolution. Greater Glasgow, 30 years ago, was split up into more than a dozen local authorities, so I ask the Secretary of State to press the Scottish Government to devolve power out of Edinburgh and into Glasgow.

Mr Alexander: In the words of the incoming Prime Minister, we're up for it, as far as devolving power from Holyrood is concerned. Alas, many of the powers rest with the Scottish Government. We need to end the grinding centralisation that I described in my speech to the Convention of Scottish Local Authorities last autumn, and see a renewed focus on the city regions of Scotland.

Douglas McAllister: West Dunbartonshire is one of eight local authorities that make up the Glasgow city region deal. The local authority is delivering an ambitious project to create a major industrial and commercial development on the former ExxonMobil terminal site on the Clyde. The enabling works are funded jointly by the council and the Glasgow city region deal, to the tune of £45 million. Does the Secretary of State agree that to reindustrialise every part of our nation, this

Government must help unlock the economic potential of the site, and bring much-needed, well-paid and high-skilled jobs to West Dunbartonshire?

Mr Alexander: Let me assure my hon. Friend that we are committed to bringing economic opportunity to every part of Scotland. Unlocking the economic potential of sites exactly like the ExxonMobil Bowling terminal is how we can achieve that for communities and deliver the high-skilled jobs that people want. West Dunbartonshire is presently benefiting from over £500 million through the Glasgow city region deal, as well as money from our new local growth fund. This Government are working hard with local partners to deliver long-term prosperity.

Livestock

8. **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): What recent discussions he has had with relevant stakeholders on Scottish livestock numbers. [900950]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Kirsty McNeill): I was delighted to meet key farming stakeholders at the Royal Highland Show, where we discussed the structural pressures facing the livestock industry in Scotland. This Government absolutely recognise that food security is national security, and while there has been a decline in herd sizes, we have seen higher productivity and changed genetics. We continue to work closely with Departments across Government to champion our producers, and to use Brand Scotland to promote Scotland's export potential globally.

Jerome Mayhew: Scotland's beef breeding herd is in trouble; it is down 373,000 in the last decade. There are also declines in dairy cattle, pigs and chickens, which show that the industry is in distress. In her response, the Minister said that food security is national security, so why do she and the Secretary of State let the SNP use devolution as a shield while stripping Scotland's larder bare?

Kirsty McNeill: It is not a question of using devolution as a shield; it is a question of proper accountability. Farming is a devolved matter, and the SNP Scottish Government have not delivered for Scotland's farmers. Take the Scottish Government's future farming investment scheme: in some areas, rejection rates for ineligibility were as high as 94%, which is a typical example of the overly bureaucratic nature of SNP policies. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Doogan, we do not need an ongoing shouting match from your sedentary position.

Pamela Nash (Motherwell, Wishaw and Carluke) (Lab): By ending Tory austerity and increasing the settlement to the Scottish Government by nearly £12 billion, this UK Labour Government have provided adequate funding for the SNP to properly resource Scotland's rural economy. Does the Minister agree it is time that Scotland's rural industries were properly recognised and got the support they needed from the Scottish Government?

Kirsty McNeill: I could not agree with my hon. Friend more. Our farms and farmers are vital to this country as providers of food, guardians of our countryside,

and significant contributors to the economy. It is time that the SNP Scottish Government recognised that fact.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to Prime Minister's questions, I extend a warm welcome to the Speaker of the New Zealand House of Representatives and his delegation, who are with us in the Gallery today.

We now come to the final Prime Minister's questions of this term, and, indeed, the final Prime Minister's questions with the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer) as Prime Minister. I thank the Prime Minister for his public service and his international leadership, particularly in his steadfast support for Ukraine. I am sure that Members will want to join me in wishing him and his family well in the future. Let us hope that this Prime Minister will be bringing home an England world cup win.

Oral Answers to Questions

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [901028] **Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 15 July.

The Prime Minister (Keir Starmer): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kind words.

I must start by saying that I am truly horrified by the murder of Ann Widdecombe. She was a distinguished politician with deep convictions, whose vivid and fearless character captured the public imagination. My heartfelt condolences go out to all her friends and loved ones.

It is chilling that during my time in this Parliament—11 years—three serving or former MPs have been murdered. I look across the Chamber at the shield for our dear friend Jo Cox, and at the shield for Sir David Amess, which sits on the wall behind me. I know that this is a House matter, so this is my personal view, but I believe it would be fitting for the House to consider a similar tribute to Ann.

We thank the police for their work. The integrity of their investigation must be protected. You have been instrumental in defending the safety of every Member of this House, Mr Speaker. I believe we must do more to defend our democracy, and have tasked officials across Government with identifying the best mechanisms for taking this work forward so that it can move as quickly as possible. I hope that the whole House can unite behind that in the months ahead.

I also pay tribute to the courage of the Hillsborough families. The Hillsborough law that we passed in this House last night is not only a law for the families and the 97, but a law that ensures that the state serves millions of working people and always gives a voice to those who fight for justice—a law for everyone, delivered by a Labour Government in the best traditions of the labour movement.

This morning, I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in this House, I have an important appointment with the television at 8 o'clock this evening.

Graham Stuart: I associate myself with the Prime Minister's remarks about Ann Widdecombe. I take this opportunity to thank him for his public service, and wish him and his family all the best for the future.

Most of us can only dream of playing the role of Jude Bellingham—scoring the winning goal and leading our team to victory—yet the Prime Minister did it. But politics, like football, is a ruthless game, and he has now been handed a red card by the 400 dodgy referees on the Benches behind him. What advice does this Prime Minister have for the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) to ensure that he, unlike the Prime Minister, does not end up with an early bath?

The Prime Minister: I think that is the first and, sadly, probably the last time I will be compared to Jude Bellingham. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that. On the question of red cards, I cannot tell him how much incoming I had a week ago Monday, after President Trump intervened on the USA red card, asking me to get the England red card adjusted. Just for the record, Mr Speaker, I did not attempt that.

For my successor, and for the England team, I will not give advice; I will simply give my wholehearted support. Just for the record, Mr Speaker, I do not care what the score is tonight, as long as we win.

Mr Speaker: I call Matt Turmaine.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. May I take this opportunity to thank the Prime Minister for his many years—

Mr Speaker: Order. I was calling Matt Turmaine—red card in action.

Q2. [901029] Matt Turmaine (Watford) (Lab): It was an honour to march with people from across Watford on a peace walk in my constituency recently. Earlier this year, we saw an attack on our high street. A fire was lit at a Jewish-owned shop, and the shop was sprayed with antisemitic graffiti. Additionally, mosques in Watford have been subjected to Islamophobic attacks and intimidation. I welcome my right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister's additional support to deal with antisemitism and anti-religious hatred. Does he agree that this House must come together to stand united against those who would seek to divide us?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his hard work. He reminds us that an attack on one of us is an attack on all of us. Antisemitism and anti-Muslim hatred are a poison. We ripped antisemitism out of the Labour party, and I have worked as Prime Minister to root it out of our country. Just this week, we invested a record £250 million to protect our Jewish communities, and we are using the new powers we have introduced to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, going after those who incite violence on our streets. Everyone deserves to live with security,

dignity and freedom. That is a fight that I and every Labour Government and those across this House will never give up on.

Mr Speaker: I call the Leader of the Opposition.

Mrs Kemi Badenoch (North West Essex) (Con): Can I start by thanking the Prime Minister for the way that he responded to the murder of Ann Widdecombe last week? This is the first opportunity I have had on the Floor of the House to commemorate her life. A lot has been said about how she died. I want to focus on celebrating the life she lived.

Ann was a woman of high principle and profound beliefs, with a wicked sense of humour—a wonderful combination of being a serious person who did not take herself too seriously. She changed her faith from Anglican to Catholic and from the Conservative party to the Brexit party, but she always remained part of the Conservative family. You might not always have agreed with her, but Ann Widdecombe was a woman who said what she meant and meant what she said. Hers was an honesty that made our politics better. Her wit and forthrightness sat alongside a deep humanity and decency.

Ann had wonderful turns of phrase. She said:

"We need less political correctness and more political courage."

She said:

"If we deny our culture, become nothing and everything, that weakens us."

She also said:

"It is a truth universally unacknowledged at Westminster that there is life after politics."

With that in mind, I turn to this Prime Minister's final questions. Mr Speaker, I wanted to make sure that I got the tone right today, so I looked back at the Prime Minister's final questions to Boris Johnson. Luckily for the Prime Minister, I plan to be much gentler than he was that day.

Week after week, the Prime Minister and I have clashed at these Dispatch Boxes and rarely agreed on anything, but there is one thing that I admired. When President Zelensky was attacked in the White House, the Prime Minister showed leadership and invited him to Downing Street. That was the right thing to do. Ukraine is on the frontline in the battle for freedom, so does the Prime Minister agree that cross-party support for their cause must endure?

The Prime Minister: I join the right hon. Lady in her tribute to Ann Widdecombe. I know that the hurt is keenly felt across all her friends and family, but it is particularly keenly felt by political colleagues in the Conservative party—her party for many years—and in Reform as well. That is why one of the first things I did on Friday was to phone the Leader of the Opposition and the leader and deputy leader of Reform to express my condolences and act in a cross-party manner, because I knew how much this would hurt them and many people in their parties. I thank them for taking that call in the spirit that they did last Friday.

I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments about Ukraine. We have stood united on Ukraine in this House. We supported the last Government in the approach that they took, and we have taken that approach on. That meeting with President Zelensky happened the

day after he was evicted from the Oval Office. He left alone. He got on a plane. We got him to come to London, and I asked him to come to Downing Street straightaway. I walked out to meet him. I gave him a hug, and then I showed him what was in the street. Many people had come, thinking that he was visiting Downing Street, and the moment he got out of the car and hugged me, they cheered at the top of their voices—the British people told President Zelensky exactly what they thought of him and the way he had been treated.

That was a really emotional moment, because it was effectively the first human contact that President Zelensky had had outside his immediate team since he left the Oval Office. I had a meeting with him to tell him that in this country, we will stand with him and Ukraine. I did not let him leave alone—I walked him out to his car—because in Britain we do not let people walk out of our buildings alone; we escort them out.

Mrs Badenoch: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer. No doubt, he will be disappointed that he will not be emulating his hero Harold Wilson in winning multiple elections. However, we all hope that he may be about to emulate him in another way: by being the Prime Minister when England win the world cup. That is something that every single one of us in the House should get behind—especially the SNP. *[Laughter.]*

As Leader of the Opposition, the Prime Minister led his party to a landslide after a historic defeat—I fully intend to do the same—but if you want to lead this country, you should set out your plans to do so. We have, but one politician intends to spend the summer avoiding scrutiny, refusing to set out his plans. Does the Prime Minister not agree that what the country deserves is a televised debate between Nigel Farage and Count Binface?

Hon. Members: More!

The Prime Minister: Well, Reform intends to spend the summer arguing with a bin. My advice to everyone is: put your vote in the Bin! *[Laughter.]*

I am delighted that today we are joined in the Gallery by some of the people I have met across the country in opposition and in power. These are the people who are in my mind's eye—people like Trevor and Luis, who have worked together at Jaguar Land Rover for over 30 years. I visited them just before we got the deal with America, when tariffs were threatened. That day, I faced the entire workforce, who were very concerned that they were going to lose their jobs because the tariffs would be impossible for JLR.

We went back when we had got the deal, and I took the call from President Trump at JLR in Solihull so that the workforce could hear the deal being made and know exactly what it meant for them. The only mistake I made was putting it on loudspeaker, which of course is always a slightly unpredictable thing to do when President Trump is on the other end. Luckily, he agreed the deal and the cheer went out. These people across the Galleries, here with us today, are always in my mind's eye.

Mrs Badenoch: I know how much the Prime Minister has come to enjoy our exchanges—in fact, in the King's Speech debate he told me that on difficult days my input was

“always a ray of sunshine.”—*[Official Report, 13 May 2026; Vol. 786, c. 24.]*

He might not have answered many of the questions I asked him, but at least he turned up. It is important to respect Parliament, so does the Prime Minister agree that his successor should come to this place and answer questions rather than scurrying away for the summer?

The Prime Minister: As Prime Minister, I have participated in over 60 sessions of PMQs—always a pleasure and always something to look forward to—and I have answered, or at least given answers, 2,800 times. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that the Leader of the Opposition will question my successor in the same way.

I am sure the Leader of the Opposition will forgive me if I just mention one or two others who are in the Gallery who have been affected by the decisions we have made. Billie, who is sitting in the Gallery in front of me, was diagnosed with breast cancer in 2023. She was there when we launched our plan for change and has been a tireless advocate for better cancer care. Billie joins us today from the special needs school where she works in London, and I am pleased to tell the House that Billie's cancer is in remission.

Hon. Members: Hear, hear!

Mrs Badenoch: I thank the Prime Minister for that answer and for paying tribute to so many of the people he has been able to help. In fact, I remember when I started this job, the Prime Minister was very helpful to me, saying that I would not last the year. Life comes at you fast. *[Laughter.]* He spent a long time laughing at how I had lost control of my party; I think he should have been paying attention to his Back Benchers instead of mine. Everyone in politics would do well to remember how quickly political fortunes can change. I know that the Prime Minister has been asked and that he is being diplomatic, but on that note, does he have any advice for his successor?

The Prime Minister: I will give my wholehearted support to my successor. I want this Labour Government to be a success. I want our country to be a success. I shall give my support privately if asked for, not publicly when not asked for. *[Laughter.]*

I draw attention to Pooja, who is with us in the Gallery with her daughter. I first met Pooja in a café at the back of Euston station where she told me about her son Ronan, who was murdered when he was 16, having just done his GCSEs. I have to say that as a father of two teenagers, I found that very hard to hear. His killer, who was also a teenager, collected a ninja sword and a machete from his local post office. He had bought them online using a parent's credit card and a fake name, with no ID checks. When I heard that, I said to Pooja that I would campaign with her to get the law changed, and I made a commitment and a promise to her. That is why we passed Ronan's law, driven by Pooja's inspirational campaign. I take the opportunity to thank her for that.

Mrs Badenoch: That is a lovely statement that the Prime Minister has just made to Pooja; I am sure that the whole House will agree. I think that the whole House will also agree that he gave a very diplomatic answer to the question I asked on advice to his successor.

Having heard that answer, I say this to Labour MPs with as much goodwill as I can muster—*[Laughter.]*—we have been where you are. Changing Prime Minister is

not a silver bullet; indeed, it may be that the Labour party's troubles are only just beginning. Solving the fundamental problems in this country will require difficult decisions, and you also need to know how to get things done. The Prime Minister once said that when he pulled the levers, nothing happened. Why did he think that was?

The Prime Minister: We did pull the levers. We pulled the levers to stabilise the economy, and we have done that. We pulled the levers to strengthen our public services and NHS waiting lists are coming down at the fastest rate for 17 years. We have pulled a big lever on child poverty, and this Government are doing more on child poverty than any Government ever, including previous Labour Governments. We have put the biggest investment into defence and security, and our international standing has been restored.

We also pulled the lever on the individual cases that matter, including those of individuals such as Carla—she is in the Gallery—who is one of the parents who came to see me about online harm and what that can do to our young children. That is why we banned social media for under-16s. Daniel, who is also here with his son, has spoken to me many times about the struggles that he has had with the cost of living and the need for a safe and secure home for every family and every child to grow up in. They are the people who matter more to me than anything else, because it is their lives that I think about when we make decisions in this Government.

Mr Speaker: Final question.

Mrs Badenoch: The Prime Minister may not think so now, but it is a tribute to him that not a single sitting Labour MP could beat him. Not the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) who could not count her taxes, not the right hon. Member for Sheffield Heeley (Louise Haigh) who could not count how many phones she had lost—“lost, lost, lost”—and definitely not the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting) who could not count to 81.

This is my last exchange with the right hon. and learned Gentleman. I know how much his wife and children mean to him, and that they are in the Gallery. As everyone here knows, our families make a huge sacrifice for our choice to enter public life. I hope that he will allow me to draw our time together to a close by thanking them for the love and support they have given him throughout his time in office.

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady very much for that. This is the last question I will face from the Leader of the Opposition, so let me wish her and her family well. We have had robust exchanges across this Dispatch Box, but she has extended kindness to me privately at very difficult times, including when there was an attempt to burn down our family home, which deeply affected my family. She reached out to me then, and when my brother died of cancer she reached out to me privately, not across this Dispatch Box. I thank her for that and for the tribute that she just made to my wife and children, who mean the world to me. I do thank her for that. She knows that this is robust, and it has to be robust—that is the way politics is done—but the kindnesses that sit behind it privately are often just as powerful, if not more powerful, and I thank her for that.

I also stood at the Opposition Dispatch Box, for four years as Leader of the Opposition. I know at first hand that it is the most difficult job in politics, and that is what the right hon. Lady is doing. When I did it, we had just lost the 2019 election, which nearly broke my party. It was the worst result since 1935, and we were found to be institutionally antisemitic. I picked up our party. I turned it round. I made a promise to rip antisemitism out of my party, and I did. I turned my party to face the country and Labour won a landslide general election. After two years, we have stabilised the economy. We have invested heavily in our public services. We have put better protections in for children, particularly on child poverty. We have strengthened our defence and we have enhanced our international reputation. I am proud to leave this country in a better shape than I found it.

Q9. [901036] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): It is an emotional Prime Minister's Question Time today, and I really welcome the tone that has been struck. I think we should hear more of this, more often. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”]

Last year, I convened a roundtable of stakeholders in my constituency to explore joined-up solutions to tackling the scourge of violence against women and girls, and I have been really pleased that over the last two years, the Prime Minister has made that central to his Government's mission. He has ensured that spiking and sexual deepfakes have been criminalised and that police forces have been mandated to have rape and sexual offences teams, and he has embedded trauma support for victims across all services. Does he agree that the Government absolutely must stick to the pledge that the Labour party put in its 2024 manifesto to halve violence against women and girls over the next decade?

The Prime Minister: Yes I do, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend's campaigning on this issue. Yesterday I was with John and Penny Clough, who I first met nearly 16 years ago. They lost their daughter to domestic violence of the most extreme sort in appalling circumstances, and in many ways my journey campaigning on violence against women and girls started with them 16 years ago this year. I pay tribute to them and everybody else who campaigns on this. That is why we set the mission to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. Whatever role I do next, I will continue to campaign for that for as long as I have breath in my body.

Mr Speaker: I call Sir Ed Davey, the leader of the Liberal Democrats.

Ed Davey (Kingston and Surbiton) (LD): I associate myself with so many of the Prime Minister's comments today, but particularly with his remarks about Ann Widdecombe. She devoted her life to public service and her murder was truly horrifying. I support his campaign for a memorial to her in this Chamber. I also thank the Leader of the Opposition for her tribute to Ann, and for reminding the whole House and the whole country that we need to remember her for the way she lived her life. I have to make a confession: I have always been slightly jealous of Ann for appearing on “Strictly Come Dancing”. [HON. MEMBERS: “There's still time!”]

Can I join the whole nation, and hopefully every nation, in wishing England well against Argentina tonight

after their superb win against Norway? It is the last job of the Prime Minister to make sure that we win the world cup.

Can I also pick up on a remark from the Leader of the Opposition about the by-election we are about to see in Clacton? I have to tell her that I cannot back joke figures with ridiculous policies, which is why I am supporting Count Binface. *[Laughter.]*

As the Prime Minister finds himself with more time on his hands, can I recommend the new “Toy Story” film? For those who do not know the films, the main character used to be in law enforcement, but was mainly known for being a little wooden, and was replaced by a shiny new action figure from far away who thinks he can fly—and the name Andy is on everyone’s lips. Maybe the Prime Minister should give that a miss, but does he share my fear that when it comes to Britain’s national debt, the plan of the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) is “to infinity and beyond”?

The Prime Minister: The right hon. Gentleman is clearly angling to go on “Strictly Come Dancing”, and no doubt he would be very good at it. I have some good news for him because he is, fittingly, the right hon. Member for Chessington World of Adventures. He talks about the economy, so I am pleased to tell him that thanks to our summer savings, his family could save nearly £20 when they visit this summer!

Ed Davey: Can I invite the Prime Minister to join me at Chessington World of Adventures? We have not always agreed across the Floor, but can I pay my own tribute—*[Interruption.]* I disagreed with Labour on Europe, and I have disagreed with the Conservatives on Europe! I say to the Prime Minister that, although we have not always agreed, I have always admired the way he has led his party, I have always admired the way he has been a true patriot, and I always admire the way he has worked with so many people across this House to do the best for the national interest. We thank him for his public service.

One of the Prime Minister’s qualities that people most underestimate comes from his experience as a carer. He has spoken powerfully about looking after his mother through her battle with Still’s disease and the love and care he gave to his brother Nick. I know the Prime Minister agrees that we can and must do more for family carers. As he leaves No. 10, will he join me and other carers across this House to speak up for family carers, to be their voice and to get them the support they deserve?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I thank the right hon. Gentleman for everything he has done in relation to social care and the importance of providing care. He does it with very real human experience, which we all know and we all respect, and no doubt he will continue to champion the issue, as everybody should. He asked me about joining him at Chessington World of Adventures, and I will. Can I suggest 12 noon on the first Wednesday in September? *[Laughter.]*

Q11. [901038] **Rachael Maskell** (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Before coming to this House, the Prime Minister and I attended the launch of my uncle’s book. It was entitled “Fine Lines and Distinctions”. Clearly,

sometimes we have had those differences, but I genuinely wish him and his family well for the future. But before he places his pen down, I understand that there is a tradition of leaving a note for your successor. In wishing all hon. Members the very best of summers, I ask that he asks his successor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), to enact my legislation to license short-term holiday lets and ensure that we can protect our communities from family houses turning into party houses in residential areas and ensure that we keep housing costs down?

The Prime Minister: I am not sure about a note for my successor. We left one in 2010 which did not work too well. *[Laughter.]* I am sure that my successor will look at my hon. Friend’s private Member’s Bill, and I am proud to have overseen the biggest boost to renters’ rights in a generation. We kick-started the biggest boost to social and affordable house building, and wherever people live, they deserve a safe, secure home that they can call their own.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): While his own MPs may have sent him off without resorting to VAR, I have some good news for the Prime Minister: under his tenure, 76% of England football matches have been won, which is the greatest, most successful record of any Prime Minister in history. In his remaining days in office, while he carries out whatever meetings, reviews or motivational talks he has planned, will he commit to ensuring that his greatest legacy is that finally, on Sunday, football is coming home?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman, but I am a massive football fan so he will forgive me for being a nerd about this: the England team have won 22 out of 29 matches since I have been Prime Minister, and we have got to get that to 24 out of 31 matches, which means we will win on Sunday. I wish the team well. Of course, it is only under Labour Governments that we win the world cup, and in that spirit, I am sure that the whole House will get behind the team.

Q12. [901039] **Julia Buckley** (Shrewsbury) (Lab): Watching the Prime Minister secure his legacy this week, with the NATO summit and the Hillsborough law, I wondered if he wanted to make it a hat-trick, and support Shrewsbury college’s bid for a new construction skills centre? As the main post-16 provider in the county, our outstanding college trains over 10,000 young people and adults, providing both A-levels and vocational qualifications, but this year’s applications are up by 15% and our buildings are full to capacity. In a rural area like Shrewsbury, with limited alternatives, hundreds of people could end up becoming not in employment, education, or training. Will the Prime Minister support the college’s third attempt to secure capital funds and meet the growing need, so that we can open the construction skills centre in September?

Mr Speaker: We have all got the point!

The Prime Minister: I know that the college in my hon. Friend’s constituency has made a bid to the post-16 and construction skills capacity fund to expand its provision. I have set a target of two thirds of young

people either to go to university or to a gold standard apprenticeship, because I think that we need to rebalance. We rightly applaud and put on a pedestal those who go to university, but we need to do the same for those who are apprentices as well and have a bit of rebalancing.

Mr Speaker: Order. Please can we speed up questions? There are some people who I really want to get in and that will help everyone.

Q3. [901030] **David Chadwick** (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): Two weeks ago, the news leaked that Powys teaching health board is considering taking the beds out of all but two community hospitals in Powys. Some 2,500 people have already signed my petition against those cuts. Does the Prime Minister agree that taking beds out of community hospitals is not a solution for the crisis in social care? Why did he not prioritise fixing social care when he had the opportunity?

The Prime Minister: I remind the hon. Gentleman that when his party was in the coalition Government, they did not do anything about social care—they simply cut all our public services and we had to pick up the results of that. I do not know the details of the particular case he refers to, but I will ensure he gets a better answer than that in writing.

Q13. [901040] **Lola McEvoy** (Darlington) (Lab): Olivia is a young constituent in Darlington. Her testimony was instrumental in securing a ban on stranger contact for under-16s. She has the letter that the Prime Minister sent her framed on her wall. Olivia and millions of young people across the country will be safer because of him: his commitment to hear the stories of ordinary people and the injustices that they face, and then to take action, has delivered real change. Given that social media has, for better or worse, played such an influential role in our tenure in this House, will the Prime Minister share with all of us any of the viral moments that have had cut-through in the Starmer household?

The Prime Minister: I need to tread very carefully here. I got into a lot of trouble at a primary school when an eight-year-old encouraged me to do the “six-seven” thing, and the whole class joined in—it went viral. When I left, the headteacher told me sternly that it was against the school rules, and I have to say that I was totally pathetic and I simply said, “I didn’t start it”.

Q4. [901031] **Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): Like others, I have always respected the Prime Minister as somebody who was in politics because he wanted to give service to his country, and he has earned our gratitude for that. In my constituency, those who volunteer as coastguard rescue officers also do so from a wish to give service to their community. In the time that remains for him in office, will the Prime Minister ensure that the money paid to them properly reflects the respect that they earn for their service?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that really important question, and I will start by wishing him a very happy birthday. This issue is really important. I pay tribute to every volunteer; they show

incredible bravery in putting their lives at risk to save others. Our guiding principle is ensuring that we respond to this complex case by properly recognising their vital work. Ministers will continue to work with all parties, the coastguard rescue service and volunteers to respond to their concerns and get this right. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this very important issue, and we will be on it.

Q14. [901041] **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for his steadfast leadership in the face of two major conflicts. My right hon. and learned Friend’s efforts to successfully marshal international support for Ukraine and his work to ensure that our armed forces are not sucked into an aimless and dangerous war with Iran could—in fact, I believe they will—prove to be his most important legacy. Does he share my view that we must now use every diplomatic tool at our disposal, including sanctions against networks and enablers, to crack down on hostile states such as Russia and Iran?

The Prime Minister: I am proud of the fact that, because the usual frameworks would not work—the UN; the EU, which was blocked by Hungary; and NATO, which Ukraine is not in—we pulled together a coalition of the willing, led by the French and the UK, and now the Germans. I am honoured that we are joined in the Gallery by the Ukrainian ambassador. Let me say to him and to all Ukrainians: we are united in this House against Russian aggression. That work began before I was Prime Minister and will continue afterwards, because Ukraine’s security is our security. This House is proud to stand with you.

Q5. [901032] **Danny Kruger** (East Wiltshire) (Reform): I thank the Prime Minister for his service; he is a good man, and I wish him very well for the future.

Politics is not a joke. Every other party in this House, except Reform, has put forward as their candidate in the Clacton by-election a comedian with a dustbin on his head—[*Interruption.*]. It might be—if hon. Members will listen—that a man with his head full of rubbish is a fitting representative of the mainstream parties in this House. I think the Prime Minister endorsed the bin man, but will he clarify who, if he will not put up a Labour candidate, he wants to win in Clacton?

The Prime Minister: I know that Reform believes in recycling politicians, but I wonder whether spending the summer arguing with a bin was what the hon. Gentleman had in mind when he defected to the Reform Benches.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): This Monday will mark 10 years since the brutal rape and murder of my constituent Samia Shahid in a so-called honour killing. May I thank the Prime Minister for all his leadership on the agenda to end violence against women and girls? Will he join me in reaffirming the UK’s commitment to end this abhorrent killing in the name of so-called honour, not just in England but across the world?

The Prime Minister: I pay heartfelt tribute to my hon. Friend for everything that she has done to campaign on and draw attention to this issue and for the very powerful and personal way in which she argues it. When she spoke in the House earlier this year, it was compelling

for all of us, for all the right reasons, and I thank her for that—I know she will continue to do so for many, many years to come, and rightly so.

Q6. [901033] **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): I put on record my appreciation for the hard work of the Prime Minister's ministerial team in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs in tackling the absolute failings of South East Water. However, last Friday, 1,200 pupils at Downlands community school in Hassocks were sent home because they had no water. For those children, their parents and their teachers, that was another reminder of South East Water letting communities down. I am sure the Prime Minister will agree that something as basic as turning on the taps should never be in doubt. Before new housing developments are approved, does he agree that water companies should be compelled to confirm that they have the capacity to provide a reliable water supply to new homes?

The Prime Minister: This incident is completely unacceptable. Every customer deserves reliable, resilient services, particularly during extreme heat, when there is a risk to public health. The Water Minister has met the company's leadership to demand improvements, and we will follow up in that way.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Even GB News is now admitting that, with small boat crossings down more than 40% this year, the Prime Minister's strategy to smash the trafficking gangs is working. With the costly fiasco of the Conservatives' Rwanda scheme long behind us and our relationship with our nearest neighbours and friends in France rebuilt, does the Prime Minister think that now is the time to establish a safe and legal route between planet Sigma IX and Clacton?

The Prime Minister: I am pleased that net migration is down 82%, small boat crossings are down 40%, the asylum backlog is down, we are closing asylum hotels and we deported 70,000 people with no right to be here. That is what this Government are delivering.

Q7. [901034] **Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Books are going to be written about how a Mayor of Manchester has managed to out-manoeuvre a sitting Prime Minister with a 170-seat majority and take the keys to No. 10. The Prime Minister appears to have been brought down by an inability to articulate a plan for government so it must be tough to be replaced by a man who refuses to say whether he has even got a plan. As the Prime Minister bows out, done in by his hon. Friends, does he agree that in a few months' time we will all be missing him?

The Prime Minister: The economy has been stabilised, we have stronger public services, half a million children are being lifted out of poverty, we have got the biggest investment in defence and security since the 1980s and our international standing has been restored. That is not just a plan; it is a plan being delivered.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I congratulate the Prime Minister on being the recipient yesterday of a Légion d'honneur medal, and on the passing of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, which

will mean that these scandals—I include those relating to Grenfell and Windrush—will never happen again. Does he agree that the media have sometimes twisted the knife a bit and made the pain worse for the victims' families in those scandals, so can he revisit some of the same principles of accountability and justice for the gutter press?

The Prime Minister: I am very proud that we delivered the Hillsborough law yesterday. It is important to recognise that there has always been an initial injustice and then a further injustice when the state does not acknowledge and get to the truth. We are putting that right with the Hillsborough law.

Q8. [901035] **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): After 16 years of Conservative Administration, Shropshire council's finances were left in a disastrous state. After a Local Government Association peer review praised the Lib Dem administration for making significant strides since last May, that difficult financial situation remains. The right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has promised Manchesterism for the rest of the country, but will the Prime Minister join me in urging him to remember that the rest of the country does not all look like Manchester and rural areas need a fair deal too?

The Prime Minister: The hon. Lady is right to raise rural areas, and that is why we have put record investment into our local authorities and our NHS across the country, including in Shropshire.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): My constituent and Scottish football superfan Craig Ferguson has just returned home after walking for 108 days across 3,000 miles in the United States to raise funds for Scottish Action for Mental Health. He has raised over £1 million. I know this is an issue that the Prime Minister cares about very deeply, and I thank him for his leadership. Will he join me in congratulating Craig and everyone who supported his actions to raise money for mental health?

The Prime Minister: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Craig. I believe there is a famous Scottish song about walking 500 miles and then another 500, but to surpass that is an amazing achievement. We all pay tribute.

Q10. [901037] **Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): We have all enjoyed watching England's success in the world cup in the last few weeks. As his last act as Prime Minister before leaving office, will the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree to grant us a bank holiday so that we can celebrate England's win?

The Prime Minister: I have been careful not to tempt fate and jinx the result. I am a passionate Arsenal and England supporter and have watched many games with agonising moments; on the question of a bank holiday, the hon. Gentleman should ask again on Sunday.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): The Prime Minister will not need reminding about Arsenal's success in the premier league last season and my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) will not want

reminding that Everton, unfortunately for him, came 13th, but what neither of them might know is that the UK finished 20th in the corruption perceptions index, well within the relegation zone. At the Prime Minister's request, last week the Ethics and Integrity Commission produced a comprehensive set of recommendations to tighten up rules around lobbying. In light of recent stories around the leader of Reform UK, does the Prime Minister agree—

Mr Speaker: Order. I call the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: I pay tribute to the commission and its work. The work of strengthening our democracy will, and must, continue.

Q15. [901042] **Susan Murray** (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): I wish the Prime Minister well in what he does next. The future of communities like mine in Mid Dunbartonshire is uncertain in areas where hyperscale data centres are set to be built. The large data centres in Scotland's planning system could demand more power than the whole of Scotland needs at its winter peak. Can the Prime Minister assure my constituents that they will not find themselves fighting for electricity during the cold winter days?

The Prime Minister: It is very important that we have all the resources we need to provide the energy we need, and to bring the price of energy down, and that is what we are doing.

Mr Speaker: I call Carolyn Harris to ask the final question.

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): I can do this. Can I thank my right hon. and learned, and very dear, Friend for everything he has given to our party and our country? There were few who believed we could make the changes needed to bring in a Labour Government after the general election of 2019, when he became leader. Today, though, because of his service and his leadership, children are growing up in a fairer Britain. We stand tall on the world stage, and every day,

we have seen his decency and his courage shine through. My family and I thank him and his wonderful family for their cherished friendship, and I am certain that everyone will join me in wishing him and his family the very, very best for their next chapter.

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for her question, her support and her friendship for me, Vic and the kids. Whatever the challenge, she has always been there for us, particularly Vic and the kids, and I really thank her for that.

This will be my last answer from this Dispatch Box. Every Prime Minister knows when they take up the torch that the day will come when they have to pass it on. That day has come for me. This is the end of my political journey. In six years, we went from historic defeat in 2019 to historic victory in 2024, and after two years in government, I leave the country in better shape than I found it in. I am proud of everything that we have achieved.

Can I just take time to say to you, Mr Speaker, and to all those who work for the House and in our constituency offices, thank you for all your hard work? To our civil service, thank you, also, for all your hard work. To my political team—many of them here today—who came on this journey with me, thank you so much for everything you have done, and for being prepared to walk through fire for me. To my colleagues on the Labour Benches, I am proud of all we have achieved together, and proud of each and every one of you. To my successor and each of you, I will give my full support. To all colleagues across the House, I wish you good health and happiness. To all those in the Gallery whose lives have been changed or improved by this Labour Government, and all those across the country who struggle to be seen or heard, you are the reason I came into politics. To my wife and children, I love you. Goodbye. *[Applause.]*

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just say, as the curtain has fallen and this House quite rightly cheers out the Prime Minister—*[Applause.]* I am sorry that we are still clapping. We do not do clapping in the House; we cheer, or hold our Order Papers up. That is the farewell that we should always give to a Prime Minister.

National Energy System Operator: Blackout Risk

12.51 pm

Claire Coutinho (East Surrey) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero if he will make a statement on allegations from whistleblowers within the National Energy System Operator regarding summer blackout risk.

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): On 7 July, the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), wrote to the Government alleging practices of poor information handling in NESO and interference in operational decision-making in the control room. The Government take this issue incredibly seriously. Since the allegations came to light, we have been engaging with NESO and Ofgem to establish the facts. Both my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and I have spoken to the chief executive of NESO.

NESO has now appointed an external legal firm to conduct a full investigation into the claims, and a report is to be delivered to the board's head of risk and controls and to Ofgem in the coming weeks. The legal firm will interview members of the control room, without any other NESO employees present. NESO has already responded publicly that all operational decisions are taken solely by authorised operational control room personnel, and that NESO does not instruct employees to avoid retaining records. We will work closely with Ofgem to monitor both the progress and the outcome of the investigation. However, it would be wrong to pre-empt that outcome, and the investigation must be allowed to run its course.

I want to make it clear that during this period of unprecedented extreme heat, the Great British grid remains stable. No customers were impacted by tight electricity margins, and NESO had a number of tools available to ensure our energy security. Great Britain has one of the most resilient energy systems in the world, and the Government work closely with NESO and the wider sector to ensure that this resilience is constantly maintained. Market notices, such as those issued by NESO during the heatwaves, are standard operational tools that can be used to support energy security, and these were used successfully to maintain grid stability. However, it is important to acknowledge that extreme heat events, such as those experienced this summer, are likely to occur more frequently as our climate continues to change.

My Department will continue to work with NESO and Ofgem to identify any lessons from these events, and to work to ensure that our electricity system remains resilient. Ofgem, as the independent regulator, is also working with NESO to initiate a formal review of events during the June heatwave. I welcome this important transparency, and look forward to working with NESO and Ofgem on taking forward the lessons learned.

Claire Coutinho: Control room operators at the National Energy System Operator have the life-or-death job of balancing our electricity supply and demand. If they do not get it right, we will have blackouts, and in blackouts, people die; it is that serious. That makes what I am about to say all the more extraordinary.

I have been approached by multiple whistleblowers within our grid operator. Their allegations are: first, that on 23 June, the operator failed to meet the grid security standards put in place to prevent blackouts; secondly, that the corporate affairs team interfered with operational decisions—that is not something that the Minister denied—putting the reputation of the operator above security of supply; and thirdly, that operational decisions are being recorded in live documents, with no audit trail. Again, the Minister did not deny that.

I first raised questions on 2 June. Since then, we have had three public electricity margin notices—warnings to the market that we may be short on supply. I cannot stress enough that this is completely unprecedented. Multiple whistleblowers have now come forward. This, too, is unprecedented. I have raised this matter twice in the House. Despite the seriousness of the allegations, the Government shockingly dismissed me on both occasions as “scaremongering”. Considering the consequences of blackouts to people's lives, that is nothing short of a disgrace.

NESO has now agreed to hold an external independent investigation. That is positive. However, while the Government wash their hands of this situation, the investigation that has been set up is a complete sham. It will not look into whether the grid is being run securely, or whether there was a breach of security standards on 23 June. It does not grant anonymity to any control room operator who wants to come forward. Those who are not selected by NESO management will have to ask those managers if they can participate, if they have concerns. Remarkably, on an all-staff call on Monday, the chief executive of NESO prejudged the outcome of the investigation by calling the allegations false, while senior management said that the whistleblowers had let them down. Let me be clear: the whistleblowers who have put the national interest over their own careers should be celebrated for their courage and integrity, not denigrated. Will the Government finally get a grip on this? Can the Minister guarantee that every single control room operator who wants to share their concerns will be given the opportunity to do so anonymously?

Mr Speaker: Order. Can I just remind those on the Front Bench—it is nothing personal; far from it—that you have only two minutes? Please, can we can try to stick to the rules? It makes things hard when we do not.

Michael Shanks: First, I reiterate what I said at the beginning of the statement. The shadow Secretary of State raised these concerns about whistleblowers who had been in touch with her for the first time at Department for Energy Security and Net Zero oral questions. I said to her, in that session, that if she had details, she should share them with the Department. She did that, and subsequently we have taken this matter incredibly seriously. A process has been put in place; an independent review will be conducted, taking into account the information that she has shared. If she has more information from subsequent whistleblowers, I am sure that she will share that with us.

We take this matter seriously. Nobody is washing their hands of this matter at all. As I have said to the shadow Secretary of State before, though, she is conflating two things, I think wilfully. There are questions to be asked about things that have been raised with her by

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whistleblowers, which we will now investigate. However, she suggests that the electricity grid was in a state in which blackouts were imminent, which is simply not the case. I gently say to her that it is irresponsible to suggest, in this place and on social media, that our energy system was at risk in recent periods. Electricity margin notices are a standard tool. I do not have time to read all the dates on which electricity margin notices were issued under the previous Government, but I can tell the House that they are a standard tool that has been deployed a number of times. We all have a duty to be careful about our words in this House. Ramping up the rhetoric does not get to the facts that we both share an interest in understanding. I make that point first.

Secondly, can I just endorse the comments she made at the beginning about the critical role that operators in the NESO control room play every day? I was privileged to visit the control room in my role, and to see the job that they do. They have an enormous amount of responsibility on their shoulders; we should recognise how seriously they take their role. This investigation, which is independent from NESO, is so important for uncovering the facts. The terms of reference have been published, and are available on Ofgem's website. They state clearly that power system managers and other control room personnel who worked on shift during the period in question will be interviewed.

However, it is right and proper that, as I think everyone in the House would expect, we wait for the outcome of an inquiry that will take a matter of weeks to establish the full facts, so that we can use any additional learning from it, but also so that we can continue to ensure that the country is confident that our energy system is resilient. We met the electricity demand on every single one of the days in question, although I do not doubt for a second that it was difficult on some of those days, as it was throughout Europe. The solution to that is to invest further in the stability of the grid, and also to tackle the fundamental question of why our temperatures are rising year after year, the answer to which is climate change.

If the right hon. Lady genuinely believes in the long-term impact of what is happening, I hope she will change course herself and support the policies that would tackle it. In the meantime, we will take this issue seriously. We will investigate all allegations that come to us to ensure that there is confidence in the energy system, and that it is operating exactly as we would expect it to.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Last week the Committee heard from Claire Dykta, the director of strategy and policy at NESO, who told us:

"Operational decisions are taken by authorised, trained personnel only."

Her comments were confirmed by Alastair Martin, the chief strategy officer at Flexitricity, who, in the same session, said:

"I do not think the idea that the head office at NESO told the control room what to do is plausible."

Does the Minister agree that it is important for public reassurance, especially at a time of threats to energy security, that the line is not crossed in any way between

properly evidenced scrutiny on one hand and conjecture on the basis of rumour, which is verging on scaremongering, on the other?

Michael Shanks: I welcome my hon. Friend's comments. Let me first reiterate that, as I said a moment ago, incredibly skilled staff work in the control room 24/7 to ensure that we are balancing our electricity demand and supply across the country, and have done so without any disruption to that supply; I pay tribute to the work that they do.

What I said earlier in response to the shadow Secretary of State was not that the allegations that have emerged today were somehow scaremongering. If whistleblowers have raised concerns, it is right and proper that we investigate them fully, and we will absolutely do that. However, it is scaremongering to take to social media or come to the House and somehow imply that we were close to blackouts, which is simply not the case. We have a responsibility in this House not to ratchet up the rhetoric simply to get some retweets on Twitter, but to take seriously the job of balancing our energy system, as we did every single day—and NESO has confirmed that.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): These allegations are extremely serious. If it is true that NESO bosses instructed control room staff to conceal evidence of grid instability from public scrutiny, that is a shocking breach of trust from a taxpayer-owned body. The investigation must be genuinely independent and its full findings must be published openly, not quietly filed away. However, let us also be clear about the fact that this is not a verdict on renewables, much as science-denying climate change sceptics wish to push that idea. It is a warning sign that our grid is straining under record heat, that ageing gas plants are failing, and that there have been years of under-investment in storage and capacity. The Government must get very serious about grid resilience. Will the Minister guarantee protection for those who have come forward, commit himself fully to a genuinely arm's length investigation, and guarantee full transparency in respect of the findings of that investigation?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman has made a number of important points. The terms of reference are available on Ofgem's website for the inquiry that NESO has commissioned an independent law firm to carry out. It will conduct interviews with staff who were in the control room on that day to get to the bottom of the allegations that have been made, because it is right for us to take them incredibly seriously, and transparency will be an important part of that. I should add, however, that if there are lessons to be learned, it is critical that we implement them very quickly. NESO has already said—and the inquiry will discover further details in this regard—that corporate affairs staff are present in the control room at a number of times, but that they do not interfere in any way with operational decisions. Obviously the inquiry will get to the bottom of the operator's views on that, but that is the point that it has made in recent days.

As for the hon. Gentleman's wider point, I agree with him. It is important for us to recognise that grid stability is foundational to everything in our energy system. That is why we are investing record amounts in upgrading the grid so that it is resilient for the future; it is also why we are looking at how we invest in, for instance, storage—which the hon. Gentleman rightly mentioned—so that we can store renewable energy that we are generating until when we absolutely need it, and have more tools at our disposal at moments of tight margins such as the one under discussion. As I have said, however, although at times frequency moved outside the normal operating range, it never moved outside the statutory limits. We met demand for all customers, and there was no disruption for customers at all. That is an important fact that is borne out by all the data that has already been published, although it does not take away from the fact that if we have lessons to learn from those incidents, we will absolutely learn them.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee.

Mr Toby Perkins (Chesterfield) (Lab): I commend my hon. Friend's approach. He is right to say that these allegations are incredibly serious, and that it is crucially important not only for there to be a full investigation but for it to be seen to be independent so that people can have confidence in it. He is also right to draw attention to the difference between the concerns that are raised by those whistleblowers and any suggestion that our grid is about to lead to blackouts. Does he agree that while it is absolutely true that one of the terrible legacies that this Government inherited from the last Government was a grid that had been woefully under-invested in for a very long time, and that there is a substantial need for investment in it in order to achieve our energy ambitions, that should not be allowed to be conflated with the suggestion that the lights are about to go out? Can he give confidence to my constituents this summer that NESO has given him all the assurances that he needs that there will be no blackouts?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which he has framed his remarks. He is right to say that these are incredibly serious allegations, and we take them with the seriousness with which they should be taken and will take on board any lessons learned. As for his point about the importance of grid investment, we inherited a grid that was not only in dire need of investment, but had not been designed to meet the full needs of generation that had been built for many years and not connected. We are currently constraining renewable energy that has been built over the past few years because it had not been connected to the grid. We are doing that work to ensure that the grid can continue to do what it needs to do.

As for my hon. Friend's final point, let me state very clearly that electricity supplies were maintained throughout the June heatwave. No customer demand was subject to disconnection. Statutory frequency limits were maintained throughout the event, and the largest credible loss that could have occurred was also covered. Let me explain exactly what we mean by the margin in this instance. The margin represents the cushion of spare generation above the peak demand that is maintained by NESO,

and at no point did we come close to breaching that. It did not indicate any kind of emergency situation. Demand was met, and those are the facts.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): When I was in government we conducted one of the largest exercises, Exercise Mighty Oak, which involved more than 4,000 people testing the effect of a power outage. That exercise demonstrated that it cascaded very rapidly and that it very rapidly affected water supply, transport and other public services. Will the Minister confirm that he has had an opportunity to read the findings from that exercise, and can he update the House on what point the Government have reached in implementing its recommendations?

Michael Shanks: I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman, and to all who were involved in that incredibly important exercise. I was not aware of it at all until I came into this job and read the full report, as well as the breakdown of all the actions that had been started during his time in office and have been continued by officials now. As he says, the cascading impacts of a national power outage are extraordinary and very quick, which is why we are first investing in the grid to ensure that that remains a very low risk on the national risk register, and secondly taking forward all those actions. I do not have the detail in front of me, but very few of the actions remain open; most have now been completed. We are also, across Government, continuing to organise exercises—on a much smaller scale—to ensure that Ministers are prepared and that we continue to keep on top of the actions, because these are not one-time events. The water industry, to which the right hon. Gentleman rightly referred, must continue to look at preparedness. That is the wider work that we are taking forward on resilience.

Ms Polly Billington (East Thanet) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for coming to the House and providing clarity and reassurance that the allegations will be taken seriously, but does he agree that alongside the transparency of this process comes the need for responsible reporting and a responsible Opposition? The electricity margin notices are a standard tool that NESO has used for many years, and that includes the time when the Opposition were in government.

Michael Shanks: Yes, I agree. At the risk of repeating myself, electricity supplies were maintained throughout this period. Tight margins were caused by unprecedented warm weather—as I think we can all testify, having lived through it that week—and we were not alone in that. Other European countries were facing similar challenges and similar pressures on their electricity systems because of the extreme weather. I say gently that our aim as a House should surely be to do everything we can to prevent that extreme weather from becoming even more frequent, and I hope we will rebuild some of the consensus on that.

My hon. Friend is right to say that the margin notices are a standard operational tool. Although there is enough generation available on the system to meet demand, NESO would like to have an even bigger cushion on that generation, and that is what the electricity margin notices are for. They were withdrawn because that generation was met, and at no point were any customers disconnected.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): There is complete chaos at the National Energy System Operator. Whistleblowers are phoning politicians to express their concerns about blackouts. Independent investigators have had to be appointed, and NESO had to cut the interconnector for exports, without notice, in order to guarantee supplies. I wrote to the chief executive, Fintan Slye, two weeks ago, but I have had no reply to my detailed question. There is arrogance and complacency from the Minister. Can he guarantee that there will be no blackouts? Does he have complete confidence in the chief executive? And will the independent investigation be published for us all to see?

Michael Shanks: It is right and proper that we are talking about this issue, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that there is absolutely no complacency on my part or that of the Government. I take my responsibilities incredibly seriously, as do NESO and Ofgem, the operator, and I think he should be careful of his language on an issue as serious as this. *[Interruption.]* He shouts from a sedentary position about blackouts. That is exactly the point I am making: this is irresponsible language. We are not debating across the House, and it is totally irresponsible.

I am not sure how much more clearly I can say it to the House, but I can point the hon. Gentleman to some published reading material on the nature of what happened during that week. I have not denied at all that an extreme weather event caused pressure on the grid, but at no time did frequency move outside the normal operating range, at no time did we not meet demand across the country, and at no time were we close to disconnecting anyone whatsoever from the system, let alone to a potential blackout, as he frequently likes to share on social media.

We have a robust and resilient energy system that came under pressure, and it responded exactly as it should. The allegations that have subsequently been made about how decisions were made that day are serious and will be taken seriously in the investigations, and we will learn any lessons that come from that, but that does not detract from the fact that we met electricity demand on every single one of the days that it was under pressure. He can dispute that all he wants, but it is a basic fact.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): It is right that an investigation into these allegations has been confirmed, and I welcome reassurances that the grid remains stable. As an electrical engineer, I have always been in awe of the work of our grid, and of the challenges it faces: climate change, electrification, the demands of renewables and AI, and cyber-attacks. Could the Minister set out what steps the previous Government took during their 14-year tenure to invest in a more resilient grid, and what steps this Government have taken?

Michael Shanks: In the past two years, during which I have had the privilege of doing this job, my hon. Friend has frequently shared her experiences as an electrical engineer, and she is right. I, too, am in awe of the grid and of the work that its operators do day in, day out as part of the extremely complex job of balancing supply and demand 24/7. I will not get into what the

previous Government did or did not do, but they did not do enough. I am not saying that they had no interest whatsoever in this issue, but there was clearly a long period in which there was not enough investment to build the grid that we need for the future. They did not maintain the resilience of the grid or invest enough to ensure that it was able to cope with these kinds of weather events, which we know will become much more frequent, so there has to be increased investment.

That is why we are driving forward the biggest upgrade in the grid in generations, and the work that the operators do at NESO is a critical part of that. The system is becoming more complex, which presents opportunities for decentralised energy and for using much more renewables in the system, but it is more complex to manage as well. I am absolutely confident that NESO is able to do that, but this is a lessons-learning exercise and we will learn the lessons from it.

Sir Julian Smith (Skipton and Ripon) (Con): I am really worried about this urgent question. We sat here last night and talked about requiring honesty from public servants, and we voted on the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, but as we have heard from my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State and the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), serious questions have not been answered. The chair of NESO is paid the equivalent of £230,000 a year. Has the Minister met him recently? May I ask about the whistleblowers, who were apparently told by the chief executive yesterday that they had let down the company? On the question that my right hon. Friend asked about record keeping, what discussions has he had with NESO about whether she is correct?

Michael Shanks: The right hon. Gentleman asks a number of questions. On his point about the governance of NESO, I engage with its chair but also with the Government's independent director. NESO is regulated by the independent regulator, Ofgem, which has responded in the last few days by scrutinising and governing the outcomes of the inquiry, as we would expect it to do.

On the right hon. Gentleman's wider point about documents, I am not going to comment on a process that is now under way to establish the truth. The version of events that I have seen suggests that that is not the case, but we are now doing an inquiry to establish the truth about version control, the sharing of documents and everything else. That is one of the key questions in the terms of reference.

The right hon. Gentleman is right to highlight the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, which we voted on yesterday, because transparency is important. I am not seeking in any way to suggest that we should not be transparent, but I am suggesting that we need to let the inquiry run its course so that we can establish the facts before we pass judgment.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): My constituents in Stoke-on-Trent Central are used to just plugging something in, switching a switch and there being electrical power, but I think we can all accept that with extreme weather becoming a bigger pattern in our lives, these events may be more frequent in the future. What conversations is the Minister having with colleagues across Government about developing public education

programmes to explain how consumers can do their bit to help reduce demand at peak times, much like the water companies do when there is extreme heat? Given that we have discussed the speculation, and the whistleblowers who have rightly come forward, on the Floor of the House, can the Minister commit that once the independent inquiry has completed, the report is brought to the House so that we can discuss the outcome with the same prominence as we have discussed the speculation?

Michael Shanks: I thank my hon. Friend for both of his questions. On the first, he is right to imply that it is good that the vast majority of the public do not think about the electricity system at all when they switch things on or off. That is the system working as it should do. He is also right to say that extreme weather events will become more frequent in the years ahead, unfortunately, and we do need to respond to that. That is partly why we are investing in the grid.

My hon. Friend's wider point is about how much we talk to the public about resilience. We are quite an outlier in Europe in not engaging with the public regularly on the question of personal and household resilience, whether during floods, storm events or any other incidents. We will take forward work as a Government to make sure that we are talking to the public much more, so that people are prepared for such circumstances and would be able to respond if they were to occur. On his final point, the report will be published when it comes forward, and I absolutely commit to making sure that the House has a copy.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): I am curious about this mantra that there have not been any blackouts. Over the past six months, businesses in the St John's area of Tunbridge Wells have complained of blackouts. I surveyed my constituents who live in the area, and 60% said that they had experienced some blackouts—not long-term ones, but intermittent blackouts. Will the Government engage with me on this issue and give my constituents some guarantees that the situation will improve?

Michael Shanks: I think we are probably speaking at cross-purposes. I suspect that when the shadow Secretary of State refers to blackouts, she means a national power outage rather than supply disruption, which does happen. I cannot give a guarantee that there will never be some supply disruption, because there are faults in the system and things will occur, which can lead to a temporary loss of supply. If the hon. Gentleman refers to a recurring issue, I am very happy to work with him so that we can make sure that the local DNO or the transmission owner is looking at particular faults. If he writes to me with the details, I will follow up.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): These are very serious allegations. It is right that they are investigated independently, and I think all of us urge NESO to have full candour. Grid stability is really important, and the recent heatwave shows the challenges that climate change brings and the importance of our clean energy transition. Does the Minister agree that nuclear plays a vital role in providing stable baseload energy and supporting grid stability?

Michael Shanks: I congratulate my hon. Friend on getting a question about nuclear into this, and she is absolutely right.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Hear, hear.

Michael Shanks: I agree with my hon. Friend 100%—as, I hear, does the shadow Minister.

This is one of those rare areas where I think we do have complete consensus—well, maybe not complete consensus, but widespread consensus—across the House. Nuclear is going to play a really critical part in our future energy needs. It provides the stable baseload power that runs on the system 24/7 for decades. Nuclear power that we build today could well still be operating by the end of this century. It is an extraordinary technology that we should be supporting and investing in as much as possible. That is why we are taking forward Sizewell C and Hinkley, but also why we have unlocked the small modular reactor programme and are delivering it at scale, and why we will take forward the reforms in the Fingleton review to make sure we can build things even faster in Britain.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can I just point out that the very fact that the Minister is at the Dispatch Box answering this urgent question is itself an indictment of the confidence that not only the public, but people working in NESO, have in the resilience of the system? Can I also point out that commentators have been warning for a decade or more about the risk to the security of supply from the over-reliance on intermittent renewables? While we in the Conservative party have learned that lesson, and are determined to have a much more robust and secure electricity policy, why are the Government doubling down on the risks they are creating by rushing ahead with renewables, vastly expensive grid investment that would otherwise be unnecessary and, of course, these absurd and obscene constraint payments to wind farm operators that cannot feed their electricity into the grid and get paid for it anyway, costing customers billions of pounds?

Michael Shanks: There was a lot there, but I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman is not happy to see me at the Dispatch Box. I am very happy to see him in his place, and to be here to answer this important urgent question. On security of supply, let me say that, yes, renewables are not going to be the entirety of our mix at all times. That which is why nuclear is important as well, it is why storage is important—so we can store energy for when we need it—and it is why our interconnectors to Europe are critical.

The hon. Gentleman said two things in his question that I think show the problem with the Conservative party's logic at the moment. First, on an urgent question about the resilience of our grid, he is saying that we should not invest in the future of the grid, which is the very thing that would lead to more issues with grid resilience. *[Interruption.]* The hon. Gentleman did just say that. If Opposition Front Benchers read his question back, I think they will see that he did.

The hon. Gentleman's second point is rightly a challenge about constraint payments, which we should not be paying, but I gently challenge him: if we had not built

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renewables without strategically planning where they were and the grid to connect them into, we would not be paying that money. His party may want to reflect on exactly why that happened. We are fixing the problems we inherited, and that involves investing in the grid.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, I wish you a belated happy Yorkshire Day for yesterday. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oof!"] It's all right—he didn't hear me!

I thank the Minister for his answers so far and the shadow Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for East Surrey (Claire Coutinho), for bringing forward this urgent question. This is a really important issue and my constituents will be keen that it is dealt with. I think we would all reflect that, as we move more and more towards reliance on technology, grid connection and resilience are hugely important. Could the Minister tell us more about what he is doing to ensure we have grid resilience in Harlow, in the east of England and across the UK?

Michael Shanks: I almost thought my hon. Friend had asked a question without mentioning Harlow, but we got there in the end. I am afraid I cannot give him a specific answer about the work we are doing on the grid in Harlow, but I can confirm that we will be investing in ensuring that the grid is as resilient as it can be for all his constituents in Harlow.

We are doing two things with the grid that really matter. One is recognising the scale of investment that is necessary to connect not just renewables, but the economic opportunities, growth projects and demand projects that need electricity, and we need the upgrade of the grid to do that. Secondly, we are reforming the grid so that it works much more efficiently. We are reforming the connections queue, which got completely out of control under the previous Government, so that projects can connect, and businesses and households in my hon. Friend's constituency can benefit from clean, cheap, secure, home-grown power.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I have some sympathy with the Minister's situation, because this is a highly technical issue, and presumably he will have been briefed to deal with this urgent question by the senior management at NESO—or at least they will have briefed the civil servants who briefed him. What is bothering me is the lack of independence in this process. It appears that the senior management made an all-staff call in which they denounced the whistleblowers as having let the company down. From what the Minister said, it appears that the firm that is going to conduct the inquiry is an independent legal firm, which will be paid by the senior management of NESO. Would it not be better, from the point of view of objectivity and transparency, for Ofgem to engage whoever is going to conduct this inquiry, not the very people whose own careers will be on the line if the whistleblowers are vindicated?

Michael Shanks: First, I am not going to comment on leaks from internal conversations that may or may not have happened. I was not in the meeting, so I am not going to comment.

On the right hon. Member's point about the review's independence, I do not know Eversheds Sutherland, but I am sure it would challenge his view that it is not independent. It has been asked to carry out an independent review. The findings will be reported to the independent director on the NESO board, and it will be shared with Ofgem. I have also committed to sharing it more widely. If there remain questions that the process has not answered, clearly we will look at what further investigation is necessary.

I take this matter incredibly seriously. At the bottom of it all, this is not about trying to conclude some process; it is about trying to understand the concerns of the whistleblowers, who have shared their information with the shadow Secretary of State. They have not shared it with me; all I have seen is a summary of those points in a letter—a one-page letter—from the shadow Secretary of State. I have not seen the detail of the allegations, and she has not shared the details with the Government. However, we take this seriously. We have to get to the bottom of the matter and find the truth, and we will do whatever is necessary to do that.

Rachel Gilmour (Tiverton and Minehead) (LD): I should remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. For 30 years, I have been a member of the GMB trade union, where I was greatly supported as a whistleblower, and I have just joined the board of WhistleblowersUK.

With that in mind, what is the Minister doing to actively protect whistleblowers who come forward with serious concerns about both public and private organisations, and will the Government heed Liberal Democrat calls to establish an office of the whistleblower to better help and protect these individuals?

Michael Shanks: First, whistleblowers are protected under legislation, and rightly so. That is important, and we have reiterated to all those involved in this incident that they are protected in law from their employers when coming forward with allegations, as has clearly happened. However, the inquiry should also protect their ability to speak about their engagement in all this without any other NESO staff present, so that their evidence can be compiled for the inquiry report without the management being part of that process. I take the hon. Member's point very seriously.

On the second point about an office of the whistleblower, I am afraid that is not in my portfolio, but I will certainly pass it on to other Ministers.

Douglas Lumsden (Aberdeen South) (Con): This is a really worrying situation that perfectly highlights why we need an energy mix in our grid. In that energy mix, we need to have nuclear, as was mentioned before, but we also need to have gas to provide the inertia in our grid. The people of Aberdeen South understand that, but does the Minister understand that, and is he concerned with the lack of inertia in our grid as we move to more and more intermittent sources?

Michael Shanks: First, no, I am not concerned, because other tools can be deployed to ensure that need is met, and they are being taken forward. Secondly, if the hon. Member looked at the disruption caused by the weather, he would see that a significant part of the issue was

caused by gas power stations not being able to operate at full capacity because of the heat. I am afraid that his suggestion is not quite the silver bullet he thinks it is.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): May I associate myself with the comments of my right hon. Friend the Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) about the management of NESO creating a hostile environment for technicians in the distribution centres? Like the Minister, I have met the individuals in the control rooms, and I have nothing but admiration for them, so for them to be condemned as enemies of the company by being whistleblowers is profoundly wrong.

We have heard Members raise other problems. In particular, the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) spoke about small blackouts in his constituency, and the Minister brushed that off as a little local problem. The reality is that at the moment we use about 36 GW of power, and during the winter we use about 45GW of power, and that is before we have electrified transportation and before we have invested a huge amount in data centres and artificial intelligence. Blackouts are indicators that the grid is not working. A small blackout in Tunbridge Wells is an indicator that there could be big blackouts in the future. What is the Minister doing to resolve these problems?

Michael Shanks: First of all, I did not brush anything off. I gave a very serious answer and said I would follow up with the individual distribution owner to resolve the issue. I said what I hope will be pretty obvious to everyone: that there are faults in the system now and again that lead to temporary disruptions to supply in households and streets, which are corrected by engineers who do an incredible job to fix things and for whom I have huge admiration. That is the nature of the system. I do not think we could ever have 100% of every single part of the system operating—I wish we could—but I did not brush it off in the slightest. I am happy to look into the issue in the constituency of the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) if he wants to raise it with me.

Secondly, the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) refers to—I do not know where this has come from—a “hostile environment” and “enemies of the company”. I have not said anything of the sort here. People have come forward with allegations and we are going to investigate them seriously, because we appreciate the fact that they have incredible skill and knowledge of what is going on in that control room—better than any of us, frankly—from the job that they do day in, day out. An independent inquiry will now interview them to establish the facts. We should wait for those facts before we jump to conclusions.

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): Balancing the grid is really important, but why is the cost of so doing rising from about £1.5 billion a year to £10 billion by 2030?

Michael Shanks: First of all, investment is necessary to bring down the costs in the long term. We are currently paying to constrain the renewables that are generating often much more electricity day after day than we are able to get to homes and businesses. Instead of doing that—paying to both turn off wind and turn

up gas somewhere else in England to fill the gap—we should be building a transmission system that brings that clean power to houses and businesses across the country. That requires an initial investment, but that investment is repaid, long into the future, from the virtually free fuel that comes from solar and wind. Many, many projects were built under the previous Government and I am very happy to champion those projects, but the problem is that they did not connect them.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I welcome the Minister’s response so far, amid the shocking allegations that staff covered up the greater risks of power blackouts during the recent heatwave, but it is not just heatwaves and climate change that are increasing demand for electricity. Artificial intelligence data centres are expanding rapidly across the UK and internationally, bringing with them significant demands not only for electricity, the demand for which is estimated to double globally by 2030, but for water for cooling, land, construction and infrastructure. Will the Minister set out what steps his Department is taking to ensure that the rapid expansion of AI infrastructure does not compromise our energy security, increase the risk of supply shortages or blackouts, place unsustainable burdens on local infrastructure, or leave local communities bearing the costs while others reap the benefits?

Michael Shanks: The hon. Gentleman asks a number of important questions about the role of data centres in the future of the country. First, there is a real opportunity if we get this right, but I take his challenge about properly planning where they should go. Data centres are an opportunity to soak up some of what we are currently constraining, which will actually bring down bills. If we can deploy them in the right places, we get a greater customer base for electricity, rather than consumers paying to switch off.

Secondly, AI is a huge opportunity for us as a country and it will become increasingly important to have sovereign capability here in the UK. In the energy space, there is a real opportunity to utilise AI to run the system in an even more efficient way. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that we have to get this absolutely right so that local communities get the benefits and not any downsides. We are working through a data centre strategy with my colleagues in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology. On the energy side, we are working to ensure that we are getting the best possible locations for the benefit of the energy system and consumers.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister, as always, for his answers and for his solution-based responses. My constituents watch developments with absolute dread, when every day families and vulnerable pensioners face skyrocketing bills. The very least they deserve is the truth about whether the lights will stay on this summer. The Minister will know that that NESO recently signed a major partnership with the system operator for Northern Ireland to deeply integrate our grids and balance system resilience, so a crisis of integrity at the top of NESO is a crisis for the whole United Kingdom network. Can the Minister guarantee that the allegations will not undermine energy security or grid stability in Northern Ireland?

Michael Shanks: I am disappointed, Madam Deputy Speaker. I heard that the hon. Gentleman rapped some of his speech in a Westminster Hall debate today, so I am disappointed that he did not do a rap in his question. He is a man of many talents, but he has disappointed me in this final week before recess!

First of all, he knows that my answer—I hope he never takes it to mean that I am not interested—on the grid in Northern Ireland is always that it is a transferred power, because there is an all-Ireland grid. However, he is right about the connections with NESO. Our interconnectors with Ireland and Northern Ireland are an important part of balancing across the system. When there were storms in Northern Ireland recently and generation was switched off, those interconnectors were vital. The partnership that we have and the partnership between the two system operators are really important, so I will take his points away.

MESSAGE FROM THE KING

The VICE-CHAMBERLAIN OF THE HOUSEHOLD acquainted the House that he had a Message from His Majesty the King to this House, signed by His Majesty's own hand.

The Message was presented to the House, and read to the House by the Speaker, as follows:

His Majesty requests that consideration should be given by the House of Commons to the provision made by Parliament for the financial support of His Majesty and other members of the Royal Household, and to the arrangements to be made for the continuation of such support in the reigns of His successors.

His Majesty desires that the hereditary revenues of the Crown, for any period for which such support is provided, should be at the disposal of the House of Commons.

In commending these matters to His faithful Commons, His Majesty relies on their attachment to his person and family to adopt such measures as may be suitable for the occasion.

Points of Order

1.36 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The leader of Surrey county council wrote to the Department for Transport on 27 March with serious concerns about the future funding arrangements for the A31 corridor scheme in my constituency. Despite my writing twice to the Secretary of State for Transport, and despite being told in response to a written parliamentary question on 18 May that the Government would respond as soon as possible, nearly four months later neither I nor Surrey county council have had a response. Can you therefore advise me, Madam Deputy Speaker, what further avenues are available to me to secure a substantive response from that Department, so that my constituents, Surrey county council and all those affected by this scheme can finally receive the clarity they have been waiting for?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. It is of the utmost importance that Ministers provide timely responses to Members. Those on the Government Front Bench will have heard his concerns, which I hope will be passed on to the relevant Minister. The hon. Member may also wish to raise them with the Leader of the House, who I know takes these matters very seriously, at business questions tomorrow.

Freddie van Mierlo (Henley and Thame) (LD): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I seek your advice on whether the Minister for Digital Government and Data, the right hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray), may have given an incomplete answer that risks being seen as misleading the House. In a response to a question about cuts to funding for the Science and Technology Facilities Council, the Minister noted:

“funding for STFC has not been cut.”—[*Official Report*, 1 July 2026; Vol. 788, c. 894.]

Yet it is only true that there are no cuts if we exclude funding for time-sensitive projects. This has led to confusion among my constituents who are affected by the cuts. Madam Deputy Speaker, could you advise me on how one may seek to ensure that Ministers communicate clearly on matters of such importance?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He will know that Ministers are responsible for the accuracy of their words in the Chamber. If a mistake has been made, I am sure a correction will be forthcoming. If the hon. Member wishes to probe the matter further, he may wish to seek alternative opportunities to question Ministers directly. The Clerks in the Table Office can advise him further.

ROYAL ASSENT

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): 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 Acts:

Supply and Appropriation (Main Estimates) Act 2026
Taxation (Energy and Vehicles) Act 2026
Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Act 2026
Cheltenham Borough Council (Markets) Act 2026.

BILLS PRESENTED**ENERGY AND DIGITAL INFRASTRUCTURE
(PLANNING) BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

John Lamont presented a Bill to make provision about the planning of new energy and digital infrastructure; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 12 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 120).

**MEMBERS OF PARLIAMENT (PROHIBITION OF SECOND
JOBS) (MOTION) BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Richard Burgon presented a Bill to require the Leader of the House of Commons to move a Motion prohibiting Members of Parliament from having paid second jobs; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 16 October, and to be printed (Bill 122).

**SALE AND SUPPLY OF GLUE TRAPS (PROHIBITION) BILL
*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)***

Rebecca Harris presented a Bill to prohibit the sale and supply of glue traps other than to a person with a glue trap licence; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 123).

**GENERAL MEDICAL COUNCIL (FITNESS TO PRACTISE)
RULES (AMENDMENT) BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to provide that an allegation concerning a medical practitioner's fitness to practise may be considered by the General Medical Council irrespective of when the most recent events giving rise to the allegation occurred; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 124).

ACCESS TO ELECTED OFFICE FUND (REPORT) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the merits of reinstating the Access to Elected Office Fund.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 125).

**STREET WORKS (PENALTIES FOR UTILITY COMPANIES)
BILL***Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to make provision for the daily issuance of Fixed Penalty Notices against a utility company which has committed certain offences under the New Roads and Street Works Act 1991; to require the minimum amount of any such penalty to be equal to the costs associated with the issuance of the related Fixed Penalty Notice; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 126).

CHALK STREAMS (SEWERAGE INVESTMENT) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Daisy Cooper presented a Bill to require water companies to prioritise areas with chalk streams and related habitats when investing in new and upgraded sewerage systems, including foul water leak prevention and the replacement or upgrading of porous sewage pipelines; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 15 January 2027, and to be printed (Bill 127).

HUNTING ACT 2004 (AMENDMENT) BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Neil Duncan-Jordan, supported by Sarah Champion, Dr Simon Opher, Alex Sobel, Richard Burgon, Abtisam Mohamed, Nadia Whittome, Mary Kelly Foy, Adrian Ramsay, Kate Osborne, Imran Hussain and Cat Eccles, presented a Bill to amend the Hunting Act 2004; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 19 March 2027, and to be printed (Bill 129).

HOME COOLING BILL*Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)*

Freddie van Mierlo, supported by Layla Moran, Mr Will Forster, Tom Gordon, Ian Sollom, Andrew George, Adam Dance and Vikki Slade, presented a Bill to provide for the zero-rating of VAT in respect of certain home cooling measures; to require the Secretary of State to report to Parliament on the potential merits of providing funding to local authorities in England to enable them to make grants for home cooling measures; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 130).

Registration of Stillbirths (England and Wales)

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

1.42 pm

Jim McMahon (Oldham West, Chadderton and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to permit stillbirths to be registered remotely in England and Wales; and for connected purposes.

I am grateful for the opportunity to introduce the Bill to the House today. It is a modest proposal. It is not about changing the legal definition of stillbirth. It is not about creating a new bureaucracy or imposing additional burdens on public services. It is about making a small change to an existing process that would make a meaningful difference to families experiencing one of the most devastating moments imaginable.

Every parent looks forward to welcoming a new baby into the world. No parent prepares themselves for the prospect of registering their child's stillbirth. However, every year, around 2,400 families in England and Wales experience that loss. On average, around seven babies are stillborn every day. Behind every one of those statistics is a family whose future has changed forever.

The inspiration for the Bill comes from my constituents, Cassie and Ryan Claydon from Chadderton in Oldham, who are here in the Gallery. They experienced the devastating loss of their daughter Matilda at 36 weeks. Like every bereaved parent, they carried hopes, dreams and plans for their daughter that were suddenly taken away. They spoke to me about the grief they experienced in the hours, days and weeks that followed, and the grief that remains with them today. But alongside that grief came something that need never have happened. Like all parents of stillborn babies in England and Wales, they were legally required to attend their local register office in person to register Matilda's stillbirth.

That requirement may seem administrative. It may appear routine. But for grieving parents, it can become another source of trauma. As Cassie described in her petition:

"The in-person requirement meant sitting among new parents, blissfully registering their babies' births. There, in a waiting room filled with celebration, we were engulfed in a contrasting wave of sorrow. This compounded our trauma during what was already the worst moment of our lives."

My constituency office is based at Chadderton town hall, and many people will experience the most significant moments in their lives in that building, because it acts as the registrar's office and the main council venue for weddings and citizenship ceremonies. It holds an important place in the story of thousands of lives in our borough. I hear the joy from reception rooms and from visitors waiting for weddings or to register the birth of a new arrival. I also recognise that for some, it is where they will have to register the death of a loved one, but that is quite different to the loss of a child, where someone must sit and wait with other newborns and their parents.

I know no law can remove the grief of losing a child, but surely the law should not make that grief harder to bear. The change that the Bill proposes is straightforward. It would allow parents the option of registering a

stillbirth remotely, either by telephone, secure video appointment or another approved electronic process. More importantly, this would be an option, not an obligation. Many parents may still wish to attend in person, and they could continue to do so. Others, however, may wish to remain at home, surrounded by family and loved ones, rather than travelling to a register office at one of the darkest moments of their lives. That choice should be theirs.

What the Bill proposes is not an untested innovation. In Scotland, parents have already been offered the option of registering stillbirths remotely. Registrars can conduct appointments by telephone or online, while maintaining the necessary legal safeguards and verification processes. The system works, preserving the integrity of the register process, while giving bereaved families greater compassion and flexibility. If it can work in Scotland, there is every reason to believe it can work in England and Wales.

Indeed, the principle is one that the Government have increasingly embraced in other areas of public administration, with many services now moved online by design. In fact, during the covid-19 pandemic, Parliament recognised that requiring bereaved families to attend in person was neither necessary nor appropriate. Temporary provisions allowed deaths and stillbirths to be registered remotely, with information provided by telephone and other methods. Those temporary changes demonstrated that the system could operate effectively without insisting that grieving families attend in person.

If remote registration was considered sufficiently robust during one of the greatest public health emergencies our country has faced in generations, then surely it can work today. The pandemic showed us that when the Government need to be flexible, they can be. The Bill simply asks that we show the same flexibility because of compassion, rather than a virus. The Bill asks that bereaved parents are afforded the same consideration at all times.

In preparing the Bill, I have also been struck by the work of organisations such as Sands and Tommy's. For decades, they have provided practical advice, counselling and support for families affected by pregnancy and baby loss. They also work tirelessly to improve bereavement care and maternity services across the UK. Their work reminds us that support following baby loss is as much about care and compassion as it is clinical care. It is also about every interaction that families have afterwards with hospitals, with local authorities and with Government itself. We have to put people first. We rightly talk in this House about trauma-informed public services, and it is important that the registration process reflects that.

More broadly, I hope that the Bill prompts us to reflect on how the state interacts with its citizens. Too often, users are expected to navigate processes designed for another era that do not put people first. I also hope that the Bill shows that there is something special about our democratic process. Cassie and Ryan first raised this issue with me at one of my constituency advice surgeries in Royton town hall. They came as grieving parents who believed that something in our law could be kinder than it is today.

Thanks to our parliamentary democracy, constituents can see the issues they raised debated on the Floor of the House and enter the official record. I think there is something profoundly important about that. It

demonstrates that Parliament is at its best when it listens carefully, responding thoughtfully and seeking practical improvements to people's lives.

The Bill has cross-party support. I know that not many ten-minute rule Bills make it into law, but I hope that this is something that the Government can listen to and take forward. For the sake of families like Cassie and Ryan, and in memory of Matilda, I commend this Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Jim McMahon, Rushanara Ali, Anneliese Dodds, Maya Ellis, Carolyn Harris, Simon Hoare, Wera Hobhouse, Alicia Kearns, Uma Kumaran, Andy MacNae, Sarah Smith and Gareth Snell present the Bill.

Jim McMahon accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 4 September, and to be printed (Bill 121).

Iran

1.51 pm

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Iran.

I welcome this opportunity to update the House on the latest developments in Iran, the strait of Hormuz and the wider middle east.

First, as a veteran myself, I know what a remarkable and difficult job Britain's armed forces are doing. From our RAF pilots, who have flown thousands of hours and had more than 115 successful engagements, to our counter-unmanned aerial systems teams, who have helped to provide crucial protection to some of our key allies, our personnel are serving with great courage and professionalism. We are at a critical moment in a conflict that has profound implications for regional stability, the global economy and the safety of British citizens throughout the region, so today we say thank you—

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will the Minister give way?

Mr Bailey: We say thank you to every member of our military in the middle east, saving lives and working with international partners to defend our interests. Britain is proud of you.

Dr Evans: The Minister points out that this is a critical moment. If it is so critical for the national importance of this country, why is the Prime Minister not here to lead this debate?

Mr Bailey: I think it is appropriate that we treat this debate with the appropriate seriousness and that the response comes from people who have this matter as part of their portfolio. I am grateful to be able to speak to the House about the contribution of our brave armed forces personnel, which is why I did not allow the hon. Gentleman's intervention while I was acknowledging their service.

The situation across the region is fast moving. The US has continued to strike Iranian targets this week, including the port cities of Bandar Abbas and Bushehr. A key priority is to reduce Iran's capacity to attack commercial shipping, after Iranian forces struck two UAE tankers in the strait of Hormuz, killing an Indian crew member and injuring eight others, and attacked facilities in Jordan and Bahrain. As a consequence of this volatility, oil prices continue to rise, with Brent crude climbing above \$85 a barrel.

Even as events unfold, this Government's objectives are unchanged. We want to see a diplomatic solution to this crisis. We call for the resumption of a ceasefire and for the United States and Iran to resume negotiations on the memorandum of understanding, leading to a resolution in line with international law. We strongly condemn Iran's reckless attacks this week on commercial shipping and its ongoing indiscriminate attacks against our partners in the region, including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar and Jordan, as well as Houthi attacks on Saudi Arabia.

During the crisis, the UK has surged air power into the Gulf, deploying the joint squadron in Qatar and sending additional jets to provide defensive counter-air to our partners.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): The Minister mentions the attacks that Iran is carrying out. Will he join me in recognising that cyber-attacks are one of the consistent threats Iran has posed to the United Kingdom, and that we must ensure in any negotiation with Iran that those attacks are prevented and stopped?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. As I will go on to say, the things we should be concerned about are not limited to the manifestation of kinetic attacks within the region, but include the things that impact us here at home, such as cyber-attacks.

We have reinforced regional partners' air defence capabilities in Kuwait, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia, as well as embedding aerospace management experts, and deployed HMS Dragon to provide advanced air defence and maritime security capabilities, all of which demonstrates our strong commitment.

Approximately one fifth of the world's oil supply passes through the strait of Hormuz. When that narrow waterway is transformed into a theatre of conflict, working people across Britain and the world pay the price, both in higher fuel bills and energy bills and in wider costs to the economy.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I just wanted to explore the role of our destroyer in the Gulf a little further. The Minister says that it is part of air defence operations. Is it integrated within a system, or is our Royal Navy acting independently?

Mr Bailey: At the moment, the destroyer is part of a UK plan, but, should it be used later, it will form part of a broader design alongside the French—at the moment it is not playing that part. Perhaps I can explore that with the right hon. Gentleman later, or answer in greater detail as I progress.

Across the globe, it is the poorest who feel the impact the most, so we will continue to work alongside our allies to restore freedom of navigation through the strait. The UK is playing its part through the multinational military mission—this is where HMS Dragon would play its role—providing reassurance to commercial shipping and conducting mine clearance operations. Of course, we continue also to protect British lives and interests across the region.

However, it is not just British citizens and military personnel in the middle east who are endangered by Iran. Its far-reaching terror threat extends to the communities, streets and people of the United Kingdom, too. Our security services tracked more than 20 potentially lethal Iran-backed plots on British soil between October 2024 and October 2025, targeting journalists, dissidents and Jewish people living in this country.

Britain treats that threat with the gravity it demands. We have sanctioned hundreds of Iranian individuals and entities, including the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps in its entirety. In May, we unveiled a package of measures directly targeting those who threaten security on our streets. Yesterday, the Foreign Secretary announced sanctions on the Islamic Movement of Companions of the Right. Otherwise known as HAYI, this is the organisation that publicly claimed responsibility for seven attacks at locations in the UK linked to Jewish and Israeli communities and Persian-language media, including the despicable antisemitic arson attack on four ambulances in Golders Green in March.

These are some of the terrible consequences that this war has had in Britain. State actors like these have been working to create division and manipulate young people, including those in my constituency of Leyton and Wanstead. We must not let them succeed in damaging our social cohesion.

Lizzi Collinge (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): The Minister speaks eloquently about the threat that the Iranian regime poses to the freedom of religion and safety of Jewish people and others in Britain. As I am sure he is aware, people in Iran do not enjoy freedom of religion or belief, such as Iranian Christians, some of whom I have met in Morecambe and Lunesdale. The Baha'i people are also routinely persecuted, and people who refute religion and become apostates are treated abhorrently. I want to put on the record the work of Faith to Faithless in supporting people in the UK. Does he agree that every person in Iran deserves freedom of religion and belief and to live in safety?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. Friend for her powerful intervention. It is important to note that that regime does not respect freedom of religion. Back here at home, every one of us, regardless of our faith or religion, must stand up for others.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I welcome the Minister to his place, as this is the first opportunity I have had to do so? I also thank him for the contribution he made in his former life, and the expertise and experience he brings to this Chamber.

I very much welcome the Government's proscription of the IRGC. Indeed, if I had it my way, I would eliminate the IRGC in its totality so that it would not be a problem for anybody else in this world, but that is not something that the Government can do by themselves.

Will the Minister confirm that the Government will go further and seize all the IRGC's assets in this country, including its buildings, banks and accounts, and can he confirm that the IRGC will be held accountable for its actions—for the people it has murdered, the children it has killed, and the women that have been raped and violated? Are the Government collecting the evidence necessary to ensure that those people who are responsible will be accountable for their actions in this world? I know that they will be accountable in the next world, because they will be in hell burning, but before that arrives for them, I would like to see them held accountable in this world.

Mr Bailey: What a great privilege it is to receive my first intervention from the hon. Gentleman. It is important that he gets a full answer to those questions, and my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer) will cover them adequately in his closing remarks.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): On behalf of the Conservative Front Bench, I place on record our absolute agreement with the Minister's tribute to all our armed forces personnel serving in the middle east. Will he briefly look around and confirm that yet again when we are debating defence and security, including threats to UK citizens in this country from Iran, there is no Reform Member of Parliament present in the Chamber of the House of Commons to participate?

Mr Bailey: I thank the right hon. and gallant Member for making that point. If we are going to tackle division, we must all be present and contribute respectfully to these debates. I am very grateful for his remarks. I will not take any more interventions, because I am fast running out of time—[HON. MEMBERS: “More!”]

We have long been clear that any nation that poses such a terror threat abroad, that murders thousands of its own people and brutally suppresses dissent at home, must never acquire a nuclear weapon.

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): Open-source media has highlighted that when the US and Israel struck Iran many months ago, a certain target was destroyed in Tehran. Overnight, a large proportion of Scottish independence media died, which underlines the point about division and protecting the right to self-determination and democracy in this country. Through social media and other means, we are allowing foreign states to play into political division in the United Kingdom. Could my hon. Friend give some insight as to what we are doing collectively to protect against those threats?

Mr Bailey: I thank my hon. and gallant Friend for his powerful intervention and the point he makes. I took a deviation in my speech to highlight how these threats are manifesting on our streets, and it is incredibly upsetting that, as the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) pointed out, there is an absence of certain political voices within the Chamber at this moment.

When we talk about the threats to our nation or the threat of war, we are speaking about nations that are acting within our country to cause division between people and communities and to attack our democracy and our state. We need every voice in the Chamber to contribute to the fight for the fundamentals of our democracy.

The International Atomic Energy Agency estimates that Iran’s total enriched uranium stockpile now stands at 48 times the limit set under the joint comprehensive plan of action. Its stockpile of 60% enriched uranium exceeds 10 IAEA significant quantities—the threshold beyond which the possibility of manufacturing a nuclear device cannot be excluded. Iran does not have a credible civilian justification for enrichment at this level. The international community is not naive about what the stockpile represents. Any final deal must address these concerns comprehensively and verifiably.

The UK stands ready to assist, alongside our European partners. We have the technical knowledge, diplomatic relationships and institutional experience to help bridge these gaps. We are ready to work with the US, Iran and the IAEA to achieve a final deal, including lifting relevant sanctions if Iran takes verifiable steps to end its nuclear programme.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): We want the Minister to go on and on, so we will keep the interventions going. On diplomatic relations, I put on record my condolences on the death of His Highness the Father Amir Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. I thank the Minister for the UK’s leadership in countering Iranian actions in both the strait of Hormuz and this country. I also put on record my own thanks to service personnel who are acting in the region in our interests.

Mr Bailey: My hon. Friend is a campaigner for the personnel at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the things that the Department stands for. He understands the importance of soft power and the relationships he refers to. It is important that we advocate for the Department and the wonderful work that it does, so it is a great privilege to open this debate alongside my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln, who is one of its most powerful servants.

This is a complex and fast-moving conflict that has the potential to escalate. We should not be distracted from our fundamental priorities: to encourage the resumption of negotiations and a ceasefire; to restore freedom of movement in the strait of Hormuz; to deliver the agreements set out in the memorandum of understanding; and to protect British people and interests and stand firmly with our allies. These measures, I believe, are the right ones to dial down hostilities and help us find an enduring, secure solution. I look forward to hearing the contributions of colleagues across the House.

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

2.8 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): First, I welcome the hon. and gallant Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) to his place on the Front Bench. I also welcome this debate, because there are few greater responsibilities of Government than protecting the security of our country and defending Britain’s interests abroad in what is an increasingly dangerous world.

I want to start by touching on the live situation, which remains precarious. It is clear that over the past week or so, escalation has spiralled because of Tehran’s serious violations of the ceasefire. We have seen Iran once again illegally attacking commercial shipping in the strait of Hormuz, violating Oman’s sovereignty in doing so, and striking our allies including Bahrain and Kuwait. They must stop.

Full freedom of navigation must be restored in the strait of Hormuz, and the onus is on Iran to comply. Tolls are not the way forward, and we do welcome the decision by the US not to pursue this. But the question is: what will Britain contribute to efforts to secure the opening of the strait? Last week, my right hon. Friend the Member for Witham (Priti Patel) pressed the Foreign Secretary on that, and few answers were forthcoming. These are serious matters. I hope the Minister will be able to share more detail about what a multinational mission, which the Government have talked much about, could look like.

Iran is not simply another difficult state; it is a terrorist regime that has brutalised its own people, destabilised an entire region, armed terrorist organisations, pursued nuclear weapons in defiance of the international community, supplied drones for Putin’s illegal war against Ukraine and threatened Britain directly through hostile activity and terror plots on our own soil. The regime in Tehran has spread fear through its proxies, Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis. It has imprisoned, tortured and murdered its own citizens for daring to demand basic freedoms. It has exported antisemitism, sponsored terrorism and sought to intimidate democratic nations, including our own.

[Wendy Morton]

No one in the House should be under any illusion about the nature of the Iranian regime or the threat that it continues to pose. An end to the current conflict must address the reasons it began in the first place. We want a settlement that makes Britain safer, protects our close security allies and offers the Iranian people hope of a future free from the repression of the terrorist regime in Tehran.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: My right hon. Friend is making an important and powerful point about recognising exactly what the Iranian regime is. Does she agree that Members of this House—and certainly some of the party members they represent—who, with their warped sense of political priorities, praise the actions of the Iranian regime as somehow justified, should be utterly condemned and have no place in our political discourse or discussion in this country?

Wendy Morton: My right hon. Friend makes a really important point. Though we have tough days in this place, it is important that we remember why we are here and hold respect for one another. Deep down, we also understand the background to some of this conflict, so I agree totally with him. It is important that we use the right language in this place and have the right tone in these often difficult but important debates.

In all this, we need to address the causes of the conflict, not just seek to pause it, and recognise that any lasting settlement must deal with Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons, its sponsorship of terrorism and its willingness to use instability as a tool of statecraft, particularly on the strait of Hormuz. That is what we are facing and dealing with.

Of course, Britain must play its part to help ensure that Iran can never again use the strait of Hormuz as a bargaining chip with which to threaten international security and hold the global economy to ransom. Those are the outcomes that Britain should be working towards. What are the Government's objectives? What does the Minister believe success looks like? What support—militarily, diplomatically or otherwise—have the Government provided to our American allies during this latest phase of the conflict? What guarantees has Britain secured that Iran's nuclear programme will be dismantled? Will we even be at the table like we were in 2015 for the joint comprehensive plan of action?

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): The right hon. Lady raises the JCPOA and the negotiations with Iran 10 or so years ago. Do you think we are closer to a nuclear negotiation today than we were back then? Do you think that negotiating at the start would have been a better approach in this conflict?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before the shadow Minister answers the question, may I remind the hon. Gentleman that “you” is not used in the Chamber because that is directed at me? I am sure he is interested in what I think about these matters, but he may be more interested in what the shadow Minister thinks.

Wendy Morton: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am sure that the hon. Gentleman is interested in what I have to say on these matters. He makes an important

point, but in 2026 we are not dealing with what we faced 10 years ago, hence my asking the Minister what guarantees Britain has secured on ensuring that Iran's nuclear programme will be dismantled.

What commitments have been obtained on curbing Iran's support for Hezbollah, the Houthis and other terrorist proxies? What mechanisms are there for monitoring and enforcing any agreement? What role has Britain actually played in shaping those outcomes? A ceasefire is not in itself a strategy. Peace is not measured simply by words on paper; it must be measured by whether Britain's security is stronger, whether our allies are safer and whether Iran's capacity to threaten the world has genuinely been reduced. On every one of those tests, Ministers have serious questions to answer to this place.

The Iranian regime has already demonstrated how fragile any pause in fighting remains. The regime has continued to threaten international shipping in the strait of Hormuz and to menace our allies across the Gulf, where, I remind the House, there are also thousands of British nationals. When British assets were placed at risk, what was the Government's response? When commercial shipping came under threat, where was Britain's leadership? When our allies looked to one of their oldest security partners for reassurance, what practical support did the Government provide?

Britain has historically played a leading role in Gulf security. We have built partnerships, provided reassurance and helped shape the international response to threats in the region, yet throughout this crisis there has been a growing sense that Britain has been reacting to events, rather than helping to determine them.

Alex Ballinger *rose—*

Wendy Morton: I will give way. I am being generous today.

Alex Ballinger: I thank the right hon. Lady. She talks about the UK's military support in the conflict. I wonder whether she is suggesting that we should have provided support to the Americans during the initial attacks, as some Opposition Members suggested, or whether she is talking about other types of military support. If she could make that clear, that would be helpful.

Wendy Morton: I think we always make our position very clear on all these matters. This debate is about the situation we face today in the Gulf, and it is for the Opposition to ask the Government the questions, and for the Government to explain the answers to the Opposition. We will all have to sit in the Chamber and wait for the winding-up speeches at the end of the debate.

Our allies once looked to Britain as a reliable and dependable partner; increasingly, that confidence is being tested. This is a time for action, not words. The strait of Hormuz is not simply a regional concern, but one of the world's most strategically important waterways. Its security matters to global trade, to international energy markets and to British families who feel the impact when instability drives up prices.

Iran cannot be allowed to use access to this vital route as leverage against the international community whenever it seeks concessions—preventing that must be a central objective of British foreign policy—yet where

is the Government's strategy to ensure that never happens again? Where is Britain's influence in shaping the future security architecture in the Gulf? Where is our leadership? Instead, Ministers have too often appeared to be spectators, rather than participants.

At precisely the moment when Britain should have been strengthening alliances and advancing our national interests, the Government have appeared distracted and uncertain. That matters, because influence is not something that Britain is automatically entitled to; it is something that we must earn. It depends on credibility, capability and the confidence of our allies that Britain will stand alongside them when it matters most. That confidence has been weakened by uncertainty over an unfunded defence investment plan, and by a Government who too often appear reactive, rather than decisive. Nowhere is that clearer than in the Government's handling of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The decision to designate the IRGC as a foreign power state threat is welcome, but it is long overdue. It is not simply another military organisation; it is the principal instrument through which the Iranian regime suppresses dissent, exports violence and spreads extremism. It has crushed protests inside Iran, financed terrorism abroad, facilitated sanctions evasion, spread propaganda, intimidated dissidents living here in Britain and repeatedly threatened our national security.

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): Does the right hon. Lady not recognise that everything she has just accused the Government of not doing is exactly what her Government did not do for 10 years? The IRGC is exactly the same now as it was when her party was in government. I am not a great supporter of the Labour Government, as Labour Members will be quick to say, but please do not take the moral high ground when it comes to proscribing the IRGC.

Wendy Morton: The hon. Gentleman from the SNP makes a very interesting point, but what did his party ever do on that front? I also remind Government Members that they have been in power for two years. They have had plenty of time. It is no good always throwing the "14 years" argument at us. They have had two years.

Our security and intelligence services deserve enormous credit for disrupting Iranian-linked plots against individuals in this country, but they should not be expected to carry that burden without the full backing of Government. Earlier this year, when protesters in Iran faced violent repression at the hands of the IRGC, the Opposition repeatedly offered to work constructively with Ministers to pass emergency legislation. Those offers were ignored, valuable time was lost and the threat continued.

The Government must explain how the designation will be enforced. How will those acting on behalf of the IRGC in Britain be identified? How will Iranian financial networks operating in the United Kingdom be dismantled? What steps are being taken to prevent our financial system from being used to launder funds linked to the Iranian regime and its terrorist activities? When will Ministers finally be able to say that Iran's corrosive influence inside Britain has properly been disrupted? Announcements alone do not keep the public safe; enforcement does.

We should not forget the Iranian people. Our argument has never been with them; indeed, no people have suffered more at the hands of their regime than the

people of Iran. Millions of brave Iranians have risked everything in pursuit of freedom, democracy and the rule of law. Many have paid with their liberty, and many with their life. Tens of thousands were slaughtered earlier this year simply for wanting the basic freedoms that we enjoy.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: May I add to what my right hon. Friend has said? I have constituents who are victims of the Iranian regime, and who have gone through torture. Victims of torture carry the scars, as do those mourning and victims of repression, as my right hon. Friend said.

Wendy Morton: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. It is important that we remember the victims and their families. That should push us to continue to seek not just answers, but actions and outcomes. Britain should always stand with those who seek freedom, and against those who seek to crush it.

The conflict has exposed some uncomfortable truths for us at home. National security depends on economic strength. Every threat to the strait of Hormuz sends shockwaves through global energy markets; every escalation in the Gulf has consequences for British businesses and households; and every hostile state that we seek to deter requires us to have credible military capability that supports our diplomacy. That is why Britain must match its global ambitions with the necessary resources. We continue to believe that Britain should spend 3% of GDP on defence by the end of this Parliament. The threats facing our country have changed, and our response must reflect that reality.

The crisis underlines why energy security is national security. We should strengthen our domestic energy resilience, expand secure sources of supply and reduce our dependence on hostile regimes that seek to weaponise energy for political gain. A stronger economy, greater energy security and stronger national defence are not separate objectives. They are essential parts of the same national strategy of making Britain more resilient, more self-sufficient and better able to defend our interests in an increasingly dangerous world. Iran remains a grave threat. Its ideology has not changed, its hostility towards Britain has not changed and its sponsorship of terrorism has not changed.

We should not judge success simply by whether the missiles have stopped for today, but by whether the regime's ability to threaten us is weakened, Britain's security is stronger, our allies are safer and the Iranian people are closer to freedom. That requires more than expressions of concern and carefully worded statements; it requires a Government with clear objectives, a coherent strategy and the determination to use British influence in defence of Britain's national interest. That is the leadership that has been so clearly missing throughout this crisis.

2.24 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): It is a day of sad farewells, and I will add to them by saying a very sad farewell from all of us across the House to Margaret and Godfrey in the Tea Room, who are leaving soon. I did not expect to be so emotional, but here we are.

I want to say something very clear and simple about what the Iran war means for us. It shows us that our affordability and security crises are intertwined, and

[Dr Jeevun Sandher]

that they lean on each other. More than that, it shows us that while we deal with those crises through policy, we also need a political vision that can unite us as we face the most important and dangerous Parliament in almost a century.

Since the Iran war started, we have seen oil and gas prices rise significantly. Oil prices are up by around 30%, and gas prices are up by 70%. The longer the strait remains closed, the worse that will get. What does that mean for us at home? It means higher prices and less affordable lives, but more than all that, it means more anger and fury on our streets. As people become unable to afford decent lives, they get angry at the system and angrier at us in this place. If we do not make their lives affordable, we cannot expect them to have a stake in, or defend, our nation. Only by ensuring that every single person has a reason to believe in this country and this place, and only by making lives affordable, can we ensure that we defend ourselves at home. We cannot ask people to risk or give up their life for a country that does not guarantee a decent life to them or their children.

As for our security crisis, we see that the far more unstable and dangerous world that we face is one in which the economy and affordability get worse. We are dependent on fossil fuels sold by dictators, including those in the most dangerous parts of the world, and that lack of security in energy abroad hits us here at home. The world is changing before our eyes. America's eyes are no longer focused on Europe as much as they used to be; they are turning to Asia and the middle east.

It is clear to us in European NATO, and it should be clear to us in this House, that we must take more steps to defend ourselves. We as individuals all have a responsibility to state very clearly that we must defend this nation. The only way we prevent war is by preparing for one. It is the only way that we keep this country and our constituents safe for this generation and generations to come.

Finally, we see a nation that is far more divided and angry than ever before, partly because people cannot afford a decent life, but also because when they turn on their screens, they see war in the middle east, wildfires across the globe and a world that is far less secure and stable. They do not believe in us because they do not see a way for us to provide a decent future for them. That is on us to fix.

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I only intervene on the hon. Gentleman because he said "finally", so I assume that he is coming to the end of his speech. [Interruption.] Apparently not. Perhaps he is about to come on to this, but I have not heard him yet condemn Iran for its actions, both against its own people and across the region. He talks about destabilisation and war. Iran is the catalyst and the instigator of the destabilisation not just in Iran, but in Israel, Yemen and further afield. Will he not condemn Iran for all that it is doing?

Dr Sandher: Short answer: yes. Longer answer: I think everyone across this House would give that condemnation as well. The latest conflagration, by our understanding, is that Iran struck a tanker, and that led to the end of the ceasefire. That is making us far poorer at home, but it is also making the region less secure and stable.

I say this to every Member in the House: although we disagree strongly and deeply, a lot unites us at this moment. Members from across the House were able to unite to face challenges a century ago, and I hope that we can do exactly the same, as we should, now and in the future.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I am listening carefully to the hon. Gentleman. He makes some powerful points. He talked about people noticing what is going on. Will he explore that in his speech? I know that he is excellent at responding while on his feet. People can and cannot see things; when there was a cyber-attack on M&S, its shelves emptied, so people would have been able to see the direct consequence of a cyber-attack on a supermarket. They did not see it, however, because they just went to the next supermarket. Will he expand on how we make the public see the threat?

Dr Sandher: I think we have to explain it to the public, although they also saw the attack on Jaguar Land Rover and they understand the attack on sea cables. They are seeing it on the news more and more often. They understand that Russia is a threat, and they see the prices at the pump.

What is far more dangerous for us is that this slow-building crisis is much harder to deal with than a rapid one. The idea that we have war in Europe is now something we accept. Since 1945, we have not really had to take on board the idea that we can redraw borders by force, that military action can once again be here and that NATO can be tested. This is a new thing for us, so we have to tell the public both that war is on our doorstep and that resilience is now far more important.

For us, there is clearly a path forward, with two sets of policies: first, make life affordable; secondly, defend our nation. In terms of making life affordable, there is an immediate challenge. We are seeing higher fossil fuel prices leading to higher energy costs at home, and food and fertiliser getting more expensive. There are ways we can get costs down, and some of them are a bit easier than others. We can invest in clean energy and we can do direct reductions in energy bills, but for other things, like food, it is more difficult for us. That is why we need the second policy. We must also create good jobs in every single part of this country, but especially in those post-industrial areas where there have not been enough good jobs for an incredibly long time. Those are the places that are turning away from us and, indeed, from most of the Opposition parties as well.

Dr Evans: The hon. Gentleman has rightly pointed out that there is a dichotomy here. His Government have come forward with a defence investment plan that is £5 billion short. Given his esteemed career as an economist, will he tell us where that money is going to come from? What is he suggesting to his Defence Secretary and the future Prime Minister about how to stop that gap? As he rightly pointed out, the cost of living is going up for the individual taxpayer.

Dr Sandher: First, I would like to thank the hon. Member for calling me an esteemed economist while the Whips are sitting on the Front Bench. He will appreciate that I am not going to annoy any Chancellor by putting forward any kind of tax rises today, but there is a clear commitment on the Labour Benches to fund the defence investment plan. The hon. Member is right

to say that, fundamentally, we need to fund defence in this country, because the only way we can prevent war, and live up to our promise to ourselves, is to ensure that we prepare for one. Part of that is about funding, which is important, but it is also about the defence economic strategy. It is not just about the munitions and drones we are producing today; it is about how we scale that up in the case of a conflict. How do we make a conflict unthinkable because people know that the British state would stand with our NATO allies to win it convincingly?

Dr Evans: The defence chief said that we needed £28 billion for defence, but the hon. Gentleman's Government have brought forward £15 billion, of which there is a £4.7 billion shortfall. Therein lie the gap and the problem, because there is a difference between what we will need to achieve that ability to deter and actually providing it. What are his thoughts on that?

Dr Sandher: I have every confidence that we will prevent war by preparing for it, and that we are going to fund that, but beyond the funding, which is important, how do we ensure that we can achieve the scale-up that we need? How do we show that we can defend this country? The hon. Member and I may have a back and forth, but I think we agree that we need to help to defend this nation. There are Members of this House, however—they are obviously not in their seats today—who do not feel the same way. There are Members of this House who want to divide us, who are far too pally with Putin and who want to see us become weaker and more divided, because that is how they get what they want. They are part of an unholy alliance of ethnocrats and, as we are seeing now, cryptobillionaires. They want to see anger and division on one side and tax cuts for their billionaire mates on the other. Those are the people that all of us in the House today stand against, whether they are arguing with a bin or not. This is where we are.

A House divided against itself cannot stand, and nor can our nation. The only way we can ensure that we meet the moment presented to us by this war in Iran, and indeed by all conflicts around the world, is by first making life affordable for every single person so that they have a stake in this nation, and also by securing our nation and making it safer, in order to get costs down here at home. We on the Labour Benches know now what we have always known: that the only way we can meet this moment is together, that we are more than the sum of our parts and that can we achieve affordability and security through our common endeavour. Together we will, but divided we absolutely will not.

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

2.35 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The picture in Iran remains volatile. We have seen renewed military strikes, threats against ships in international waters and rhetoric that keeps ratcheting upwards. Put together, that is the kind of mix that tips into a spiral that nobody in this House wants. The Liberal Democrat position has not shifted on this issue, and our leader has been consistent in this House. We opposed escalating the situation militarily from the start, because it contravenes international

law and because middle eastern conflicts have a track record of running on long after the promises made at the outset, and of leaving the region worse off than it was before.

What is needed now is diplomacy and restraint, backed by a real commitment to keep the situation from tipping back into something far worse. The UK Government should be working every diplomatic channel they have to get Washington and Tehran back to the negotiating table as soon as possible. Let me be clear: this was an illegal war started by a reckless and irresponsible President. Trump, together with Benjamin Netanyahu, led the US and Israel into this war without a plan. As a result, NATO is less secure and Trump has been humiliated by his arrogance. None of this excuses Tehran, however. The regime bears real responsibility for the instability we are seeing. It is funding terror groups such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, targeting shipping lanes, holding foreign nationals without cause and crushing dissent at home. Iran can also never be allowed to develop nuclear weapons, but that goal must be achieved through diplomacy not through force of arms.

Roughly a fifth of the world's traded oil moves through the strait of Hormuz, so anything that threatens shipping there shows up quickly in household budgets here in Britain, not just in the Gulf. Iran's attacks on commercial vessels, on top of President Trump's now aborted proposal to start charging for passage through the strait, have made already jittery markets more nervous still. Freedom of navigation is foundational to how trade works around the world. Shipping lanes should not be turned into leverage. The strait needs to stay open, secure and governed by international law, full stop.

This Government should be co-ordinating with allies to steady the situation, keep commercial shipping protected and bring down the odds of things escalating further at sea. The fallout does not stay offshore.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: The hon. Gentleman said that we should be keeping shipping protected. How does he see that happening? What does he think needs to be protected, and from what area?

James MacCleary: Primarily, shipping needs to be protected from attacks in the strait of Hormuz. The first way to do that is to reach a settlement that keeps shipping safe in the strait of Hormuz and, as I said in my previous point, that is why we need to reach a diplomatic solution. A military solution is not going to keep shipping safe, because ultimately, shipping companies assess things by risk and as long as shipping is held to be at any risk in the strait of Hormuz, we will not see a resumption of previous trade levels.

The fallout does not stay offshore. When oil prices climb, it is British households—our constituents—who feel it in transport costs, in the weekly shop and in energy bills. I hear daily from constituents who are feeling the financial pressure. Families who are already stretched thin do not need another external shock landing on top. The Government should not just be waiting for markets to calm down on their own. There are concrete steps available, including cutting fuel duty, bringing rail fares down, keeping on pushing bus fares lower and scrapping VAT on electric vehicle charging. All of that would ease the everyday cost of getting around. This moment should also sharpen the case for building real energy resilience at home.

Dr Evans: Does the hon. Gentleman have an estimate of how much those policies would cost?

James MacCleary: Yes, of course. All our proposals are fully costed, and if the hon. Gentleman would like me to do so, I can send him more information on how we would pay for them. Every time that instability somewhere else sends a shockwave through our economy, it is a reminder of why weaning ourselves off volatile fossil fuel markets is squarely in Britain's interests.

I would also like to raise the situation facing British citizens held in Iran. Lindsay and Craig Foreman have now been in Evin prison for over a year, and today there are reports that Craig's sentence has been extended by a further two years. There are reports of hunger strikes and conditions that remain harrowing. No British national should be used as a bargaining chip in a geopolitical stand-off. Their continued detention is not acceptable, and the Government need to treat their release as an urgent diplomatic priority, working with international partners to get them home.

Gregory Stafford: The hon. Gentleman has just outlined a number of ways that Tehran does not respect international law and uses human capital as a bargaining chip, but in the same breath, he mentions that he does not see that there needs to be a military solution and that he believes that somehow Iran can be brought to the table to get a diplomatic solution. How can those two things be compatible?

James MacCleary: It is a good challenge. Obviously, what I am talking about is a long-term solution. The military option has been tried. The United States, the pre-eminent military power on Earth, has expended a huge number of missiles and other military assets to try to bring Iran to a position that it wants it to be in. This has clearly not worked: Iran is still attacking shipping in the strait, and we are still seeing instability in the area. It is clear that the military option has not succeeded, and if the Americans cannot do it, frankly probably nobody can. We need to go back to the negotiating table to try to find a diplomatic solution, which I accept has so far been out of reach, but if we want a stable solution in the long term, it will come through diplomacy, not military means.

I welcome the recent decision by the Government to designate the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps under the National Security Act 2023, but a designation on paper matters only if it is backed by enforcement. This House will expect the Government to act firmly against anyone on UK soil intimidating dissidents, running cyber-attacks on British institutions or acting at the bidding of a hostile state.

Finally, a word on Britain's role: the Government have said that UK bases have been used by the US only for narrowly defined defensive purposes. That distinction is worth holding on to, and this House deserves ongoing clarity about exactly when and how British territory might be used if things escalate further. Our alliances matter, but they do not relieve the Government of a duty to make their own judgment calls on how sovereign UK territory is used.

The priority now has to be stopping any slide into a wider war in the region, starting with the rebuilding of diplomatic channels, keeping shipping lanes protected and holding the line on international law, while backing

our allies without handing over our own judgment calls. Above all, it means remembering that every step further into escalation has real costs for civilians in the middle east and families here at home. It is a reminder of the limits of armed force and of the fact that one of this country's greatest strengths is our soft power—diplomatic, financial, cultural. Britain has influence that it can use to cool this situation down, rebuild some diplomatic momentum and help get the region and the wider world to the stability that everyone so desperately needs.

2.42 pm

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Life for ordinary Iranian people is getting ever more difficult. Right now, they are caught between a rock and a hard place. There is the brutally repressive and theocratic regime's systemic economic mismanagement and rampant corruption, and an inhumane and suffocating package of US sanctions that hurt the Iranian people long before any regime official feels the pain caused. The two devastating waves of US-Israeli military strikes in just over a year have pushed the country to the brink, making virtually every aspect of daily survival an enormous struggle for most ordinary Iranians.

The latest developments in relation to the rapidly re-escalating conflict between Iran and the United States are incredibly alarming. This could easily become an all-out full-scale war with devastating consequences, not just for the people of Iran but for the wider middle east region and, of course, for hundreds of millions more, with the economic and environmental impacts reaching across the globe. By actively seeking to assert unilateral US hegemony, the Trump Administration are dragging the middle east and the wider world into a perilous situation that is worsening by the day.

It is abundantly clear that diplomacy and international law are in tatters. We can see this by three recent developments. The first is the illegal and indiscriminate US-Israeli 40-day military bombardment of Iran. That was following the equally illegal and unwarranted 12-day barrage of the country in June 2025. Both were launched when the Iranian Government were sat around the negotiating table. Secondly, there is the rapid unravelling of the subsequent ceasefire under Trump's maximalist attitude, with his having stopped the military campaign which his Administration had started in the first place without agreement or approval internationally. Thirdly, there is US Secretary of State Marco Rubio declaring the launch of a campaign systematically to dismantle the International Criminal Court under the pretext that that global tribunal is interfering with US military and law enforcement operations, and thereby threatening US sovereignty.

There is no doubt that we are entering a phase in which the US feels emboldened. It is giving short shrift to the basic tenets laid down in the UN charter and in international law. Iran is the arena in which it can wage war at any time, all while demanding that independent and sovereign countries such as the UK fall into step and provide direct support without question. If there is no consideration of entering a protocol of diplomacy, that is the abandonment of international law and basic humanitarian principles.

Despite the rhetoric of those on both sides of the conflict claiming some sort of major victory, the reality remains that Iran, and primarily the beleaguered Iranian

people, have suffered immense loss and devastation, while the Trump Administration have clearly failed to achieve any of his constantly shifting objectives. We now witness a new cycle of rapidly worsening tit-for-tat military action, with the Islamic Republic Government targeting commercial shipping in the strait of Hormuz and US assets in neighbouring countries, and the US launching blunt-force bombardments, primarily of cities and areas along Iran's southern coast, but also elsewhere in the country. Innocent Iranian civilians are the casualties of war.

The Trump Administration on the one hand cite the illegality of Iran's attempt to exact a toll on the strait of Hormuz—"It's an international waterway"—but on the other talk about exacting their own 20% tariff on traffic through the strait. That blatantly demonstrates the US imperialist aims regarding control of the strait and the wider Persian gulf. It is completely in line with the various recent stances the US has taken with regard to Venezuela, Greenland, the Panama canal and even neighbouring Canada.

This should serve as a stark warning to all countries, particularly those attempting to appease Trump by accelerating their own militarisation in compliance with his diktats, as was recently demonstrated at the NATO gathering in Turkey.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Is the hon. Gentleman suggesting that European defence spending is growing only because of the President of the United States, even though several Presidents of the United States have demanded increased defence spending? The current President has actually achieved it, but Europe really does have to increase its defence spending. Since the first Trump presidency, it has been increased by almost €1 trillion, but that had to be done. Can I clarify with the hon. Gentleman whether he is criticising Europe for doing what Donald Trump asked, because Donald Trump is not the first US President to demand more European defence spending?

Brian Leishman: Trump is absolutely throwing his weight, his heft and his influence politically and militarily across various parts of the globe. His behaviour is in contravention of international law. It is heinous in the extreme, and he is a danger to—to use a broad phrase—world peace. There is no doubt about that. However, Ukraine and other parts of the world, such as Kashmir, are very much on the brink. We have seen mass displacement and ethnic cleansing of millions. We have seen—I may be wrong, and pardon me if I am—the biggest humanitarian disaster in Sudan. When we amalgamate all those crises in various bits of the world, we see that the world is on the brink—it is on a precipice.

I have often quoted the *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists* in this place, and it says:

"It is now 85 seconds to midnight."

That is the closest the world has ever been to annihilation. A lot of that is down to environmental aspects, but it is also down to politics, politicians and the political decisions that are made in various parts of the globe. I would like to think that there would be the international leadership to say, "No." The right hon. Gentleman is well aware of my position on military spending: I think we have higher priorities than that because our nation has crumbling infrastructure, some 3.5 million people and rising using

food banks, and 14% of children living in food insecurity. Those are the issues in my inbox and those are the things that I want to tackle.

Tom Hayes (Bournemouth East) (Lab): Building on the intervention by the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), is the issue not as simple as this: in recent years, although Presidents have called on European Union countries and Britain to spend more on defence, we have not done so because America would fund the defence of the western world? President Trump is refusing to do that and is willing to look to other parts of the world to meet America's strategic interests, and as a consequence, European countries are stepping up. Missing in this debate is the realisation by the Americans of what they gain by making a fair contribution to the defence of the west: they are not just burning their bridges with their allies, but harming their own defence. We ought to be emphasising that we will invest in our defence, but also that we will call out American behaviour where it is harming alliances and endangering US security.

Brian Leishman: My hon. Friend touches on something that I want to expand on further: spending for defence is not limited to weapons, drones and so on. I regret that my Labour Government have cut overseas development aid, which is an echo of what Donald Trump did with the US Agency for International Development package. Even the most marginal, minute bit of analysis appreciates that overseas development aid is an investment in more dangerous, volatile parts of the world to combat another hot political topic in this country at the moment: immigration. There is more than one way to spend to secure our borders.

The UK must join the moral and principled calls for an immediate and lasting ceasefire, to be followed by a swift resumption of negotiations. We must also openly denounce and separate ourselves from the Trump Administration's dangerous and hypocritical tactics, specifically Trump's willingness to initiate and pursue illegal wars while claiming to negotiate. Above all, we must keep it in our minds that the vast majority of Iranian people desire peace and wish to rebuild their shattered country.

This devastating war has set back the vital efforts of and the painstaking progress made by civil society and trade union activists, who have been valiantly struggling to achieve genuine freedom and social justice and to steer Iran towards a democratic, popular, fair and progressive transition. The future of Iran remains the sole preserve and remit of the long-suffering and long-struggling people of Iran themselves—and absolutely only them.

2.53 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I will start by spending a few minutes on the context of why we are having this debate. It was rushed in by an emergency process, meaning that two scheduled Opposition day debates had to be cancelled. I was in the Chamber when the Leader of the House made that announcement and I listened very carefully. I would like to quote some of the important points he made when he justified the need for this debate:

[Dr Luke Evans]

"I appreciate the frustration of Members when business is changed at short notice and when debates are postponed, but they will appreciate the importance of the House being able to discuss the escalating and fast-moving situation in the middle east before the recess."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 768.]

He went on:

"I remind the House that there is a crisis escalating across the middle east."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 770.]

Further still, he said:

"I point out to her and to Opposition Members that the situation in the middle east is unusual. We could well be in the midst of a greater conflagration in that region."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 771.]

He went on:

"I am talking about a situation that is erupting once again in the middle east."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 774.]

He said:

"Tomorrow's business is being altered because we are on the verge of a conflagration".—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 775.]

He finished up by saying:

"As I have said, the new Prime Minister will come to this House and set out his plans, but we deemed the crisis unfolding across the middle east to be of sufficient priority to change tomorrow's business. I apologise that that is the case. Nobody wanted to do it, but that is what the importance of the situation demanded. I am sorry if the Opposition cannot get their head around that."—[*Official Report*, 14 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 778.]

Gosh! As an Opposition MP, I heard what the Leader of the House said and thought, "Wow, I had better make sure I am at that debate." I have only been in this place for six years, but when I walked in, I was slightly surprised that the Prime Minister was not leading the debate. Fair enough, he is stepping down, but given the urgency of the situation, I would have expected the Foreign Secretary to be leading the debate, especially as she was in the Chamber earlier, but no, she is not here. Fair enough, maybe she is doing the diplomacy, but what about the Defence Secretary? No, he is not here. Instead, we have a brand-new Minister, who I welcome to his place, opening the debate. Fair enough, the Department is busy, but I would have expected the Back Benches to be full. Instead, it is a pleasant surprise to find that I do not have a time limit on my speech, given that there are only six about Back Benches here to speak in the debate.

Brian Leishman: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it is about quality not quantity?

Dr Evans: Amen. We on the Opposition Benches definitely agree with that. They do not make diamonds the size of bricks, and I intend to be erudite in what I say, but I still have a few more points to put on record.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend has clearly outlined the Government's justification for having this debate. I welcome the new Minister to his place, but during his opening speech, did my hon. Friend pick up anything about why the debate had to happen with such urgency?

Dr Evans: My right hon. Friend is right. It may well be that the Foreign Secretary, the Defence Secretary or the Prime Minister has something more urgent to deal with, but I am yet to know what. I hope that in the

wind-ups we will hear why this debate was needed so urgently, rather than Opposition day business, considering that it is a highly unprecedented move to prioritise a general debate over an Opposition day debate.

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

Dr Evans: I will take another intervention.

Chris Vince: I will try to make it a nice intervention as I will be speaking next and the hon. Gentleman might want to intervene on me. Does he welcome the experience that the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), brings to this place? The Conservatives are often critical of Labour for not having enough business people talking in debates about business, so does he welcome the fact that both the Minister and the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), are gallant Members of this House? We should celebrate that fact.

Dr Evans: The hon. Gentleman makes a fantastic point about how important it is for hon. Members to have lived experience when they come to this House, especially given that the Leader of the House said that Opposition day debates had to be cancelled to discuss this issue because it is the biggest crisis we face. The new Minister has only been in the Department for a couple of weeks, so he may not be as up to speed as the Defence Secretary—oh no, he is new as well—or perhaps the Foreign Secretary. Given the severity of what is facing the UK and the world, I thought the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) would be here. I even asked the Leader of the House if he would write to the right hon. Member for Makerfield to ask him to come to the debate, but alas, that seems to have gone amiss, but I am glad that we are having this important debate on Iran.

Gregory Stafford: My hon. Friend has danced around the topic, but should we not place it on the record that we are now entirely clear why the Opposition business was cancelled yesterday and we are having a debate in which only two Labour Back Benchers are speaking—

Chris Vince: Three!

Gregory Stafford: Okay, three Labour Back Benchers. It is because the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) and the Government decided that they did not want scrutiny of the new Prime Minister. It should be placed on the record that that is an absolute disgrace.

Dr Evans: Au contraire—how could my hon. Friend possibly make that suggestion? The public will see what this looks like. Did Labour Back Benchers not listen to the words of the Leader of the House about how important this debate is? Clearly, other hon. Members are too busy dealing with something even more important.

As I was saying, I am actually very pleased to be debating Iran, because the situation there has an impact on all aspects of our lives. The real question is not why we are debating the situation in Iran, but what decisions will be made by the man who will take charge in four or five days' time. The Government are effectively asking us to debate a storm without understanding how the captain wants to steer us through it. That is why this debate matters.

Let's start with energy. We have heard from both sides of the House about the impact that the situation in Iran will have on energy. Will the new Prime Minister think about opening new licences? What is he going to do about the cost of living and fuel prices? We do not know the answer, but that is going to have a big impact. We know that the cost of energy is going up in this country, despite the Government's promises at the election that it would fall, and we do not have an answer on what the right hon. Member for Makerfield will do. We are not 100% sure what he will do on net zero. We have just had an urgent question on resilience and possible blackouts in this country, but we do not understand what he will do. I am quite keen to understand the thoughts of the person who will be in charge in five days' time on how to deal with that issue and grow resilience in the country.

We have rightly heard from Members on the Government Benches about defence. There has been a lot of turmoil in defence under the Labour Government. We have lost a Defence Secretary. We have had a defence investment plan and, as I rightly pointed out earlier, it was expected to need £28 billion, but it has hit £15 billion. That is the funding that has been committed, but there is a gap there, isn't there? We are £4.7 billion short. The right hon. Member for Makerfield will have to fill that gap in the handover, so how is he going to do it?

Mr Francois: My hon. Friend is making a very good speech, but he should not undersell this point. On top of the £4.7 billion that has not been approved by the Treasury, there is £10.7 billion that has to be generated from cuts to the Ministry of Defence budget and recycled. If we put them together, that is £15 billion, which is more than all the new money put together.

Dr Evans: My right hon. Friend makes an excellent point. I would love to put that question to the right hon. Member for Makerfield, if he was here, although I expect that it would have come more eruditely from my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) on the Front Bench. This is precisely my point: we do not know how that issue will be resolved.

The hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman), who spoke before me, spoke about the humanitarian situation, which is hugely important. We have no idea what the decisions of the right hon. Member for Makerfield will be when it comes to dealing with international aid. After all, the current Prime Minister castigated the previous Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, for making cuts to international aid, then went and made cuts himself. The question is: will the new Prime Minister make the same decision? Will he hold to it or reverse it? I do not know—this Chamber does not know, and that is the point.

The DIP hits our domestic policies too. The funding needed to defend our nation and ensure that we are protected from the likes of Iran must mean a capital expenditure cut, which will be 1% in health and 1% in education. Which frontline services in health are going? Which hospitals in the hospital programme will not be built? There was a negotiation between the US and the UK on pharmaceuticals in our trade deal. That was signed off with the US, which has a tendency to use leverage on us when it comes to international issues such as Iran and tariffs. We still do not know from this Government where that funding will come from, but it

has to come from the frontline when it comes to the NHS. I would love to ask the new Prime Minister what that looks like and how he will fund the new drugs that we need, but, alas, we will sadly not get that opportunity.

What does the 1% off education look like for school budgets? When it comes to education, especially when we have the likes of VAT on private schools, which has meant that 100 schools have closed and we have less teachers than when this Government came in—

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Fewer!

Dr Evans: Thank you—I will ensure *Hansard* corrects that.

Let me point out that there are 1,900 fewer teachers under this Department for Education. I pose a question to the right hon. Member for Makerfield: how does that factor into the Iranian debate when it comes to defence and having to make cuts and other considerations?

What about the reporting on Iran? The BBC has been reporting on Iran. What is the vision of the right hon. Member for Makerfield for the BBC, given that the end of the charter is coming up? We do not know the answers to these questions. We have not had the chance to ask him, and that chance was kiboshed yesterday. We could have extended parliamentary time to pose these very pertinent questions to him.

On that point, Iran is one of the best reasons for having this debate, because it shows the scrutiny that we need to place on the incoming Prime Minister. I am shocked, I tell you, to hear from others outside this Chamber that the Government are falsifying information and changing the rules to be able to hide from scrutiny. They are using the fog of war to dull the light of scrutiny when it comes to the new Prime Minister. I will not have that, because I trust that they surely would not be that stupid or Machiavellian. Surely they would not make the naive decision to give the public the perception that the new Prime Minister does not want to take scrutiny when it comes to topics like Iran.

We are going to go six weeks without the chance to debate the likes of Iran. We have had a red carpet rolled out for a coronation, but it could appear that the green Benches have been rolled up for those six weeks to allow the king in the north to come down to his United Kingdom. At some point, he will have to face his subjects and tell us how he will deal with domestic issues, international issues and Iran.

Tom Hayes: The hon. Member is 12 minutes into his speech, and we have not yet got into a debate about Iran. As he has said, there is a one-sided dimension to the US-UK relationship, in which the US is vastly stronger than the UK at this moment. If he were he Prime Minister—just imagine—and he had to deal with President Trump, what would the hon. Gentleman do to achieve his aims in trying to bring peace to the region, protect our cost of living and further the UK's national interest?

Dr Evans: I would come to the Chamber to answer questions from Parliament.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Chris Vince.

3.6 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) took an intervention right at the end of his speech, which threw me.

It is a pleasure to speak in this debate. May I take this opportunity to thank my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey)? As I have mentioned in this place before, he is very much a friend of Harlow. I welcome him to his place and thank him for opening this debate. I join him and others from across the House in paying tribute to our incredible armed forces personnel.

I have said it a number of times in this House, but I am the son and grandson of armed forces personnel, and I know the huge sacrifice that they and their families make to keep us safe. My hon. and gallant Friend has done that on more than his fair share of occasions, and I thank him for that. I think Members across the House recognise the huge importance of debating these issues and the very concerning times that we live in—that is probably putting it mildly—and I cannot think of anybody else I would want to see debating them at the Dispatch Box, other than maybe my hon. Friend the Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), who is sitting next to him.

I take the points made by Opposition Members, and it is really important to absolutely condemn the Iranian regime. Let us not forget the way in which the regime has treated the people of Iran. It cannot be right that people in Iran are not able to express their religious beliefs and are not allowed to be the people they want to be. That is hugely important, and we should always frame any debate about Iran in those terms.

Gregory Stafford: The hon. Gentleman has very clearly put on the record his own condemnation of Iran. I join him in his comments about the way that Tehran treats its own people, but Iran's malign influence on civilian populations goes way beyond its own people. It funds terrorist organisations such as Hamas, Hezbollah and the Houthis, causing devastation and destruction to civilian populations across the region and beyond. Will he also condemn Iran for that?

Chris Vince: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and I absolutely do, and I will add to that too. I wanted somehow to shoehorn in my support for the BBC World Service and ask Members to bear with me as I am going to do that, because it is also important that we recognise the malign influence of the Iran regime in this country. It was touched on earlier by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) in terms of the use of bad state actors and malign influences in social media. The BBC World Service is a really important tool in our armoury to tackle that disinformation. Going slightly off on a tangent, when the BBC World Service and BBC Monitoring have been withdrawn from certain countries, Russian media sources have taken that space. It is important that we absolutely condemn the behaviour of the Iranian regime and its proxies, but also that we recognise the malign influence of the Iranian regime in this country, and we need to be prepared to tackle that.

Gareth Snell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about the malign influence. Following some of the attacks in Iran and the Iranian people seeking to change

their leadership, he will have seen the same report as I saw that when the Iranian Government turned off aspects of their domestic internet, hundreds of X accounts in this country, purporting to support far-right activity but also Scottish independence, fell silent. That is hugely important, and we need to look at how malign disinformation accounts in the UK are pursuing domestic political agendas in the UK and being funded and operated by non-existent people—bots—in Iran.

Chris Vince: My hon. Friend makes a really important point. I do not mean this response to sound jokey, but if I, for example, wanted to promote Harlow to be the UK capital of culture—sadly, we got rejected—the way to achieve that might not just be to directly say to people, “Come on, let's get behind Harlow.” I am not suggesting that these bad actors are pro-Scottish independence necessarily, but you use views that are not your own to slowly manipulate people. *[Interruption.]* I see a Scottish National party Member on the Benches opposite. I am not trying to suggest that they are trying to promote Scottish independence—*[Interruption.]* Okay, maybe they are. What I am saying is that—*[Interruption.]* I have started an argument. If you want to try and—

Gareth Snell: Will my hon. Friend take an intervention?

Chris Vince: Yes please.

Gareth Snell: I believe the point my hon. Friend is making is that the Iranian state is sponsoring these bot farms that are pumping out political points in the UK, which are a perfectly legitimate debate point, but are not underpinned by real people expressing real views. They are done in the most reductive way to stimulate dissent rather than discussion.

Chris Vince: You are absolutely right, and if you want to put forward your—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. The hon. Gentleman keeps saying “you.” In this Chamber, “you” means me. Please do not ascribe those views of the Iranian Government to me.

Chris Vince: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker, because I get really annoyed when others do that but I have just done it as well. I will move swiftly on and get to the main point of my speech.

Since the beginning of the crisis, the Government and Prime Minister have been clear that our approach has been guided by what is in the best interests of the British people and our country's security. Unlike some Members across the House, the Prime Minister was clear that we would not be dragged into a US-led war with no apparent plan and without reflecting on the impact.

I am also proud that the Foreign Secretary convened more than 40 countries to help build international pressure to open the strait of Hormuz. I was chatting to my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak prior to this debate. It is hugely important that we build those international alliances because we cannot do that on our own. I ask the Minister to address in closing the economic impact on the UK of not getting the peace process back on track and trade flowing through the strait. This recent conflict shows the regime in Iran has no scruples about hijacking the world economy by

blocking the strait, and we have seen the consequences. And, again, we should of course condemn the Iranian regime.

I said that I would mention Raytheon UK, based in my constituency, and I am proud that it is leading the consortium that has won a £20 billion contract to build the British Army's new AI training systems. Training like that is now key to the nature of war and how we fight war, and I am very proud that my town is going to play its part in that endeavour.

Finally, I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for his leadership, which has put Britain back on the international stage. Working with our allies is the only way we can deal with these issues.

3.14 pm

Brendan O'Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): I too congratulate the Minister on his appointment and welcome him to his place.

Call me naive, perhaps, but I honestly believe that there is nobody in this Chamber who, for all the absenteeism and manifest faults, is a supporter of, or an apologist for, the regime in Tehran. It is a regime that has for decades sought to export its version of Islamic revolution across the world by organising and financing armed groups and militias while simultaneously being absolutely brutal in crushing any form of dissent within its own borders.

It was always the hope that one day the people of Iran, weary of the internal repression and worn down by the collapsing economy, would turn against the regime, overthrow those leaders and begin a new chapter in the history of that wonderful country. There have been moments in recent years when we thought, indeed fervently hoped, that that could happen. Many of us here will remember the Woman, Life, Freedom movement, which swept across Iran in late 2022, when those incredibly brave Iranian women took to the streets in their tens of thousands to protest against the murder of Mahsa Amini, the 22-year-old Kurdish-Iranian woman who died in police custody having been arrested for not wearing her hijab properly in public.

Those brave women and girls were soon joined by students, by workers, by members of ethnic and religious minority communities, who had had enough of the subjugation of women, the repression of minorities, the religious fundamentalism, the police brutality and the endemic Government corruption. And so, to the cry of "Woman, life, freedom," and in an act of incredible bravery and in deliberate defiance of the regime, they removed their headscarves. Of course they knew that in so doing that bravery would come at huge personal cost to so many of them as individuals and to their families. As Professor Azadeh Kian, director of the centre for gender and feminist studies at the University of Paris, said at the time:

"What these women are doing in Iran is a revolution, at least a cultural revolution."

But it was a revolutionary act which could not be tolerated by the regime, and it was one which the regime punished the only way it knew how: with extreme violence.

In the immediate aftermath of those protests, hundreds of protesters were killed and thousands more were arrested. In the short term, the streets were cleared; but

no matter the wishes of the regime in Tehran, no amount of brutal repression would crush the dreams of millions of predominantly young Iranians. It was only a matter of time before they would take to the streets again, and they did so at the end of last year, on 28 December, in the biggest display of civil unrest since the '79 revolution.

Millions of Iranians took to the streets. They took to the streets amid a collapsing currency, soaring inflation, a deterioration in living standards and so much more. It spread quickly to over 200 cities. In the inevitable crackdown that followed, thousands of protesters were killed and the IRGC, using live ammunition, turned on unarmed protesters on 8 and 9 January. In the days that followed, tens of thousands were arrested and there were verified reports of mass killings, putting the death toll at upwards of 30,000. The Iranian regime's brutality is almost beyond comprehension, but it must have known that those popular uprisings would only become larger and more frequent. It must have known in late January or early February of this year that as its economy collapsed, with its continual brutalisation of women and girls, the imposition of strict religious laws and the suppression of minorities, the people of Iran had had enough, and that pressure was building.

As sure as day follows night, the regime's grip on its population was loosening, but on 28 February, President Trump began his illegal war. One of Trump's many and varied reasons for that massive aerial bombardment was to prevent Iran from developing a nuclear weapon, but this was the same President Trump who, following the 2025 bombardment, told us:

"Monumental Damage was done to all Nuclear sites in Iran...Obliteration is an accurate term!"

His assessment was backed up by his Israeli allies, who announced that

"we significantly damaged the nuclear program, and I can also say that we set it back by years, I repeat, years."

Yet in the face of what was happening inside Iran, the United States and Israel, between them, took the decision to attack. It was in that first wave of American attacks that 165 wee girls, aged between seven and 12, were killed when a US bomb hit their school while they were sitting in their classrooms. That same evening, Trump announced,

"to the great, proud people of Iran, I say tonight that the hour of your freedom is at hand".

I suspect that for many Iranians, particularly the parents of those dead children, freedom had never felt further away.

Five months on from that initial attack, the freedom that was promised to the people of Iran has turned out to be no more than the gimmicky soundbite we suspected it might be. Over the past five months, it has become clear that in this ill-conceived, illegal war of choice—although it remains unclear whether it was Trump's choice or Netanyahu's—there is no plan, no strategy and no sign of an off-ramp to bring the war to an end. All it seems to have achieved is to have all but destroyed Iran's civilian economy, thereby harming the very people Trump said he was acting to liberate, while at the same time giving the regime in Tehran a huge strategic advantage, one that they are currently exploiting to great effect. One would have hoped and expected that in the White House, when they were scenario-planning this attack,

[Brendan O'Hara]

someone would have asked the obvious question: "What will we do if the Iranians block the strait of Hormuz?" Unfortunately for the rest of the world, when someone is so desperate to deflect and hide from a scandal or a crisis at home, the bleeding obvious can sometimes become obscured.

In response to that attack, the very first thing Iran did was to cut off the strait of Hormuz—one of the most strategically important waterways in the world—leading to what the International Energy Agency has described as the

"largest supply disruption in the history of the global oil market".

Iran's response sent fuel prices rocketing, and the cost of just about everything else that relies on oil—either for its manufacturing or its transportation—soaring. There is not a family anywhere in the United Kingdom who have not paid a direct price for Trump's reckless behaviour. Even if this war were to end tomorrow, the economic shockwaves would continue for years to come. The European Central Bank recently warned that a prolonged conflict will likely trigger a period of stagflation and a period of low growth rates accompanied by inflation, and push major energy-dependent economies, including Germany and Italy, into technical recession by the end of 2026.

Since the initial attack back in February, Trump has told us time and again that in one form or another, Iran has been defeated, that it is begging for a peace deal, or that the strait of Hormuz is about to return to normal service. None of that has been true, and every ceasefire that has been brokered has collapsed within days. The dire economic consequences of Trump's war of choice continue.

Gregory Stafford: There is little in the hon. Gentleman's analysis that I disagree with, including what I could generously call the maladroitness of the American response. However, given the Tehran regime's human rights violations and its utter disdain for not only its own citizens, but citizens across the world, what does he think is the correct response to a regime that is so brutal and so fundamentally outside the societal norms that he and I think are acceptable?

Brendan O'Hara: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. It is a difficult question to answer, but I can tell the House what should not have been done, and what will never work. You do not free people from oppression through indiscriminate aerial bombardment. You do not free people by killing them, or by killing the children of the people you purport to be there to liberate. Of course there are ways in which any democratic country can support a freedom movement within a repressive regime, but what America has done with its Israeli allies is the antithesis of what should be done. All they have done is strengthen the regime, polarise the world, and irreparably damage the movement for freedom within Iran.

Brian Leishman: I agree with everything that the hon. Gentleman has said so far—he is making an excellent speech. Does he agree that the actions of Trump and, therefore, Netanyahu are not born out of a passion for the liberation of the Iranian people but are an imposition

of imperialist forces, and with imperialism naturally comes capitalism? It is ordinary Iranian people who are suffering on the back of that.

Brendan O'Hara: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on his—as usual—erudite explanation. The point he is making is fundamentally correct: this was not done to help liberate the people of Iran from an oppressive theocracy. It was done for American security, and because of an American belief that they had some kind of God-given right to the mineral wealth that is below the ground in the middle east and beyond. That is what this war is about; it is not about liberation. Even yesterday, having U-turned on his latest plan for the zillionth time, Trump announced:

"We're going to knock out all their power plants."

Even after all that has happened—even after all that this man has said—he is still planning to knock out power plants, the power plants that supply the electricity that keeps the lights on in the houses of the people he is supposedly determined to liberate. As we all know, targeting civilian infrastructure is a breach of international law, but sadly, what regard has either Trump or Netanyahu for international law as this year develops?

This reckless and illegal action has set back the cause of human rights in Iran by decades. It has strengthened the position of the regime in Tehran, allowing it to portray itself as the victim, rather than being made to account for its appalling human rights record. America and its allies have sacrificed international law and have once again shown that their doctrine of "might is right" will somehow prevail. That has brought financial hardship to every single home in every single community, in every single part of the United Kingdom, and for what? The world is less safe, the Iranian people are suffering more, and the Epstein scandal has not gone away.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I now have to announce the results of today's deferred Divisions.

On the draft Trade Unions (Permissible Means of Voting) and Employment Rights (Unfair Dismissal) (Amendment) Order 2026, the Ayes were 330 and the Noes were 109, so the Ayes have it.

On the draft Code of Practice on Electronic and Workplace Ballots for Statutory Trade Union Ballots, the Ayes were 330 and the Noes were 109, so the Ayes have it.

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

3.30 pm

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): It has been a fascinating debate so far this afternoon. There is no doubt about the effects of a lot of what the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara) has just said. This debate therefore has to be set into the context of what we are dealing with now. What is going on in Iran is an example of the importance of some of the tough decisions we have to make.

Until November, I am one of the vice-presidents of the NATO Parliamentary Assembly. Most of my career in this place has been about dealing with soft power, and that is a soft power body. It has become difficult in recent years to maintain the UK's reputation among allies, because countries, especially the eastern allies of

NATO, are accelerating their spending enormously quickly. They are taking that spending up to serious levels, way beyond what would have been suggested, because they recognise the threat.

The hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher), who is not in his place, spoke about how we make people recognise the threat. I do not believe that we always can; indeed, history has shown that we cannot. The hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) and I have often had a discussion over a cup of tea about what happened in the 1930s, and the Cabinet that Ramsay MacDonald had to form as Prime Minister. The difficulty of getting people to recognise the threat is why Winston Churchill went through years of being detested, while he tried to warn of the coming dangers. Neville Chamberlain, often described as an appeaser, recognised that this country was nowhere near ready for war in 1937, and was having to push things back. There is also what is often described as the phoney war from September 1939; people were saying, “Why are we doing this?”, right up until the bombs started to fall.

As I said to the hon. Member for Loughborough, people can see things, but they also cannot see things, so how do we get the message across? We hear people say today, “I am not going to fight for my country. Why should I get involved? Why should I defend the Baltic states?” I remind the House that way back in the 1930s, the Oxford Union had a debate on the motion that

“This House would not in any circumstances fight for King and Country”.

That debate took place—let me get my maths right—some 90-odd years ago. How people regard the defence of their country has never changed, and that is where tough decisions come in. It is the responsibility of Governments to do things that are not popular.

I have debated with the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs, the hon. Member for Lincoln (Mr Falconer), many times, and I have a great deal of respect for him. I suspect that tucked away in his notes for his winding-up speech there might be a reference to defence spending in the 14 years of Conservative Government, but I think that line does us a disservice. We have to recognise that from roughly 1989 onwards, defence spending was cut and cut. It hovered between around 2.2% and 2.5% of GDP. The Labour party has said that when it left office, defence spending had risen. In blunt terms, that is true, but Labour MPs do not say just how much was coming out of the reserves to fund the wars. A lot of Labour MPs stare at their feet when that is mentioned now.

Defence was cut further under the coalition Government, when Danny Alexander was the Chief Secretary to the Treasury. The Liberal Democrats like to speak about what the Conservatives did to defence spending, but they conveniently overlook who the Chief Secretary to the Treasury was who pushed through those defence cuts. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) is, I believe, one of the most experienced men in our party in analysing defence budgets and understanding defence needs. I am sure that when he winds up the debate his words will be worth listening to, as they always are, because he understands, and he understood at the time, that the decisions being made would have a knock-on consequence.

I am trying not to make party political comments today. I am making a speech about the threat that is right in front of our nation's eyes. It is clear that this

general debate on Iran, and the cancellation of all the business previously announced, was arranged not because there is an incoming barrage of missiles and we are going to experience a conflagration, but because the Government did not want to call on the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) to come to the House until six weeks from now. That is obvious, but it does not take away the underlying point that we have to accept in this country.

Let me return to the subject of defence spending. I have been in the Chamber when the procurement Minister, the hon. Member for Plymouth Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), and the new Secretary of State for Defence have been at the Dispatch Box to talk about how much funding they are giving to defence. They say that they are spending record amounts on it. Well, I am spending record amounts on diesel for my car, but that does not mean that I am investing more; it means that my revenue costs have gone up—and the former Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), said that the Treasury was not supplying the money, or the Government were not willing to spend it.

The hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who is no longer in the Chamber, said that there had to be a more hybrid approach to defence, and I think he is right. That does not mean chucking everything else away. I was relieved that the Type 26 and Type 31 programme for the Royal Navy is still in place. However, I am open-minded and, indeed, intrigued: I think there may be a positive outcome to the replacement of the Type 83 with the Type 90s—well, let us just call it a destroyer programme for now, until they have a proper name, but there will be drones attached to them—because we need a flexible workforce.

Wars always accelerate innovation. The speed with which drone technology has developed in the Ukraine war is incredible, but we have seen this before. Look at the speed with which we moved from the V1 to the V2 rocket. Look at the speed of our work to develop atomic weapons over the six years of the second world war; we came very close to developing them then, and indeed ultimately did.

Gordon McKee *rose*—

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I will give way to my colleague on the NATO Parliamentary Assembly.

Gordon McKee: The right hon. Gentleman is, as always, making a very good speech. I want to make a point that I think is often under-appreciated when we talk about drones and drone warfare. The Ukrainians are, of course, world-leading, but I think that many of us in the west did not realise the extent to which Iran had advanced its drone technology. For instance, Iranian Shahed drones have been used by Russia to harm civilians in Ukraine. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that we must watch closely not just what our allies are developing, but what our adversaries are developing?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to the hon. Gentleman, because that is a point that I was moving towards, given that today's debate is about Iran, and the consequences of what is happening there for the conflict, for our country and for the defence of Europe. It is now clear that the Russians know how to defeat the weapons that remain in our warehouses, because when we use a

[*Sir Alec Shelbrooke*]

weapon, they learn how to defeat it. We therefore have to accelerate our innovation and accelerate how we adapt, and a great deal of that involves drone warfare. Nevertheless, there is always a need for traditional weaponry. I look at the plans for the Royal Navy, and they seem to me to constitute a sensible way forward, but my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford is in a much stronger position to comment on that.

We have to accept that there are instance when the Ministry of Defence gets it really, really wrong. When, for a short period, I was the procurement Minister, Ajax was landing on my desk every day. My right hon. Friend knows as much about Ajax as most people in this House know about what is in their wardrobe—he knows every nut and bolt—and he is right when he says that we must accept at some point that some projects must be scrapped.

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend generously refers to me. On Ajax, the Government published a written ministerial statement yesterday that had a great deal of verbiage in it, but it still did not say when Ajax would enter operational service, even though it is nine years late.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to my right hon. Friend for clarifying that. I have been speaking to officers who command Ajax tanks. When an officer is interviewed, he has another officer stood behind him, to make sure that he says the right things. When an officer is interviewed on the record, he is not going to say a lot. You have to go to the pub and speak there to the officers who command the tanks; you need to have proper conversation with them. They will tell you that this thing will be useless in a war. The fact that the tanks cannot communicate with each other in real time on the battlefield should send a shiver through us all.

The point I am driving at builds on the point made by the hon. Member for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee), who talked about Iran supplying technical drones to Russia, how Ukraine has moved ahead of those, how Russia will catch up, and how we have to adapt. We have to accept that some of our programmes are simply not fit for purpose, because we do not have a budget in place for funding the defence investment plan; it is smoke and mirrors. Labour Members will push back on that, but the figures are there. There is £15 billion to be spent, even though the demand was for £28 billion. Some £5 billion has not been identified, and £10 billion comes from savings in the Ministry of Defence, so there is not a penny more for the MOD. The money is just not there, and we should be terrified by that. Those are not my words, but the words of the man who was the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough. This is not coming from the Opposition; it is coming from a man who was in office, and who has the Labour movement running through him, like the words in a stick of Brighton rock. There is no way that he wanted to criticise his Labour Government, and neither did the noble Lord Robertson, another man who has the Labour party running through his veins, but they have pointed out just how exposed we are.

Too many people ask—again, this comes down to education—“Why should we defend the Baltic states if Putin wants to go in?”. I have heard people say, “They’re Russian anyway. They were part of the Russian empire.” I have heard people say, “The Ukrainians started the war with Russia. NATO pushed them into it.” I have heard people say all these things, and do you know what they all have in common? They all started off looking at particular right-wing websites—I do not mean far right; I am not talking about extremism—that push these sorts of things, and the Russians and the Chinese have been watching what they click. They are the ones developing the algorithms, and they feed their lines through algorithms that take people further and further down a particular path. That is about undermining what underpins our society. When sensible people whom I have known for years are parroting back exactly what is coming out of the Kremlin, it is clear that this is having an effect.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for making that point, and he is absolutely right. This issue was raised by my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), who spoke about the threat of social media disinformation from hostile states such as Iran and Russia. Given the significance of the threat to our democracy, does the right hon. Gentleman share my concern that there does not seem to be a single lead in Government for dealing with this issue? We have the Security Minister, the defending democracy taskforce, the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport and, of course, the MOD. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that there needs to be a single lead on tackling disinformation online?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Absolutely, and we all have a role to play in talking to the country and making people realise what is happening, but I do not think they want to believe it. Too many people, especially from some of the right-wing parties, are quick to jump in and say that we must defund the BBC, but why? People say to me, “I hate the BBC.” No, I think they hate BBC News because it does not agree with their opinion. I think that they are being fed the view online that the BBC is wrong and is lying.

I agree with the hon. Member for Harlow about the importance of the World Service, to which I listen a lot. In fact, I recommend to people, if they can find the time, that they listen to “Newshour” for half an hour a day to hear about what is going on in the world. Some of those stories eventually break through to the mainstream news, but it really gives us a picture of what is going on in the world, and we should trust it.

I am not making excuses for the BBC. Boy, oh boy, has it got it wrong in some areas in recent years, and that undermines faith, but that is exactly what the Russian bots pick up on, and they feed on that and further undermine faith.

Chris Vince: I liked the right hon. Gentleman saying earlier that he and I have discussed Ramsay MacDonald in the 1930s, over a tea and no other beverage. I very much messed up my words when I was trying to answer my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent Central (Gareth Snell). I was trying to make the point that the problem we have with these malign influences and

hostile states is the drip-feeding of disinformation. It does not come all at once and say that people should support Russia. This drip-feeding is really concerning, and that is a real challenge for us to tackle, is it not?

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for that.

The point I am driving at—bringing all that together about how this lack of confidence is slowly starting to build in society through what such people are doing—is that that is why we now have to take some really unpopular decisions. The Leader of the Opposition—the leader of the Conservative party—has made it clear that we would cut welfare to fund defence. These are unpopular decisions, but it has to be done because we are not going to convince people about the threat. History shows that people are never convinced until something happens. People do not understand geography, and think that Ukraine is so far in the distance that it does not affect us. However, as has been said by so many Members, it affects all of us through the energy crisis.

The hon. Member for Alloa and Grangemouth (Brian Leishman) and I have debated with each other in this Chamber many a time, and I have huge respect for him, because he takes a view, with which I fundamentally disagree, about not spending money on defence but spending it on welfare, meeting societal needs and so on. He is clear and honest about it, and he backs up why he believes it. However, I believe that if we are not ready to go to war, we cannot have a peace, and if we do not have that peace, we are going to go to war. Such a war does not necessarily mean bombs raining down, because it could well mean cyber-attack, when the areas on which he thinks we should be spending would collapse anyway. Our society would collapse, so we have to make that investment, because Ukraine shows the enormous loss of GDP—50% of its GDP has been lost—because of the invasion by another country.

Turning to the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara), I have always taken issue with SNP Members when they call Trident a nuclear weapon. In my mind, and I think in the minds of many people, Trident is not a nuclear weapon, because it is called the nuclear deterrent. People say they would never use Trident, but we are using it every single day. We have used it continuously at sea every single day for nigh on 60 years. Yes, it is creaking; yes, we are sending people out for too long; and, yes, there has been a ridiculous delay in getting out the Dreadnought class because of the lack of reactors when we needed them. However, it is absolutely vital that we invest in it because it is a deterrent, and it is the best example I can give of why we have to invest in defence.

The Iranian conflict shows just how much our world can be affected. I could go on forever about the energy situation, and why I believe that the actions of the Energy Secretary have put this country at enormous risk. I do not want to try the patience of the House or you, Madam Deputy Speaker, after being on my feet for 18 minutes—

Dr Luke Evans: Nineteen.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Ninety or 19? [*Laughter.*]

A lot of people say we cannot be reliant on the petrochemical dictators, but we are utterly reliant on the Chinese, who are no more reliable than the petrochemical dictators. All our processed materials for renewables come through China. Why? It is because they are cheap, and because China has cornered the supply and the market.

Madam Deputy Speaker, I know you cannot comment from the Chair, but I urge people to look at your work in this place to understand exactly how the Chinese make those products so cheaply. I am not sure whether you are still sanctioned—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: I do not mean to be speaking for you, but I know that this is something you are passionate about. You have been sanctioned because you have called out the human rights record of the Chinese and the way they have been exploiting the Uyghur population to fund and put forward the energy on which we now rely.

What was going to be the second topic of the Opposition Day debate—we were not allowed to debate it today, although this debate is clearly not quite as urgent as the Leader of the House made out—was how we have taken terrible decisions on our energy policy. We are leaving ourselves more and more exposed to other areas. Yes, we cannot control the price of oil and gas, and we all know that it is traded on the international markets, but it would help to secure the supply. All the gas goes directly into our system. I think 3% of our gas comes from LNG. We could start to reduce that risk.

Iran has a huge malign influence which has a direct effect on us all and we must ensure we are ready to defend ourselves. The point I really want to get across today is this. We have to make decisions that are really, really unpopular and controversial. We have to slash an out of control welfare bill and we have to spend on defence. People say, “Where would you get the money to pay for defence?” We have been crystal clear about that, no matter how unpopular or popular it is. The point is not just coming from our side; Lord Robertson has also said that such spending is vital.

The hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak is in his place. I was just saying, and he will be able to look it up in *Hansard*, that I think he makes some very important points about having a hybrid force. We must ensure that we invest in what is needed, and recognise the projects, such as Ajax, that have just failed and work out how we are going to do things differently.

3.52 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I congratulate the Minister for Veterans and People, the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) on his recent promotion.

Most Members will agree that the repression of Iran's population by its Government is an absolute disgrace, but Trump and Netanyahu's illegal war on Iran has unleashed chaos across the region. This conflict, backed by the leaders of both the Conservative party and Reform UK, has put British nationals directly in harm's way. Renewed US and Iranian strikes now risk damaging the region, dragging it back into full-scale war. Trump's actions have caused immense suffering across the middle east, and have had real consequences for the people of Wokingham and across the UK.

[Clive Jones]

The conflict also reminds us that we cannot neglect our relationships with our European allies and that we cannot rely on Trump. Driven by ego rather than diplomacy, Trump's reckless strikes have undone weeks of negotiations with Iran and shattered hopes for a peaceful resolution. Most recently, President Trump announced plans to impose a 20% tax on shipping through the strait of Hormuz, before reversing course just a few hours later. That proposal amounted to economic extortion, a flagrant violation of international law, and would have further increased costs for UK families already struggling with the cost of living.

My constituents in Wokingham are feeling the effects. Rising instability in the strait is pushing up fuel prices at a time when household energy bills remain high. Will the Minister therefore consider Liberal Democrat calls to cut fuel duty by 10p, reduce bus fares to £1, cut rail fares by 10%, and remove VAT on public electric vehicle charging?

Dr Luke Evans: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Clive Jones: I will not; I would like to carry on. Iran's continued attacks on vessels in the strait are fuelling instability. The conflict shows little sign of ending while Trump refuses to acknowledge that military escalation has failed and admit that he was wrong. His reckless and unpredictable approach should strengthen the Government's resolve to deepen co-operation with our reliable European allies.

It is for those reasons that I urge the Government to back the Liberal Democrat proposal for a new growth and defence partnership with the European Union. Such a partnership would strengthen our economy, reinforce our security and help Britain respond more effectively to international crises. The Government must do all they can to encourage the United States and Iran to return to negotiations, restore stability in the strait of Hormuz and work towards ending this devastating conflict.

3.55 pm

Gregory Stafford (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Before I start on the main topic of Iran, I put on record my condolences to the family and friends of Ann Widdecombe. The only time I met her was when I was a late teenager at the Oxford Union—like me, she was a former treasurer of the Oxford Union.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) mentioned the Oxford Union when he referenced the King and country debate. The other formative debate that the Oxford Union has every year is the no-confidence debate, which always happens in September or October, at the start of the academic year. In the past academic year, which we are now coming to the end of, the Oxford Union voted overwhelmingly to say that it did not have confidence in His Majesty's Government. However, I am not naive enough to believe that Labour Members were following that debate carefully and that that is the reason they have ousted the current Prime Minister.

It is interesting, however, that the reason we are here debating Iran is not because Iran is a serious issue—although, of course, it is. It is because neither the

outgoing Prime Minister nor the incoming Prime Minister, nor Labour Members want there to be scrutiny of the new Prime Minister. Labour was so frightened of whatever it was it thought its new Prime Minister was going to say at the Dispatch Box that it has given him cover for six weeks until he has time to think about it.

We know from his own campaign manager that the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has been plotting this coup for over a year. One would have thought that in that time he could have come up with a few answers, ideas or ways forward, but he will not speak to this House or to journalists, and presumably he does not even speak to Labour Back Benchers. Hopefully, in September he will come before this House and we can scrutinise him.

As the Leader of the Opposition said at Prime Minister's Question Time, the problem is not whichever Prime Minister is leading the Labour party; it is fundamentally the Labour party itself. If this Labour party has allowed their incoming Prime Minister to evade scrutiny, all Labour Members should be ashamed.

Tom Hayes: My Jewish constituents will be watching this debate, so I put on record my support for the Government's ban of supporters of the IRGC. I also welcome the fact that the Government have sanctioned that organisation and 500 Iranian-linked entities and individuals. The hon. Gentleman is an outspoken critic of the IRGC, so will he use this debate to repeat his criticism of it, and to support the Government's moves?

Gregory Stafford: The hon. Member is entirely right, and I will come on to the IRGC in my speech. He is right to raise the concerns of his Jewish constituents, but I think all our constituents—of any faith or none—should fear the malign influence of the IRGC, and the way that it has brutalised its own population and works to the detriment of the UK and other European nations.

For centuries, Iran has been a nation of immense historical, cultural and civilisational importance. It has produced some of the world's greatest contributions to literature, science, the arts and philosophy. Before the '79 revolution, Iran was widely regarded as one of the most advanced and outward-looking states in the middle east. It was a country with a growing economy, expanding diplomatic ties with the west and a strategic role as a regional partner for us here in Britain, the United States and other democratic states. I do not say that to give right hon. and hon. Members a history lesson, but simply to highlight that it is not the Iranian people or Iran itself with which we have a problem, but the current fundamentalist regime in Tehran.

The picture I have painted of Iran before '79 changed completely with the revolution. The previous system of government had essentially produced prosperity, but the Islamic Republic has a fundamentally different view and has, for four decades, pursued the destruction of its own country. The Iranian people have suffered from increasing restrictions on political freedoms, suppression of dissent, economic mismanagement and a state apparatus that has too often prioritised ideological ambition and external confrontation over the prosperity and liberty of its own citizens.

I was very disappointed in the speech from the hon. Member for Wokingham (Clive Jones), who is no longer in his place, because he spent the whole time blaming

Donald Trump. As I said in earlier interventions, I have no love for Donald Trump or the way in which he has dealt with the issues in the region, but not to stand and condemn Iran was shocking. I did a quick search, and while the hon. Member has mentioned Donald Trump in 18 speeches in this House, today was the first in which he has mentioned Iran. I think that is probably the wrong balance.

The current regime does not represent the aspirations of millions of ordinary Iranians, who have repeatedly risked their lives to demand greater freedoms, accountability and the right to determine their own future. Our quarrel is with the regime, which has systematically denied its citizens basic liberties, exported terrorism and instability across the middle east and further, threatened our allies and conducted hostile activity here in the United Kingdom. The courage of the Iranian people deserves all of our admiration.

Since the end of last year, protests have spread across all 31 provinces, driven by soaring inflation, economic hardship, corruption and decades of political repression. The response from the authorities in Tehran has once again demonstrated the methods on which this regime relies: intimidation, arbitrary detention, restrictions on communications and the use of force against those who simply demand a better future. Support for the Iranian people must therefore go hand in hand with a clear-eyed assessment of the wider threat posed by the Iranian regime.

For decades, Iran has sought to project power beyond its borders—not through normal diplomacy, as some in this Chamber seem to think, but through intimidation, terrorism and proxy warfare. It has armed, financed and directed militant organisations across the middle east in pursuit of its strategic objectives. It has threatened Israel, our Gulf partners and other allies of the UK and US, culminating in the attack on a number of our allies earlier this year and last year. Last May, I had the opportunity to go to Bahrain and see our troops there—to think that they were being bombed by Iran is utterly disgusting. We need to have a robust response to that.

I have to say, I found the response of the UK Government and the current Prime Minister weak-willed at best. He seemed to be happy to allow American fighter jets to take off from our bases and to be willing for our British fighters to shoot down incoming missiles, but was not willing to use our bases and fighter jets to shoot the missile launchers. That seems utterly bizarre to me. The Prime Minister was extraordinarily fortunate that one of those incoming missiles did not hit and kill personnel at Akrotiri or hit a hotel in Dubai full of British citizens. If that had happened, I think the British public's mood towards this Prime Minister would have changed, and changed rapidly. I do hope that the incoming Prime Minister will have a much more robust response when dealing with these threats from not just Iran, but a number of its proxy actors.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Is my hon. Friend, in that one sentence, not summing up what the problem with today's debate has been? The contributions that have been made, including from the Government Front Bench, clearly do not reflect the urgency with which the Leader of the House outlined the change in business yesterday. This debate was clearly scheduled to stop a motion being put to this House to make the new Prime Minister

come to this House. It will now be at least a month and a half before any of the questions that my hon. Friend has just asked will be answered.

Gregory Stafford: My right hon. Friend is entirely right. The fact that the incoming Prime Minister has run away from any kind of scrutiny, whether it be from us, the press or anybody else, does him a disservice, and I think he will come to regret that decision. I do not know the right hon. Gentleman personally, but from Labour Members I have spoken to understand that he is good on his feet and can talk, so it surprises me that he does not want to come to the House and answer those questions.

None the less, we are having this debate, and it is an important one. I spoke about proxies. Hezbollah, for example, remains a heavily armed organisation despite international obligations and years of diplomatic pressure. Hamas has not abandoned violence, and the Houthis continue to threaten freedom of navigation and regional security well beyond Yemen. Iran's network of proxies may be under pressure, but it remains one of the principal drivers of instability across the middle east.

That brings me to the role of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, which has been mentioned. The IRGC cannot simply be treated as an ordinary branch of Government. It is the institution most closely associated with Iran's external military operations, its support for those proxy groups, its intimidation campaigns abroad, and its efforts to undermine the security and safety of Britain and our allies.

Earlier this year I co-signed a letter to the Foreign Secretary calling for the IRGC to be proscribed under the Terrorism Act 2000. I did so because the evidence is compelling, and recent developments have only strengthened the case for action. I welcome steps taken in recent years to respond to the increased threat posed by Iran. Last year the Iranian state was placed on the enhanced tier of the foreign influence registration scheme. That was an important national security measure to increase transparency around activities undertaken on behalf of foreign powers. More than 500 Iranian individuals and entities have been sanctioned, restricting their access to the international financial system, imposing consequences on those responsible for the malign activity, and demonstrating that Britain will not ignore threats to our national security.

I welcome the Home Secretary's announcement that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps will be proscribed under the Terrorism Act. It is a really significant step, because it reflects the reality that the IRGC is not merely a political or even a military institution of a foreign Government but an organisation that is responsible for activities that pose a direct threat to Britain, our citizens and our allies. I note that Conservative Members have been calling for proscription of the IRGC as a terrorist organisation as early as 2023, and I know that others across the Chamber did so. I thank them for their efforts in getting us to this point.

The Government have taken a number of important steps to respond to the threat posed by Iran, but this is an important national security measure, because it is designed to increase transparency. We should also be clear about what the measures were and what they are not. Sanctions matter—they are really important, despite what some hon. Members on the Labour Benches have

[Gregory Stafford]

said. Foreign influence registration matters, and action against Iran-linked organisations matters, but they are not the same as proscription under the Terrorism Act.

This debate takes place against the backdrop of Iran's continuing nuclear ambitions. Britain has consistently supported diplomacy in the region. Where diplomacy can succeed, that remains the right approach, but nobody should underestimate the consequences of further military action and escalation in the middle east. Diplomacy cannot succeed without pressure. It cannot succeed without enforcement. It cannot succeed if Iran believes that international commitments can be ignored without consequences.

Sanctions, international co-ordination and robust enforcement all have a role to play. The international community must remain determined that Iran cannot acquire a nuclear weapon capability that would further destabilise an already fragile region and place additional pressure on our allies.

From past engagement, we know that the Iranian regime has historically responded not to weakness, ambiguity or pleasant overtures, but to strength, unity and resolve. Iranian state-linked actors have been responsible for hostile activity directed towards the United Kingdom, including the intimidation, espionage and threats that I mentioned against individuals on British soil. Protecting the British public must remain the Government's first duty. Our response must therefore match that scale of threat.

Iran undoubtedly faces profound internal challenges of its own—its economy, its regional position and the public confidence in the regime are together a real pressure on that regime—but, unfortunately, none of that internal pressure means that change is inevitable. The British public therefore expect the Government not merely to recognise the threats but to confront them.

In closing, I wish to ask the Minister a few questions. First, what is the timetable for completing the legal process for bringing the proscription fully into force? Secondly, what steps have the Government taken to ensure that the evidence base and legal reasoning underpinning the decision are sufficiently robust to withstand any potential judicial challenge? Thirdly, what assessment have the Government made of the likelihood of any appeal or judicial review? What contingency planning is there, should legal proceedings be brought?

Fourthly, what additional operational benefits will proscription provide to the police and security services in identifying, disrupting and prosecuting IRGC-linked activity in the United Kingdom? Finally, how will the Government work with our international partners—including the United States and other allies who have long recognised the threat posed by the IRGC—to ensure that this decision has maximum impact?

Tom Hayes: I thank the hon. Member for giving way as he is about to close. He talked about the importance of international co-operation to stop Iran from acquiring a nuclear capability; I completely agree with him. Where the UK has had success before, that has been in concert with the French and the Germans. With the French presidential election this year with the current president

moving on, does he agree that there is a real opportunity for Britain to lead that European co-operation to try to address the possibility of Iran acquiring a nuclear capability?

Gregory Stafford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I agree that Britain should be the leader and at the forefront of any negotiations and international coalitions, not just because we have the skills and the history to be able to do so but because that would demonstrate to our European allies—perhaps even more importantly, to the Americans—that we as a country are willing to stand up and do our bit.

The Government really must ensure that the right decision they have taken is implemented swiftly, defended robustly and enforced effectively. The decision has been made; now, the test is the delivery.

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

4.12 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford), who, as the whole House knows, spoke extremely well and in detail about the threat posed by the IRGC. I agree with every word he said. I will return to that, although I suspect not as eloquently.

My hon. Friend, along with my right hon. Friend the Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke), mentioned the 1933 Oxford Union debate. On that topic, it is worth reminding ourselves of what happened there. The motion, voted on on 9 February 1933—barely a fortnight after Adolf Hitler had become Chancellor of Germany—was that

“This House would, under no circumstances, fight for King and country.”

It went through by a majority of over 2:1 on the night. We do not know how each individual student voted that night, but we have a good idea of those who were there, many of whom subsequently signed up to fight for king and country in 1939. That shows how attitudes can change, and I have great faith that, were it ever to come to it and the young people of this country really believed we were under threat, they would rally to the colours again. It is worth placing that belief on the record.

I wish to reiterate the point I made in an intervention on the new Minister for Veterans and People—it is good to see him in his place. Unfortunately, yet again as we debate defence and security—the first duty of government is the defence of the realm—Reform Members are not here. These plastic patriots love to wrap themselves in the flag, but when we talk about those who serve to defend it, they cannot be bothered to turn up. I do not live in Clacton, but if I did, I would vote for the Bin.

For many years, the Iranian regime has been the most prolific sponsor of global terrorism. From Hezbollah and Hamas to the Houthis, who have been attacking British ships in the Red sea for some time, Iran has been at the heart of it all. The regime has repeatedly called for the destruction of Israel and uses hostile anti-western rhetoric. Indeed, the former supreme leader Ali Khamenei despicably called for Israel to be “eradicated” and “uprooted and destroyed”.

The Iranian regime has also been accused of supporting proxy conflicts across the middle east, contributing to instability in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, all facilitated by the enforcers, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. As the proactive think tank, the Coalition for Global Prosperity, has warned us,

“despite the disruption that Iranian proxies have seen to their activities, there remains the potential for their regrouping due to the weak governance and poor economic stability that engulfs parts of the Middle East”.

That is a sage warning.

In recent months, the Iranian regime has deployed thousands of drones, supported by a variety of ballistic missiles, which have been fired at Israel and a number of fellow middle eastern countries, including Jordan, Qatar, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates—all allies of this country. On 1 March 2026, as my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon pointed out, one drone reached as far as Cyprus and hit our airbase at RAF Akrotiri, thus directly endangering the lives of our service personnel. Mercifully, no one was killed or wounded—but they could have been.

Given that, on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition I place on record our admiration and thanks to all our armed forces personnel deployed in the middle east, and crucially to their loved ones who support them, even though many are separated from them, back in the home base in the United Kingdom. Our armed forces are deployed in the gulf in support of our long-standing allies, but also to help defend our nation at home.

The director general of MI5, Sir Ken McCallum, speaking at Thames House on 16 October last year revealed:

“Since the start of 2020, MI5 and the police have disrupted 19 late-stage attack plots. And we've intervened in many hundreds of developing threats.”

He went on:

“MI5 has tracked more than twenty potentially lethal Iran-backed plots in just the one year”.

The whole House will know that it is very unusual for the director of the security service to be so candid about threats to the home base, and therefore we need to take his words extremely seriously. They offer a stark warning to us all about the threat of the Iranian regime and the IRGC, both in the middle east and in the United Kingdom.

Many of the UK's closest allies, including the US, already proscribe the IRGC as a terrorist organisation, thus increasing pressure on its leadership, restricting its ability to operate internationally and making it clear that support for terrorism and violent destabilisation carries consequences. That is why we on the Opposition Benches welcome the decision to proscribe the IRGC as a foreign state threat. When the Minister for the Middle East sums up, perhaps he will explain to the House exactly where the Government will go from here and whether legislation, either primary or secondary, will be required. If that is the case, they will most certainly have our support.

Turning to nuclear weapons, for decades, the global consensus has rightly been that preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon is a critical security objective, given the profound risks that would pose to regional stability and the wider global effort to prevent nuclear proliferation. The acquisition of a viable nuclear weapon by the Iranian regime would fundamentally alter the security balance in one of the world's most volatile

regions. The possession of nuclear weapons by the Iranian regime would increase the risk of miscalculation, escalation and a wider nuclear arms race. This would create a far more dangerous security environment, making existing tensions between countries more difficult to manage and increasing the likelihood of future conflict. This was emphasised by the UK's statement to the United Nations Security Council in June 2024, which stressed:

“Iran's unabated nuclear escalation...makes the region and the world far more dangerous and makes escalation by others more likely.”

This would create further consequences for UK interests specifically. Any conflict involving a nuclear-capable Iran would risk threatening the security of British personnel and assets in the region, disrupting vital trade routes on which the UK economy relies and undermining global energy stability, with wider consequences for consumers and businesses. A number of hon. Members have referred to that this afternoon. These risks are not theoretical. Following the United Kingdom Government's decision to grant the United States use of military air bases for strikes on Iran, the Iranian ambassador in London warned that any facilities, properties or bases used against Iran would be considered “legitimate targets”, demonstrating the potential for wider escalation and the direct risks posed to United Kingdom interests. This highlights the broader challenge of responding to Iranian aggression while maintaining the stability of vital international waterways.

That brings me on to the situation in the strait of Hormuz. The strait is one of the world's most important waterways for global energy supplies and international trade. Iran's attempts to threaten freedom of navigation and bring shipping through this vital route to a standstill, contrary to international law, represent a deliberate effort to weaponise trade and effectively hold the global economy to ransom. The Iranian regime's actions, including the reported recent attack on a Cypriot-flagged container ship travelling through the strait, demonstrate the clear need for a firm response to protect international shipping and regional stability. That is why we wholeheartedly support efforts to strengthen maritime security, including through the deployment of minesweeping equipment where necessary. Minesweepers are a defensive capability, designed to protect freedom of navigation, safeguard global energy supplies and prevent any state from using maritime disruption as a tool of coercion. The UK must ensure that no regime can threaten one of the world's most vital economic lifelines without facing resistance.

The UK's approach should also recognise the growing importance of technology in modern defence—something I know the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) is very keen on. The Defence drone strategy of 2024, delivered by the then procurement Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartledge), highlighted the potential of uncrewed systems in the maritime domain, including their use for mine countermeasures. These capabilities demonstrate how the United Kingdom could use innovation to protect vital international infrastructure while responding effectively to emerging threats.

At this point, I should declare an interest. As some will know, my late father, Stoker First Class Reginald Francois, served on a minesweeper named HMS Bressay during the second world war, including on D-Day. As

[Mr Mark Francois]

the son of a minesweeper man, may I ask the Minister if he could update us on the deployment of RFA Lyme Bay to the Gulf? I realise that there are certain operational constraints on what he can say, but could he give us at least some idea of when those capabilities might be deployed and in what circumstances? Working with the French and others, we have the capability to clear the strait. Can he give us some idea of if and when we might be required to use it?

At present the Iranian strategy appears to be effectively to play cat and mouse with the Trump Administration. Iran will no doubt seek to humiliate the President in the run-up to the mid-term elections in November, approximately four months from now. The Iranians have form on this. The House may remember that they sought to humiliate President Carter over the American hostages and only released them on the day of President Reagan's inauguration—a quite deliberate act. I may be wrong, but I suspect the Iranians will do everything they can to try to keep the strait blocked between now and the mid-term elections in November. Time will tell if that proves right. I would like the Minister to tell the House what we, working with the Americans and others, are trying to do to prevent that scenario, not least because of the economic consequences for us at home.

Turning to those economic consequences, some 20% of the world's oil passes through the strait of Hormuz. It would appear at present that very few tanker captains and/or their shipping line owners are prepared to effectively run the gauntlet through the strait. That being the case, surely it is strategic madness to deny the ability to grant future hydrocarbon exploration licences in the North sea. Surely, for reasons of strategic and energy security, we should be encouraging the oil companies to “Drill, baby, drill” in the North sea if we believe the Iranians will continue to block the strait of Hormuz. This strategic imperative overrides any ideological “obsession”—I use the word deliberately—by the current Energy Secretary.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: Again, does my right hon. Friend recognise that mincing around with words, saying, “Oil and gas play an important part, and we pump millions of barrels every day” is simply not good enough? We need to exploit what is there because it gives us energy security. Yes, the price is set on the international market, but the gas we would drill in the North sea would go directly into our system. That is what gives us energy security.

Mr Francois: My A-level economics is a bit rusty, but price is based on the relationship between supply and demand, and if we can increase the domestic supply of oil and gas, that has to be materially to our advantage.

That brings me on to the defence investment plan.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: No, I will go on to the DIP.

I tread warily because both the former Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey), and the hon. Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) honourably resigned because they believed—it is in their resignation letters—that the resources

were not sufficient to defend this country. The outgoing Defence Secretary resigned because, as he was very clear, the Treasury was only offering 2.68% of GDP by the year 2030, and yet the new Defence Secretary seems to be content with 2.69% of GDP in the same timeframe.

We should remember that the chiefs of staff wanted £28 billion extra over the next four years, partly to implement the strategic defence review. They have been offered just over £15 billion, and £4.7 billion of that has not even been cleared by the Treasury and is subject to a subsequent public expenditure review. As I said earlier, a further £10.7 billion is actually financed by cuts, including to operational spending and training within the Ministry of Defence, which would then be allowed to recycle that money into the DIP, rather than surrendering it to the centre. When those two figures are added together, they more than match the so-called £15 billion of extra spending, so it is all smoke and mirrors. To all intents and purposes, for all the bluster, for the year of delay and for all the waiting, there is no extra money for defence in the defence investment plan.

I regret to tell Ministers this, but the Russians can read, and so can the Chinese and, indeed, the mullahs in Tehran. We will not deter those people from further adventurism if the Government of this country cannot even tell us in which year they would achieve 3% of GDP. It is laughable to think that the defence investment plan is a credible piece of deterrence to our potential aggressors.

Mr Bailey: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: Yes. The Minister gave way to me, so I must now return the favour.

Mr Calvin Bailey: Will the right hon. Gentleman say why the Conservative Government's equipment plan had a funding deficit of between £7 billion and £28 billion? It was filled with unfunded programmes for aircraft and ships. I struggle to understand why he calls the DIP “unfunded” when we have provided £298 billion of funding for it.

Mr Francois: I have two things to say to the Minister. First, I am not sure if what he says is exactly right, but even if it were true, those programmes are still unfunded, pretty much, because there is no new money in the defence investment plan. Secondly, I have a small revelation—I was not going to mention this, Madam Deputy Speaker, but I now I will—about the “no confidence” debate, mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Farnham and Bordon, that was won at the Oxford Union last autumn, at which Labour was slaughtered: the two proposers of the motion that night were Sir Robert Buckland and me. We have been invited back this autumn, so we will see whether we do better next time.

Dr Arthur: On that point, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: Yes, certainly, although I am coming towards the end of my remarks.

Dr Arthur: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way, particularly if he is drawing to a conclusion. Of course, the big “no confidence” debate was the 2024 general election. Before reflecting further on defence,

can we go back to his enthusiasm for more exploration of oil and gas? The most optimistic timeline puts the recovery of oil and gas from Jackdaw and Rosebank five years away, but it could be 10 years away. How will that help us with the situation in the strait of Hormuz?

Mr Francois: In response to the hon. Gentleman's second question, that is all the more reason to get on with the exploration. On his first question, I know that we are all on our best behaviour for the Prime Minister's departure, but he has some brass neck talking about big victories on the day that the Labour party effectively sacked its Prime Minister. I give him marks for chutzpah, but that is going a bit too far. For the benefit of *Hansard*, the hon. Gentleman is even grinning at me while I say this. We all know why this debate was scheduled: it is because the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has gone AWOL, and Labour did not want a debate about the fact that he did not want to face scrutiny.

Dr Arthur: On that point, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: No. If I were the hon. Gentleman, I would not embarrass myself again. He should sit down and take a break. That is the reason why the Government have scheduled this debate, which is likely to finish more than two hours early—[*Interruption.*] Around two hours. These silly games that the Government play do not help them, and do not impress. There is a lot of hubris in this. If I were the hon. Gentleman, I would not take too much for granted.

I will finish on what I hope will be a consensual point for the House: there will never be peace in the middle east while the mullahs run Iran. We now know that the horrific 7 October attack carried out by Hamas was almost certainly ordered from Tehran, in order to pre-empt the signing of an Abraham accord between Israel and Saudi Arabia; that is why it was done. The theocratic regime of the mullahs does not want stability. The mullahs do not want peace; they want destruction and death, be it in the Gulf or, if they could achieve it, here in the United Kingdom. In much the same way that Margaret Thatcher hoped and prayed, three years before the Berlin wall came down, that one day people in eastern Europe would be free, I hope and pray—I hope that the House will join me in this—that one day the ordinary, decent people of Iran will be free. They, the Gulf and the world will be all the better for it.

4.33 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Let me start by joining the hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon (Gregory Stafford) in offering my condolences to the family of Ann Widdecombe. I also join my hon. Friend the Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) in thanking Godfrey and Margaret in the Tea Room, who are retiring today. I know that some representatives in this Chamber may not entirely agree with this, but I also thank Richard from the Strangers Bar. I have been here for only two years, but I have been very well looked after by Richard many times in the Strangers Bar, as I know many others have been.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. It would be remiss of me if I did not put on record my thanks to Godfrey and Margaret—my Nigerian mum here—in the Tea Room.

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to Members for their valuable interventions in this debate, and I will endeavour to respond to all the points raised. I may leave the Oxford Union point to Opposition Members, if that is okay—there was extensive debate about who won what debate. I am very glad that we are going to have a Cambridge Prime Minister, rather than an Oxford one, so perhaps we do not need to go quite so much into previous debates.

The Minister for Security (Dame Angela Eagle): That is very controversial!

Mr Falconer: That may not be the most controversial thing I say.

Dr Evans: Will we ever see the Cambridge Prime Minister at a debate?

Mr Falconer: I am sure the hon. Gentleman will not be disappointed. He had an opportunity to hear from the future Prime Minister yesterday, but the current Prime Minister is in place until the end of term, as he knows.

Let me move on to questions raised by Conservative Members, particularly about the statutory instrument. There was a question about the designation of the IRGC and the other two entities. I do not wish to prejudge the decisions of this House and the House of Lords, but I hope that the statutory instrument will be passed by this place immediately after this debate, and will make its way through the other place very swiftly, hopefully by the end of the week. The statutory instrument would then be in force by the end of the week.

Dr Arthur: Some colleagues have questioned the need for this debate. Like others, I welcome the news that we are going to proscribe the IRGC, but online, I have seen people who are basically antisemitic claiming that this is some kind of plot, that Jews are taking over the world, and that they were behind this decision. That is why it was right to have this debate today. It has been fantastic to hear colleagues from across the House reminding us of just how barbaric the regime is, and of the role it plays in the UK. I thank Ministers for the proscription, and I thank those who took part in this debate who talked about this barbaric regime.

Mr Falconer: It is important that we designate all three organisations. Two of them have links to Iran, and one of them has been named in relation to barbarous attacks on the Jewish community in this country. It is right that we take this action. I am very pleased to be joined by the Security Minister, who will introduce the statutory instrument shortly.

I heard Conservative Members express a desire for us to move quickly on this question. I recognise the concern in the House—it was reflected in some of the debate this afternoon—to ensure that we balance the need to take firm action against the Iranian regime with maintaining diplomatic relations with it. We could hear that concern in some of the exchanges between Members. I believe that the tools that we are introducing following the

[Mr Falconer]

Jonathan Hall review get that balance right. These are firm measures in response to totally unacceptable behaviour. I have summoned the Iranian ambassador within the last week, and I have instructed my officials to do so again.

The hon. Member for Farnham and Bordon referred to normal diplomacy. We have to be absolutely clear that we wish to maintain diplomatic relations with Iran, but we will not accept attacks on people in our country, whether they are Jewish or diplomats from elsewhere. We will not accept arson attacks on ambulances. All that is totally unacceptable, and the United Kingdom—with the support of everyone in this House, I believe—will put in place the measures we need to ensure that these attacks cannot continue.

Alex Sobel (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): I have long called in this House for the proscription of the IRGC. Last year, the Joint Committee on Human Rights, on which I sit, undertook an inquiry into transnational repression, which found that Iran was one of the most flagrant perpetrators of transnational repression globally. The IRGC uses proxy criminal networks, surveillance and direct threats to silence journalists, opposition groups and the Iranian diaspora in this country. How will they be protected by the proscription?

Mr Falconer: Many Members of the House will have looked carefully on the Friday before last at the judgment relating to an attack on a journalist here. Let me say a little more. It is neater and more accurate to refer to the power in the statutory instrument, which we hope will be passed, as a designation, rather than a proscription. The statutory instrument, and the designation that should then follow, will give power to the police and the security services to take action against anyone who is a supporter of the designated groups. MI5 in particular has been clear that this power is welcome and will give it an additional ability to disrupt. It is clearly not the only tool in our arsenal. We already have extensive sanctions against the Iranian regime. We are already taking action—or rather, more properly, the police and security services are taking action—under the existing National Security Act 2023. The legislation passed with Royal Assent on 8 July, now supplemented by the statutory instrument, will provide further powers to the police and the Security Service. The House will understand that I will not allude to how the police might use their new powers—that will be an independent operational matter for them—but I am confident that they will have greater ability to go after groups of concern.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke: The Minister makes a very important point about operational independence, but elected councillors across the country, from different parties, have blatantly ignored the fact that these are terrorist organisations, and have supported them. They are there for the antisemitic comments that are made, and they have been shown recently to be stabbing effigies. These are elected people. The Minister for Security is in her place. It is important that there is no fear of going after councillors, just because they are elected; if they make these comments, they must be called out.

I take this opportunity to place on the record how much I supported the Prime Minister and his family, and regretted the disgraceful fire-bombing of their family home. However, councillors, perhaps from another wing of politics, put out the most disgusting allegations about that story. They were completely untrue, but had clearly come straight out of Moscow, and were brought into the cyber and cognitive despair that we see being built. I wanted to make those points because I have not yet had a chance to do so. It is important that anybody who thinks that they can flout the laws that are being brought in can feel the full force of the law.

Mr Falconer: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for that courteous and generous question. Let me be absolutely explicit about the effect. If Parliament approves these designations later this week, anyone supporting, assisting or obtaining material benefit from these groups will be subject to new criminal offences, and could face up to 14 years in prison. The law operates without fear or favour, regardless of position. Of course, our speech in this place is protected, but that is not the case elsewhere. We would expect the law to be applied evenly throughout the country.

Luke Myer: I wish to push the Minister on the point about social media disinformation. This is one of the biggest issues affecting our democracy, and western democracies around the world, when it comes to the threat from not only Iran but other hostile states. I am no closer to understanding which part of Government is responsible for leading on tackling this challenge. Where is the plan? Who is responsible? I wonder if the Minister can offer clarification on that.

Mr Falconer: That is a really important question. In my career as a diplomat, I saw the extent of disinformation and hostile efforts to influence others change incredibly quickly. Iran has been described in this debate as not doing normal diplomacy. It is not just Iran. The right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold (Sir Alec Shelbrooke) mentioned the obvious efforts of Moscow to have influence in a whole range of ways, whether through the Wagner Group—now the Africa Corps—or online. I am afraid to have to inform my hon. Friend the Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer), if he is not already aware of it, that quite a lot of the state-backed Russian media spend quite a lot of time talking about just how awful we all are in this House.

This is a really important area of work. The Security Minister leads the defending democracy taskforce, which is driven from the centre of Government—of course, we in the Foreign Office have an important role to play, but so do many other arms of Government. There is no lack of urgency on the part of Government in dealing with this problem. It is, of course, difficult to delineate between disinformation and disagreement, but you know it when you see it, and many of us in this House with experience of foreign affairs have seen just how dramatically it has risen as an issue. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) rightly referred to the noticeable drop in commentary on the merits of Scottish independence following the interventions—I do not wish to disagree with friends in the Chamber on the merits of that case, though as the House might expect, I am an ardent Unionist, with an English mother and a Scottish father.

Madam Deputy Speaker, with your permission, I will make a little progress and turn to what is happening in Iran, lest I leave Conservative Members complaining that I have taken the full two hours. I do not like to do this, but let me gently correct the right hon. Member for Wetherby and Easingwold—I am afraid that there are missiles flying, and they are flying towards our friends. I condemn in the strongest terms the reckless attacks on commercial shipping in the strait of Hormuz and, indeed, on countries in the region. These include Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, Oman and Jordan. The Conservative defence spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), asked what support we have given to those countries. We still have British fighter jets in the air seeking to defend our friends and partners, we have the Sky Sabre programme, and we have forward-deployed a range of support from the RAF. I join the right hon. Member in thanking both our armed forces and their families—I think he referred to the home base. For much of the Royal Air Force, the home base is Lincoln, and I am particularly grateful to the families there.

We have called out what is intolerable aggression from Iran—not just by ourselves, and not just with our counterparts in the region, but with friends elsewhere, including France and Germany. The House should be clear about what Iran has done over the past week; it is seeking not only to strike our friends and partners, but to assert control over what are very clearly Oman's territorial waters. It has been explicit that one of the things it is most offended by is the passage of ships through what is sometimes called the southern channel of the strait of Hormuz. That is practically the beaches of Oman. Oman is a long-standing friend and ally of this country; it has full rights to its own territory and its own waters, and what Iran is seeking to do is a terrible threat to a principle that this House has valued for a very long time, which is the freedom of navigation. We want to see no tolls and no restrictions, and we want a return to diplomacy. We want the memorandum of understanding to be clearly in force, implemented in good faith, verifiable and in line with international law.

Our priorities remain de-escalation, the protection of civilian shipping and the full reopening of the strait. However, as many hon. and right hon. Members have said, Iran also must never have a nuclear weapon, and we continue to engage closely with our partners in the region and, indeed, to be clear with Iran itself about that. For understandable reasons, we have talked a great deal about the strait, but let me set out the clear and verifiable steps that we expect of Iran in relation to the nuclear issue. We must now have full co-operation with the IAEA, and it must have full access to all nuclear sites in Iran.

To return to the strait of Hormuz, as many hon. and right hon. Members have said, what happens there affects all of our constituents. I unequivocally condemn Iran's attacks on commercial shipping, which have cost innocent seafarers their lives, damaged the environment and left global trade unable to flow freely. Many of those strikes have been in Omani waters; the MOU between the US and Iran in no way abrogated Oman's rights to its own territorial sea, and we stand with Oman.

As a result of Iran's reckless actions, particularly over the past few days, we have now seen daily transits decline from around 150 vessels a day before the conflict

to just a handful yesterday. No country has the right to hijack international shipping or to hold the global economy hostage. This crisis will be felt by some of the world's most vulnerable people, who will bear its brunt most extremely. Iran must halt these attacks on international shipping, and it must support the reopening of the strait and a return to de-escalation and diplomacy, as envisaged in the memorandum of understanding that it signed.

The UK will continue to stand for freedom of navigation, both in the strait and across the world. Our priority in the strait negotiation is to ensure unimpeded passage without the threat of violence, tolls, fees or conditions. We will continue to stand up for international law, as reflected in the United Nations convention on the law of the sea, for freedom of navigation, for global navigation rights, and for seafarer safety. We will continue, alongside France, to lead efforts to reassure international shipping. That is why we have established the multinational military mission—the MMM—to support de-mining, to reassure shipping and to help reopen the strait. Some 28 countries have now pledged their support for these efforts.

The Foreign Secretary convened a meeting of more than 40 countries, as well as the International Maritime Organisation and the EU, to build consensus and determination across the international community to secure freedom of navigation and reopen the strait. We welcome the IMO's evacuation corridor initiative and its mandate to restore safe and unhindered transit through the strait. The IMO must be enabled to resume that work as soon as possible.

Mr Francois: Without asking the Minister to reveal any operationally sensitive information, for reasons that we all understand, is the Government's position that they will not seek to use the capability of the international coalition for de-mining to clear mines from the strait unless, in effect, they have Iranian consent for de-mining?

Mr Falconer: We have to be extremely clear about the circumstances of the strait. It is clear that Oman has the right to do what it wishes within its own waters, consistent with international law. I am sure the right hon. Gentleman will have seen the statement from France and Britain recently about our intent to support the Omanis in de-mining, if that is what they want. We have been clear that the MMM is intended to be a defensive effort. It is not committing the UK into the wider conflict between the US and Iran; it is a defensive measure. We do not require the consent of Iran to be in Omani or international waters. That is an important principle that this House has upheld for many decades—perhaps even centuries—and we will continue to do so.

I will turn from the strait to what happens here at home. Important points were made in the debate about the role of Persian language media organisations and their associated journalists. I am afraid that it is true that the Iranian intelligence service has a long-standing pattern of targeting Jewish and Israeli people, and there appear to have been efforts to target journalists, too. We are firm in our commitment to protect the Jewish community, and we will continue to work urgently to stamp out vile antisemitism. As foreign states increasingly seek to promote threats on our streets, we are taking concrete measures to crack down on those who try to undermine our country and its security.

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): On the threats to British citizens, two British citizens are detained in Iran in Evin prison: Craig and Lindsay Foreman. They are innocent. They have been arbitrarily detained there for more than one and a half years, after a flagrantly unfair trial. It has been reported that Craig has now been sentenced to a further two years, for reasons that seem entirely opaque. The couple have been on a hunger strike for 68 and 59 days, and both have lost significant weight. I welcome the appointment of a special envoy for consular cases and the state threat designation for the IRGC, but what steps are the Government taking that will give the Foremans and their family hope that welfare items will reach them, that full communications will be restored, and that the Government have a plan to get them home?

Mr Falconer: My hon. and learned Friend has been a doughty advocate for his constituents, and I am deeply concerned by the reports that he has mentioned. I am aware of them, and I am urgently seeking an update from the Iranian authorities on whether those concerning reports are indeed true. We have spoken many times about the case of his constituents, and I am continuing to meet the family regularly. He also referred to the appointment of the envoy, which is a welcome step: I am sure that Mr Burt will make a real contribution in the world. I recognise that the families of both Foremans will continue to be anxious for updates, and I will provide them in as timely a way as I can—often outside the House, for reasons that my hon. and learned Friend will understand.

My hon. and learned Friend has rightly turned the discussion to human rights. We have heard some powerful speeches, including that of the hon. Member for Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber (Brendan O'Hara), about the circumstances of Iranians in Iran. I know that a number of Members have constituents with family links in Iran, and they will be all too aware of the absolute horrors that have faced many who have sought to stand up for their rights there. That is why we now have 105 human

rights sanctions against the Iranian regime. We must not forget the legitimate aspirations of the Iranian people, in particular Iranian women. The hon. Gentleman spoke movingly about one such very brave leader who stood up for her rights and was subjected to extreme hardship by the Iranians as a consequence.

We will continue not only to take action ourselves, but, alongside international partners, to lead efforts internationally to keep attention on these questions. We have called special sessions in the Human Rights Council to address the deteriorating human rights situation in Iran, and we have repeatedly taken advantage of our human rights ambassador to ensure that we use that forum to warn Iran not to seek to exploit this conflict to inflict further violence on its own people. We did so again on 16 June. Since this conflict began, I have summoned the Iranian ambassador to the United Kingdom on five occasions, most recently yesterday in response to our attribution of attacks in London to Iranian state-backed organisations. We will continue to hold the regime to account.

Let me once again underline this Government's commitment to tackling the Iranian threat, however and wherever it manifests itself. Having been the Minister with responsibility for the middle east for two years, I want to place on record my thanks—which I am sure are shared by the House—not just to our armed forces personnel in the region, but to the many members of the diplomatic service, including those in Tehran, and those in a range of other places which are not easy to be in, often for long periods of time and often in circumstances of great uncertainty. I come to this House always armed with their insights and their wisdom, and their relentless efforts to see a resolution in the region in accordance with the wishes of this House, and I am grateful for the opportunity to pass on my thanks.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Iran.

National Security

4.58 pm

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dame Angela Eagle): I beg to move,

That the draft National Security Act 2023 (Designated Bodies) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 13 July, be approved.

I am grateful to the House for its consideration of this draft statutory instrument, which will see three bodies designated: the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, the Islamic Movement of Companions of the Right, and the GRU Volunteer Corps. Threats from foreign powers and their proxies have grown in scale and complexity, and we have just had a debate about one of the areas of the world from where these threats emanate. Designation is a powerful tool for disrupting state bodies and those acting in concert with them, and it sends a strong message about the UK's commitment to tackling foreign power threat activity globally. The Home Secretary has determined that the three bodies are involved in foreign power threat activity, so we propose to designate them under this new power.

Before I give more detail on the bodies in question, it is worth setting out the legislative basis of the decision. For a body to be designated, the Home Secretary must reasonably believe that it is involved in foreign power threat activity, as defined in the National Security Act 2023. The definition of "foreign power threat activity" covers the most serious offences in the Act, including espionage, sabotage and foreign interference. It also covers broader activity that constitutes a serious threat to life or public safety when carried out for, on behalf of, or with the intention to benefit a foreign power. If that test is met, the Home Secretary must then consider whether designation is necessary to protect the safety or interests of the United Kingdom. She will take account of considerations such as foreign policy and the impact on human rights.

Once a group is designated, it is a criminal offence within the UK's jurisdiction to support, assist or obtain material benefits from that designated body, and the penalties for such offences are imprisonment for up to 14 years and/or a fine. Where an individual commits certain espionage conduct or sabotage for a designated body, this can attract sentences of up to life in prison. Designation therefore enables law enforcement and intelligence agencies to disrupt designated bodies more effectively. Given its wide-ranging impact, the Home Secretary will exercise this power only after thoroughly reviewing the available evidence, including intelligence material and cross-Government advice. A decision to designate is only taken after great care and consideration, and it must be approved by both Houses.

I turn now to the bodies in question, starting with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The long-standing threat posed by Iran and its proxies is well established; indeed, we have literally just debated it. We know that the Iranian intelligence services have a pattern of targeting dissidents, Persian-language media organisations and journalists, and Jewish and Israeli communities globally. The IRGC Quds Force and the IRGC Intelligence Organisation, together with the Ministry of Intelligence and Security, form the Iranian intelligence apparatus. As a key component of the Iranian state's security apparatus, the IRGC is answerable directly to Iran's

Supreme Leader. Its role extends beyond conventional military operations and includes intelligence activity, the use of proxy actors, and influence operations that are designed to advance Iranian state objectives. Activity linked to the IRGC has involved threats to life and intimidation on UK soil, including credible plots to target individuals in the United Kingdom. The IRGC also supports militant groups overseas, and has been associated with cyber-attacks and other state threats that are actively aligned with Iranian state objectives.

I will move on to the Islamic Movement of Companions of the Right. The IMCR has publicly claimed seven attacks at UK locations linked to Jewish and Israeli communities and to Persian-language media, including the antisemitic arson attack on four Hatzola ambulances in Golders Green on 23 March. Sitting behind the IMCR are members of the Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Quds Force, who almost certainly directed attacks across Europe by the IMCR. These incidents, including acts of arson and intimidation, have caused real fear and distress, and they have a profound effect on the communities affected. It is clear that this sustained activity directly threatens the safety and the interests of the United Kingdom.

On the GRU Volunteer Corps, Russia's threat to the United Kingdom extends far beyond conventional military action. The Kremlin increasingly relies on proxy organisations to pursue its objectives, seeking to undermine our security while maintaining a degree of plausible deniability. The so-called GRU Volunteer Corps is a clear example of that approach. It is not an independent force or a loose collection of volunteers. It is a proxy organisation operating under the direction and control of the GRU, Russia's military intelligence service. These formations are directed, supported and sustained by the GRU, and they are already operating across conflict zones, most notably in Ukraine in support of Russia's illegal invasion.

We are seeing a conscious attempt by the Russian state to blur the lines between military action, intelligence activity and criminality, using deniable forces to carry out sabotage, destabilisation and violence beyond its borders. This is not conjecture; it reflects a pattern of behaviour that underpins Russia's aggression in Ukraine and has been seen repeatedly across Europe, including here in the United Kingdom. In 2024, two men organised an arson attack on a Ukrainian-owned business in east London on behalf of the Wagner Group, another proxy body that acts on behalf of the Russian state, and which is proscribed as a terrorist organisation in the UK. It is notable that large parts of the Wagner Group have been absorbed into the so-called Volunteer Corps, which demonstrates the threat posed to the UK.

With the House's consent, these bodies will be designated. Having carefully considered all the evidence, the Home Secretary has decided that there is sufficient evidence for her reasonably to believe that each body is involved in foreign power threat activity, and that designation is necessary to protect the safety or interests of the United Kingdom. Designation will strengthen our ability to disrupt these bodies and those who support and facilitate them. More broadly, it sends a powerful message to any foreign power or proxy intent on harming the United Kingdom or our interests. We will do whatever it takes to prevent such activity on our soil.

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

This debate is a significant moment, because this is the first use of a new power introduced by this Government to answer an urgent need. We are taking action because the three bodies in question, in their different ways, pose a threat to our country, and because designation is a necessary and proportionate response to their activities. With that, I commend the regulations to the House.

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

5.7 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): It is right that these measures have been brought forward, and the Opposition will support them. The powers Parliament created through the National Security Act exist for precisely this purpose. They are there to respond to hostile state activity and those who threaten our national security. It is right that they are now being used. That said, we have consistently argued that these powers should have been deployed sooner, particularly against the IRGC. We made the case repeatedly because the threat was clear. While it is disappointing that it has taken this long, it is nevertheless welcome that action is now being taken against these organisations.

As we heard throughout today's earlier debate, Iran continues to pose a serious threat to the United Kingdom. It seeks to intimidate, to interfere and to undermine our security, often through the use of proxies and affiliated organisations. That is why it is right that the regulations do not focus solely on the IRGC itself. The Iranian regime does not operate through one organisation alone. It relies on a network of proxies to spread fear, conduct hostile activity and threaten those it regards as opponents. The Minister has already set out clearly why each of these organisations meets the test for designation, so I will not repeat those arguments, but it is important that we recognise the danger they pose.

Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman says that he wished the Government had acted sooner. Did the National Security (State Threats) Act 2026 not get Royal Assent a week or two ago? I think our Ministers have acted very quickly indeed.

Matt Vickers: We put in place powers that assist in this. The first duty of any Government is to keep the public safe, regardless of which party is in office. We introduced the National Security Act 2023. The Minister and I have had many debates on this subject, pushing for action, and we have been clear and consistent that the powers should have been used much more quickly. If the Government are now doing what is necessary to protect the public, they will have our support. National security should not be a political football.

Groups such as the Islamic Movement of Companions of the Right demonstrate how quickly new organisations can emerge, targeting people here in the United Kingdom while often acting on behalf of hostile states. We know that their activities have included threats against dissidents and particular hostility towards Britain's Jewish community.

That brings me to a wider point. The rise in antisemitism we have seen in recent years is deeply disturbing. Jewish people in this country should never have to look over

their shoulder because of who they are or what they believe. Equally, those who have come to Britain to escape authoritarian regimes should be able to live here free from intimidation and fear. Protecting those communities is not optional; it is a fundamental responsibility of the state. These organisations, and those who support them, should face the full force of the law. Parliament has provided the powers; now they must be used robustly.

When the 2026 Act was before this House, we spent a great deal of time scrutinising how the powers would work in practice. We asked whether there were gaps in the legislation and whether hostile actors might find ways around them. I would therefore be grateful if the Minister could reassure the House that the operation of these new powers is being kept under close review, their effectiveness is being assessed, and, if weaknesses emerge, the Government will not hesitate to act.

But legislation alone will never be enough. The organisations we are dealing with today are driven by ideologies that reject everything this country stands for. They seek to divide communities, spread hatred and undermine confidence in our democratic way of life. They do not believe in debate; they believe in intimidation. They do not persuade; they threaten. That is why our response has to be broader than enforcement alone. Of course we need strong policing. Of course we need capable intelligence agencies. Of course we need robust legislation. But we also need confidence in who we are as a country. We need to defend the values that unite us: democracy, the rule of law, tolerance, freedom of religion, and freedom of speech. Those are not abstract ideas. They are the very things these organisations seek to attack.

If we are serious about protecting our national security, we must do both: relentlessly pursue those who threaten us, while strengthening the resilience of the society they seek to undermine. That is why we support the regulations today. They are an important step and they send a clear message that those acting on behalf of hostile states, or supporting those who do, will find no safe haven in the United Kingdom.

5.12 pm

Al Carns (Birmingham Selly Oak) (Lab): As Russia becomes increasingly boxed in in Ukraine, it looks towards horizontal escalation. I welcome today's announcement and the move to proscribe some of these groups. The IRGC, GRU and the SVR—multiple different organisations—are seeking ways to undermine our democracy, using physical, electronic, financial, diplomatic and a multitude of other avenues to try to undermine the right to self-determination, the centrality of democracy in the western world, and, importantly, the way in which we govern.

As we move towards an increasingly fractious and dangerous period of time with Russia and in the middle east, will the Minister, in her summing up, say what more we can do to clamp down on hostile state disinformation, Russian disinformation in particular, on social media?

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

5.13 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): The Liberal Democrats will support the regulations, which are welcome if somewhat overdue. We have argued for years that the IRGC should face much tougher action here in the United Kingdom. Despite successive Governments recognising the threat, they did not act until now, so the regulations are very welcome indeed.

The IRGC is central to the Iranian regime's repression at home and its destabilising activities abroad. It is backing proxy groups targeting dissidents overseas and poses a direct threat to people here in the UK. The new designation powers recognise that modern threats extend far beyond conventional warfare. Espionage, cyber-attacks, foreign interference and intimidation carried out on behalf of hostile states all threaten our national security.

I also recognise and welcome the designation of the Islamic Movement of Companions of the Right, and Russia's GRU so-called Volunteer Corps. However, designation alone is not enough, so will the Minister tell the House what additional resources are being provided to ensure that the powers are properly enforced? How will the Government identify and prosecute those acting on behalf of those organisations here in the UK? I also hope that the Minister can say more about protecting those at risk. Members of Britain's Iranian diaspora and our Jewish communities deserve confidence that the measures will deliver real protection.

The regulations should form part of a wider strategy. Hostile states increasingly rely on cyber-operations, disinformation and political interference. Britain must continue to strengthen our resilience and work closely with our allies to meet those threats. The regulations are a welcome step, and the Liberal Democrats support them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I call Mark Sowards for the final Back-Bench contribution—not on a five-minute speaking limit but with 60 minutes of debate left.

5.15 pm

Mark Sowards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I have 60 minutes to make 60 points—no, Madam Deputy Speaker, I will speak very briefly, as I feel I have already taken enough of the House's time on this issue.

I commend the Government for bringing forward the National Security (State Threats) Act 2026 and for designating the IRGC almost as soon as it received Royal Assent. I gently say to the Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers)—who said many things that I agreed with—that while he talks about the length of time it has taken, it was a delivered by a Labour Government, despite all the time that the Conservatives had in office. But that is the only party political point I seek to make in this debate—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The hon. Member has 59 minutes left.

Mark Sowards: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me, but I am not going to take the offer.

The IRGC is a direct threat to the safety of the British-Jewish community. We have known that for a long time, and unfortunately the evidence has stacked up as the years have rolled on. We have seen Hatzola ambulances, which served the whole community, not just the Jewish community, set ablaze; we have seen synagogues and community centres firebombed; and we have seen Jewish people stabbed on the streets of Golders Green. It is past time that we designate the IRGC as the threat to this country that it is.

I am reminded—especially today of all days, after the Prime Minister's final Question Time—that it was the Prime Minister who went to the Jewish community in April and made two promises: first, that the legislation would be brought forward in the King's Speech and prioritised; and secondly, that he would use it to designate the IRGC. I am so pleased that today, after his final Prime Minister's Question Time, he has fulfilled both promises.

I am eternally grateful for the work that the Prime Minister did to transform my party. I think back to 2019 and the worst defeat that we had suffered since 1935 and remember feeling that my party may never come back. But the Prime Minister turned it around, made us face the public, rid us of the poison of antisemitism and delivered the second-biggest majority of my party's history.

As I make the short journey over to the parliamentary Labour party office to nominate my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), in the spirit of unifying behind our next leader, to succeed the Prime Minister—assuming this debate is done by 6 pm—I place on record my thanks to the person who delivered this historic Labour majority, and who is directly responsible for my job and the jobs of many of my colleagues. After all, serving as a Member of Parliament is the greatest privilege in the world, and I will always be grateful to the Prime Minister for that.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Mr Sowards, you have left many minutes on the clock for a change.

5.18 pm

Dame Angela Eagle: I am tempted to say hold my beer, as there are 50 minutes left, but I suspect that many people will want to have their beers elsewhere, in front of a larger screen than we have in this House. I am grateful to all colleagues who have contributed to the debate.

The bodies that we have discussed today—the IRGC, the IMCR and the GRU Volunteer Corps—represent different manifestations of a common challenge: foreign power threat activity conducted directly by states through proxies. The hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) asked why it has taken so long to take this action. This power has been developed specifically to address the growing challenge posed by state-linked bodies where it is not always appropriate to use existing counter-terrorism powers. It provides a targeted and proportionate means of disrupting those involved in foreign power threat activity based on the recommendations of Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of state threat legislation.

To answer the hon. Member's question, we had to have that review by Jonathan Hall and look at the way in which current terrorism legislation is working. We

[*Dame Angela Eagle*]

then had to change the law to create this new designation, which is akin to proscription, but in the different context of states—one cannot proscribe a state and suddenly announce that it does not exist, but one can designate proxies that act on behalf of states, which gives our intelligence and police services very similar powers to deal with the malign influence that they seek to bring to bear on our shores.

Designation will disrupt these bodies and those that support or facilitate them by providing stronger tools to our law enforcement and intelligence agencies. It will mean that anyone who supports, assists or obtains material benefit from these organisations will face sentences of up to 14 years in prison, and will make it easier to prosecute certain offences under the National Security Act 2023. The hon. Member for Stockton West talked about getting that Act on the statute book in 2023. At the time, I was serving on the Intelligence and Security Committee from the Opposition Benches. The ISC brought to the House various amendments to that Act, hoping to make it better. I now see from the other side—from the Government Benches—that it has made it easier to use.

So that the House can take an assessment, I note also that designations for the foreign influence registration scheme are also up and running—something else that this Government have done that makes it easier for us to keep an eye on what is going on on our shores.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns) and the hon. Member for Lewes (James MacCleary) widened the debate slightly from the threats facing us to talk about the threats to destabilise our democracy and to ask what we can do about social media companies and the disinformation and misinformation that is swirling around us at the moment. In the context of designation, the regulations now introduce offences relating to supporting the GRU Volunteer Corps, the IRGC and the IMCR. We expect platforms to act responsibly and not to provide space for state threat-linked activity, propaganda or recruitment. We will be keeping a close eye on that, as well as liaising with social media companies to tell them about how this law impacts them. We are clear that any harmful propaganda and material has no place on the internet, and we will continue to take robust action in response if we see it there. The designation introduces the supporting offence, which enables us to talk directly to those hosting such material.

Members including the hon. Member for Lewes and my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) talked about how important it is to defend our Jewish communities, and we all understand and support that. We all want to see antisemitism driven out of our country. This Government have introduced support for the Jewish communities who have been threatened and directly targeted by IRGC proxies. Just a couple of days ago, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister announced an extra £250 million for policing to ensure that we can support and protect our Jewish communities.

In general, the kind of attacks on our democratic way of life that my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak talked about have been aimed also at the Muslim community. The rise of hate speech, intolerance,

grievance and division is an issue that I, as current chair of the defending democracy taskforce, am only too aware of. We have to tackle this across Government, and I promise the House that we are doing that.

The debate has highlighted the seriousness of the threats posed, as did the debate we had before this one. All the cases that have been mentioned underline the need for a robust response to proxy activity on our streets that is state-directed. The United Kingdom faces a growing and evolving threat from foreign states and proxies acting on their behalf. Through this statutory instrument, we are strengthening our ability to respond effectively. We will protect our national security, support our communities and ensure that those who seek to undermine this country are met with a clear and firm response. I commend this instrument to the House.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft National Security Act 2023 (Designated Bodies) Regulations 2026, which were laid before this House on 13 July, be approved.

PETITIONS

Infrastructure Adoption

5.26 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of residents of Mid Cheshire pertaining to unadopted estates in my constituency.

Around 4,700 households—equivalent to more than 12% of all properties across Northwich, Middlewich and Winsford—are on new build estates where basic infrastructure such as roads, drains and sewers remain unadopted by public authorities. The petition, alongside an accompanying online petition, has been signed by over 720 people.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Cheshire,

Declares that homeowners and tenants in newly built properties are waiting too long to see their streets and sewerage infrastructure adopted by the relevant authorities; and further declares that residents are living with years of uncertainty and potential financial liabilities.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to (a) develop a clear standards framework for infrastructure adoption; (b) ensure that housing developers, local authorities and water utilities work together to bring about the timely adoption of infrastructure; and (c) if necessary, legislate to ensure infrastructure is adopted.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P003219]

Safety of Wimborne Road

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I wish to present a petition on behalf of residents in Wimborne about road safety in the Walford Mill area. This location is on the route of three local schools, is close to a nursery, GP surgery and local shop and sits alongside elderly residents' flats. The area includes a complex junction and an ancient bridge that has a pavement on just one side. Despite two large housing developments increasing both the use of the route by pedestrians and traffic, no meaningful improvements have been made to the ability for people to cross the road.

The installation of a zebra crossing and a pedestrian refuge would provide a clearly defined, protected point for crossing Wimborne Road. This would not only enhance safety but offer reassurance to families and the wider community, reducing the likelihood of accidents, encouraging more people to walk to school and improve traffic flow.

While work is finally expected to take place to introduce pedestrian crossings elsewhere, this does not present a solution. My constituent Rosanna, who is in the Gallery today, started this petition, which now has 1,766 signatures.

The petition states:

“The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the installation of one pedestrian crossing and one pedestrian refuge near Knobcrook Bridge and the BP garage on Wimborne Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole,

Declares that Wimborne Road is a bustling thoroughfare used by a mix of vehicles and a significant number of pedestrians each day; further declares that despite its heavy use, there is an insufficient number of zebra crossings and refuges along Wimborne Road; further declares that an insufficient provision of safety measures poses a daily risk to all pedestrians, including the hundreds of school children who traverse this road en route to one of the multiple schools that Wimborne Road connects.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to support the installation of one pedestrian crossing and one pedestrian refuge near Knobcrook Bridge and the BP garage on Wimborne Road.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003224]

A1: North Northumberland

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Claire Hughes.)

5.29 pm

David Smith (North Northumberland) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to open this debate on the A1 through North Northumberland. I have been seeking this debate for months. When I saw the time at which it was originally to have happened, I wondered whether someone somewhere had decided that this Scotsman did not really need to see the big match tonight. I am delighted to see that the business has been brought forward, and now I will be able to watch the game. On a serious note, this is a matter of huge importance, not just to my constituency but to the whole of the north-east of England. We should see it in the context of the question of how we push power, control and resources out to the regions through the devolution settlement, and how great infrastructure projects are delivered in the regions of this great country.

According to the *Newcastle Chronicle*, on 31 May, Emma Bartle-Scott said to her husband that they should not use the A1 as part of their journey that day. She said:

“I had a bad feeling that day...we had had the fatalities and I said to my husband that I didn’t know if we should go on the road.”

Her worry was proven right. As the Scotts neared the end of their journey, and waited—stationary in the middle of the road—to turn off the A1, they were rear-ended and pushed into the other lane. If the drivers coming the other way had not been alert, they would have been hit head-on at 60 mph. Thankfully, the couple are okay, but the dreaded necessity of using the A1 is felt deeply throughout Northumberland.

I would like to outline the condition of the road, welcome the support of the Government and National Highways for planned improvements to the road as part of road investment strategy 3, and advocate for greater investment in the road in the years ahead.

The A1 is the issue for my constituents. I am contacted about it daily. There is not an issue that I am contacted about more than safety on the A1. The road is a critical part of my constituents’ lives, but it is one that they would rather do without. The A1 holds North Northumberland back and is littered with overlapping problems. It is not a safe road. It has also become a bit of a totem for the frustrations of my northern constituents. They feel, rightly, that investment is always going somewhere else, such as the deep south—Manchester, Leeds or somewhere like that—instead of to the true north. With the new rules of the Treasury’s Green Book and, as I said, with a devolution agenda coming to Westminster, I hope that the Government will increase their attention to the road, now and in the years to come.

What is the current situation with the A1? It runs through nearly 50 miles of my constituency—the third-largest in England—from Morpeth to Berwick. I am a bit disappointed to be gazumped by my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), who has the largest constituency in England; I should mention that the A1 also runs through his constituency. The A1 is part of the National Highways strategic road network, and it is the road from London to Edinburgh. It is the east-coast equivalent of the M6, which is a three-lane highway, even through Cumbria; there is no comparison.

[David Smith]

The road is the central feature of my constituency. It is how my constituents get about—they use it in their thousands, daily—including me, my family and my team. Almost all of the 10 million tourists who come to Northumberland every year—many of them from abroad—will use the road in their travels, too.

Tragically, since the beginning of May, six people have died on the A1, with more injured, and 11 people have died on the road over the last year alone. My prayers are with them and their loved ones. Police data, which has not yet been updated to include the most recent incidents, suggests that since 2014 there have been 768 accidents along the A1 through Northumberland, from Seaton Burn to Berwick, 176 of which were serious—and 24, sadly, were fatal. Although the number of less serious accidents is falling, serious and fatal accidents remain persistent. No one should lose their life on our roads.

There are several problems with the A1. The first is the vast number of minor at-grade turnings—my office counted 140 such turnings from Morpeth to Berwick. At those junctions, stationary local traffic must merge with highway traffic along the same gradient, often on to a single lane. There are rarely slip roads to help build up speed, so the turnings are very abrupt. Cars wanting to cross to the other side must wait for gaps in traffic and time their crossings expertly. I am an experienced driver—I have been driving for about 30 years—and I find those crossing points, and especially getting from one side to the other, very worrying.

Some of the crossings are so narrow that long vehicles and vans extend into the road, obstructing traffic that is going at 60 mph—I saw that the other day. Those crossing places are among the worst elements of the A1 and are loathed by everyone who has to use them. Data from 2025 suggests that intersections are responsible for 43% of crashes from Alnwick to Berwick and 30% of crashes on the southern section of the route. Mention Guyzance, Charlton, Hebron, Chevington, Fenwick, Belford or Denwick in my constituency and people might think of those villages, but they are more likely to think of the high-risk junctions there.

The second problem is overtaking and unsafe driving. In 2021, the Planning Inspectorate noted that

“the A1 suffers more overtaking accidents than would be expected on a road of this type.”

Stretches such as Mousen Bends and the merging of lanes at dual and single sections are notorious. Indeed, my point was made when the regional director of National Highways and his team visited me to see the road last year. We did a drive up and down the road, and we had barely entered the single-lane section when we were overtaken by a car driving above the speed limit into traffic. No improvement to the road could fix such reckless behaviour, but the problem was emphasised by the merging of the lanes where we were. It was also tragic to learn that two recent fatalities involved foreign nationals. As North Northumberland becomes ever more popular in summer, tourists who lack local A1 know-how are risking their lives and those of local residents without knowing it.

The third problem is mixed traffic use. That is not unique to the A1 in North Northumberland, but it is quite unusual to have a road where there are ordinary family cars, heavy goods vehicles, tractors—every manner

of transport that we can imagine. On the single-lane sections, that has the effect of slowing down traffic and generating driver frustration, leading to the reckless overtaking that I just mentioned.

Linked to that is the fourth problem: congestion. Average seconds per vehicle mile, which is a measure of traffic speed and congestion, are much higher than the national average north of Alnwick, and they are double the national average around Berwick and the Scottish border. Congestion on the A1 is so high because it lacks resilience and capacity. We talk a lot about road safety—as we should; it is the no. 1 priority—but the congestion wears down the people who live in Northumberland, as it is near constant. The single-lane stretches and frequency of collisions mean that even a minor incident has major consequences. Traffic is delayed and redirected through tiny rural villages, gumming up the entire region.

All those problems—risky junctions and crossing points, dangerous or unfamiliar driving, mixed vehicle types and slow travel times—contribute to one another and create a road that lacks safety, resilience and capacity. There is no silver bullet for those problems, but dualling would certainly fix some of them. In the north-east and Northumberland, when we mention the A1, the first thing people think about is the duelling of the road. It is a saga that, in many ways, has been going on for over 50 years.

In 2014, the Government promised they would dual the A1 from Morpeth to Ellingham, which is a 13-mile stretch. Between 2014 and 2024, the Conservatives in government did a variety of things: they left the EU, they went through five Prime Ministers and they saw the Scottish football team reach a major tournament for the first time since 1998. Yet one thing they could not do was lay 13 miles of new road in North Northumberland. The costs ballooned in that time to about £0.5 billion, and the funding for the project was quietly withdrawn in 2021. The project was briefly resurrected—to everyone’s surprise—just before the 2024 general election.

No one at any point seemed to have figured out an answer to the most basic question: where will the money come from? That is despite my predecessor for the area being, albeit briefly, the Secretary of State for Transport. While it is certainly true that dualling would do a lot of good for the road, it is also true that a particular dualling project was long dangled and never delivered. I am pleased to have seen the recent attempts at cross-party focus on the road, and a desire to encourage the Government to get to a place where we could get these safety improvements and, ultimately, dualling. I welcome that, and I will work with anybody who seeks to achieve that.

It is clear that what we need most urgently are sensible safety improvements that tangibly improve the quality of the road from Morpeth to Berwick. That includes improvements at key junctions, but also signage, markings, speed cameras and the like. Because of that long-promised dualling project, there have been no significant safety improvements on the road for over a decade. I was told that by National Highways.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): As always, my hon. Friend is making a well-informed, passionate speech on behalf of his constituents. Is it not the case that dualling is necessary not just for the safety of his and my

constituents, and those of all the north-east MPs in the Chamber, but for the economy of the north-east region as a whole? Does he agree that dualling would not just make people safe, but make the region better off? It would benefit the entire east coast of the country, enhance connectivity between Scotland and England, and save lives.

David Smith: Absolutely. I could not agree more with my hon. Friend. I will come on to that in a moment. This goes back to what I was saying about the Green Book, about the Treasury's investment rules, and about how we decide where public money ultimately goes. This is as much about the economy as it is about safety.

Over the past two years, my office has been working with National Highways to deliver two route treatment studies of the full 50-mile route, in which National Highways has assessed what needs to be done to the road. We now know exactly where the problems are and what the road needs, and I am really pleased that funding has been secured as part of RIS3, so that the A1 can have the necessary improvements that make journeys safer. I am grateful to the Minister and his predecessor for the time and attention that they have given to the A1 so far. I also want to share my appreciation for the National Highways team at Yorkshire and North East, who continue to work hard on improving this vital road. Planning is still continuing, but I am looking forward to driving on the A1 and seeing new improvements for the first time in over 10 years.

As I hope I have demonstrated, however, the problems along the A1 are varied and overlapping. To be absolutely fair, they have been 50 years in the making and previous Governments, including my own, have not done what has been necessary with the A1. We also have to be honest that fixing these problems will require years of attention. It is not going to be possible for any Government to click their fingers and sort out 50 miles of the A1 in North Northumberland, but we have to make a start, and I wonder whether this might be the Government who will fix this road once and for all. I truly hope they will.

That is why, ahead of the next road investment strategy—RIS4—in the coming years, I want to make the case for everything being on the table for the A1. That includes ongoing uplifts to the road's condition, major improvements at problem junctions and, yes, dualling the entire road. I have mentioned the Treasury Green Book a couple of times, and its reforms have made it clear that value for money is about more than cost and a purely financial return on investment. The new Green Book is squarely behind the ambitions of place-based growth and long-term transformation, rather than a short-term, purely financial yield, and economic benefit to the locality, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) mentioned. That means that regions such as the north-east can be prioritised based on how their growth can be unlocked, by recognising where weak infrastructure limits the potential for new housing developments, tourism growth or business confidence.

The focus on transformational change where a project might take decades to be fully realised is a quiet revolution that changes the way we think about improving the A1. All these changes must be acknowledged as we enter the RIS4 cycle. What consideration will the Minister and

his Department give to the road as part of RIS4 and in the light of these Green Book changes? I fully support a menu of improvements to the road and believe that there is a sustainable case to be made for them.

There is also a political case to be made. When the £11 billion lower Thames crossing gets the nod ahead of the A1, and when the London to Birmingham High Speed 2 line costs as much as the GDP of Belarus, my constituents might be inclined to suspect that, just occasionally, there is a north-south divide. Northern Powerhouse Rail and the TransPennine route upgrade are great, welcome projects, and I am genuinely pleased for the people who live in those parts of the country, but what about infrastructure in the true north of England? If we are serious about devolution and unlocking regional economies, and I think we are, the A1 is the place to start.

In conclusion, the A1 dominates the lives of my constituents in North Northumberland. It is unsafe, lacks resilience and capacity, and is not fit for the future of a region that is booming in tourism and has so much to offer. It hangs over every journey that my constituents make. It hangs over my head every time I go up and down to constituency visits or to spend time with family. It is a mess of overlapping problems that chokes the region's potential, and that is why I am so pleased that we have secured the first substantial improvements in over 10 years following Labour's investment earlier this year. Instead of a long-dangled but never delivered dualling for the south of the constituency, we will have necessary improvements from Morpeth to Berwick. But I want to go further. My expectation is simple: a safer A1, including dualling. All options should be on the table.

If we are serious about devolution, I urge the Minister and the Government to apply these reformed Green Book rules and deliver maximum improvements on the A1. The Scott family who I mentioned at the beginning thankfully survived their collision. Others tragically have not survived, and there will be more to come. It is our job to ensure that we do all we can to minimise the risks of this road, and we have no time to waste.

5.47 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this important debate, and I congratulate my neighbour the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) on securing it. I understand that a football match is taking place tonight, and I want to reassure colleagues that I will not detain them until 7.30 pm—it will be a relatively short contribution.

The A1 is not simply a road through Northumberland; it is one of the United Kingdom's most important strategic routes linking London, the north-east of England and the south-east of Scotland and beyond. For my constituents in the Scottish Borders, the A1 is a vital economic and social artery. It connects communities in eastern borders with Newcastle, Edinburgh and the wider national transport network. It is used every day by people travelling to work, attending hospital appointments, visiting family and transporting goods. Yet large stretches of the A1 through Northumberland and the Scottish Borders remain single carriageway. That is simply not good enough for a road of such national importance.

[John Lamont]

The last Conservative Government approved plans to dual 13 miles of the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham. Those improvements would have created a continuous dual carriageway from Newcastle to Ellingham, improving journey times, strengthening connectivity and, most importantly, making the road significantly safer. It was therefore deeply disappointing that the Labour Government cancelled the scheme shortly after taking office. Years of planning had taken place, development consent had been granted, and tens of millions of pounds of taxpayers' money had already been spent.

The decision to abandon the project was short-sighted. Businesses do not recognise the border between England and Scotland when they make investment decisions or move goods around the country. The failure to invest properly and improve the A1 in Northumberland has a direct impact on businesses, workers and families in my constituency in the Scottish Borders.

Too often, debates about transport investment focus on major cities. Rural and cross-border communities are expected to tolerate slower, less reliable and less safe infrastructure. That imbalance must be readdressed.

I will not focus my frustration only on the UK Government, because the Scottish Government, which is responsible for the A1 on my side of the border, bear equal responsibility for investment in the road and have also significantly failed to invest in the A1 in Berwickshire and the Scottish Borders. Serious accidents happen all too frequently, causing significant diversions through small, rural communities and upsetting local residents. There is great concern about some of the junctions on the A1, particularly around Reston, where local campaigners have been campaigning for years. I pay tribute to Barrie Forrest and the community council team from Reston who have been campaigning for the A1 junction at Reston and Coldingham to be improved, because they rightly identify it as a safety concern. The Scottish Government need to play their part in improving this important road as well.

Upgrading the A1 would support tourism, agriculture, manufacturing and the many small businesses that form the backbone of the economies of Northumberland and the Scottish Borders. It would improve access to jobs and services and help unlock investment across the wider region. There is also an overwhelming safety argument, as we have heard already from the hon. Member for North Northumberland. Anyone who regularly travels along the single-carriageway sections of the A1 understands the risks caused by heavy traffic and slow-moving vehicles, and the limited opportunities to overtake safely. Minor alterations and isolated safety measures are not a substitute for the substantial upgrade that the route requires. This should not be treated as an English project or a Scottish project: it is a United Kingdom infrastructure project.

David Smith: I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way. We may not agree on all of the narrative on what happened over the past decade, but does the hon. Gentleman agree with me that these infrastructure projects are not just about the day-to-day use of the road? They are about what binds our countries together across the border.

John Lamont: The hon. Gentleman makes an important point. Part of the reason why the Scottish Government have not invested in the route—I notice that none of the Scottish National party Members are present—is that they see it as a road going to England. Perhaps they make decisions to invest in other parts of the Scottish transport network—maybe not ferries or the A9—but routes going to England do not get the share of the resources that they require. This is undoubtedly a United Kingdom infrastructure project in which both Government should invest.

I conclude by urging the Government to reconsider their decision not to go ahead with these improvement works, to restore the Morpeth to Ellingham scheme and to work with the Scottish Government to set out a credible, long-term plan to upgrade the A1 through Northumberland and the Scottish Borders. Our communities have waited long enough. They deserve a road that is safe, reliable and fit for purpose.

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

5.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): It is a pleasure to be here once again with you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, to answer tonight's Adjournment debate. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) on securing the debate, and on the determined and constructive manner in which he has represented the views of his constituents on this issue. May I also mention the persistent lobbying of my hon. Friend the Member for Hexham (Joe Morris) and, until recently, that of my hon. Friend the Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody), who joins me on the Front Bench. My hon. Friends have all lobbied for action on the A1.

I recognise the strength of feeling locally about the safety of the A1 and I acknowledge the tragic fatalities on the route. My thoughts and prayers are with the families, friends and communities affected. I know that the future of the A1 has been a matter of significant local interest for many years. It is a subject on which Members from across Northumberland have campaigned vigorously, and I fully recognise the importance attached to the route by local communities, businesses, freight operators and visitors.

The A1 is one of the country's most important strategic roads. It earns its historic title as the Great North Road, continuing to move people and goods throughout the United Kingdom. Through Northumberland, it links the north-east of England with Scotland, supports economic activity, facilitates tourism and provides vital connectivity for communities along the route.

I do not underestimate the disappointment that many constituents felt following the Government's decision not to proceed with the A1 Morpeth and Ellingham dualling scheme, given that we inherited a number of unfunded capital commitments from the previous Government. This evening, I want to explain what the Government are doing to improve safety on the route and how we intend to continue engaging with local communities and stakeholders going forward. It is entirely right that these matters should be discussed in this House, and I welcome the opportunity to respond.

The proposal to dual the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham has been under development for many years. During that period, considerable work was undertaken—consultation took place, design options were developed and statutory powers were ultimately secured. The Government recognise that many local people view the scheme as an opportunity to improve connectivity, support economic growth and address concerns about safety and the reliability of the route. However, Governments have a responsibility to make decisions based not only on ambition, but on evidence and affordability and the prudent use of public funds.

When Ministers reviewed the portfolio of strategic road schemes in 2024, really difficult choices had to be made across the transport network. The evidence presented showed that the Morpeth to Ellingham scheme represented a comparatively weak value-for-money proposition when assessed against competing investment priorities. At the same time, Ministers faced wider pressures on public spending and had a duty to ensure that the limited funding was directed towards investments capable of delivering the greatest benefits across the network. The decision was therefore taken to cancel the scheme, alongside a number of other strategic road projects.

While the Government concluded that the full dualling scheme should not proceed, it does not mean that we have ignored concerns regarding safety—indeed, quite the opposite. Safety remains the foremost priority of both the Department for Transport and National Highways. Following the cancellation announcement, National Highways commenced a dedicated safety study covering the Morpeth to Ellingham section of the route. The purpose of that work was to identify practical interventions capable of improving safety while representing a responsible use of public funds.

National Highways has examined a range of possibilities, including improved road signs and markings, vegetation clearance, improvements in visibility, speed management measures and junction improvements. Where schemes are sufficiently developed, affordable and deliverable, work will commence during the current road period. That work reflects a determination to identify practical steps that can improve safety, even where a larger scheme has not progressed.

A number of colleagues have argued that cancelling the scheme risks constraining economic growth in Northumberland and the wider north-east. I recognise those concerns, but the Government's approach has been to prioritise investments that can demonstrate the strongest overall return on taxpayers' money while supporting growth across the country. The decision should not be interpreted as a lack of commitment to Northumberland; the Government continue to invest significantly in transport infrastructure across the region. Decisions on individual schemes must always be considered in the broader context of national transport investment. Through the transport for city regions settlements, we are providing the north-east with £1.8 billion between 2027 and 2032. That unprecedented long-term funding could be spent on improvements to local roads or safety improvements. I also place on record my appreciation for the constructive engagement shown by local Members of Parliament.

Following the cancellation, National Highways has met with my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland to discuss concerns about the route

and consider options for future improvements. National Highways has subsequently indicated that further work will take place to examine safety issues on sections of the A1 north of Ellingham, towards Berwick, and to identify additional route-based solutions where appropriate. That reflects the reality that most motorists experience the A1 as a continuous corridor.

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I am not a Northumberland MP, but I really want to press the Minister on a couple of things. The fact is that this road is important not just to Northumberland and Scotland, but to the whole region. While Hadrian's Wall is not on the A1, people travel to Housesteads and Vindolanda on the A1. That is a worldwide heritage attraction and centre, and it has that status. However, I am concerned. The Minister is saying some brilliant things about the north-east, but does he agree that we need urgency? The number of fatalities continues to make this issue a priority. The north-east loses out—Manchester is the south-west to us. I am really concerned that fatalities are not higher up the list.

Simon Lightwood: As a sand dancer—as someone from South Shields—I understand where the north is and the north-east is, but I hear my hon. Friend's concerns about road safety, which is why National Highways is undertaking this work to see what additionally can be done to mitigate any safety concerns. I reiterate that £1.8 billion has been given to the north-east between 2027 and 2032, which could be used for improvements on local roads and safety improvements.

I welcome the continued engagement of my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland with National Highways on improvements to the safety and performance of this strategic route.

Joe Morris: Just to pick up on the comments around Treasury engagement, what is the Minister's opinion of recent changes to the Green Book and the approach that Members of Parliament should take to engaging with his Department possibly now that the king of the north-west midlands is due to take up office? What should we be doing to drive that investment forward now that the rules have been changed and Ministers are considering perhaps a different context?

Simon Lightwood: I will come on to future funding, and of course National Highways and the Department for Transport will reflect and follow the changes to the Green Book.

I do not want to raise unrealistic expectations this evening: the Government have not reversed their decision regarding the Morpeth to Ellingham dualling scheme, nor am I announcing a replacement major capital programme tonight. However, that does not mean that nothing will happen. National Highways has continued assessing safety-focused options, and future proposals will be considered in the normal way for RIS4, taking into account evidence, affordability, deliverability and value for money, and any future improvements will be subject to viability and funding considerations within future investment programmes. Of course, I encourage National Highways to continue to liaise with the Scottish Government and local stakeholders.

David Smith: I wish to press a little on RIS4. One of the changes to the Green Book is about place-based approaches. Will that be under consideration so that ultimately the financial return on investment is not the be all and end all? Will consideration also be given to the place-based impact of some of the decisions?

Simon Lightwood: I reiterate that the Department will of course follow the changes to the Green Book accordingly. We will continue to liaise with Members regarding future investment.

John Lamont: The Minister said that National Highways is engaging with the Scottish Government, but it is really important that there is engagement at ministerial level. There is cross-party support for improvements—I think we all recognise their importance—but unless we get that ministerial drive pushing it forward, I do not think we are going to get what we want.

Simon Lightwood: Absolutely. We continue to engage and the Secretary of State has liaison meetings with counterparts in Scotland, as do I.

The Government recognise, of course, the importance of the A1 in Northumberland and further afield. We recognise the concerns that continue to be expressed regarding safety, resilience and economic growth. National Highways has undertaken significant work to identify targeted improvements capable of improving safety on the route, and further work continues on wider sections of the A1 in Northumberland. This Government remain committed to engaging constructively with local communities, National Highways and hon. Members as that work progresses towards delivery.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland once again not only for securing this debate, but for the important points that he has raised and his campaign on this issue on behalf of his constituents. I reassure him and other hon. Members that I take this matter extremely seriously, and I will continue this conversation to see what we can achieve to provide a positive outcome for road users in both the short and longer terms.

Question put and agreed to.

6.4 pm

House adjourned.

Deferred Divisions

TRADE UNIONS

That the draft Trade Unions (Permissible Means of Voting) and Employment Rights (Unfair Dismissal) (Amendment) Order 2026, which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 330, Noes 109.

Division No. 59]

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bird, Lara
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Siân Berry*)
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill

Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy

McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Miliband, rh Ed
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Dr Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Ryan, Oliver

Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Sewards, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel

Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil

Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Sunak, rh Rishi (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Question accordingly agreed to.

TRADE UNION AND LABOUR RELATIONS (CONSOLIDATION)

That the draft Code of Practice on Electronic and Workplace Ballots for Statutory Trade Union Ballots, which was laid before this House on 22 June, be approved.

The House divided: Ayes 330, Noes 109.

Division No. 60]

NOES

Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 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*)
 Dinanage, Dame Caroline
 (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver

Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Lumsden, Douglas

AYES

Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Rushanara
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Alex
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Berry, Siân
 Billington, Ms Polly

Bird, Lara
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Blake, Olivia
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Butler, Dawn
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Chowns, Dr Ellie
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom

Conlon, Liam
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Cooper, rh Yvette
 Corbyn, rh Jeremy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Coyle, Neil
 Craft, Jen
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Daby, Janet
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 De Cordova, Marsha
 Dean, Josh
 Denyer, Carla (*Proxy vote cast by Sián Berry*)
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dodds, rh Anneliese
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Eagle, rh Maria
 Eastwood, Colum
 Eccles, Cat
 Edwards, Lauren
 Efford, Clive
 Egan, Damien
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Falconer, Mr Hamish
 Fenton-Glynn, Josh
 Ferguson, Mark
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Frith, Mr James
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gemmell, Alan
 George, Andrew
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gould, Georgia
 Grady, John
 Greenwood, Lilian
 Hack, Amanda
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Healey, rh John
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Mr Adnan
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Johnson, rh Dame Diana
 Johnson, Kim
 Jones, rh Darren
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Jones, Sarah
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kaur, Satvir
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyle, rh Peter
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lake, Ben
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell, Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice (*Proxy vote cast by Sir Mark Tami*)
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Malhotra, Seema
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonagh, Dame Siobhain
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McFadden, rh Pat
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKee, Gordon
 McKenna, Kevin
 McMahon, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Medi, Llinos (*Proxy vote cast by Ben Lake*)
 Miliband, rh Ed

Minns, Ms Julie
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, rh Ian
 Murray, rh James
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naismith, Connor
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Nash, Pamela
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Dame Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Peacock, Stephanie
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Phillips, Jess
 Phillipson, rh Bridget
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Dr Peter
 Quigley, Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Rayner, rh Angela
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, rh Ellie
 Reynolds, rh Emma
 Reynolds, rh Jonathan
 Rhodes, Martin
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rimmer, Ms Marie (*Proxy vote cast by Rachael Maskell*)
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Ryan, Oliver
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Sandher-Jones, Louise
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Seward, Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Spencer, Hannah
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Streeting, rh Wes
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Tami, rh Sir Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, Alison
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Thornberry, rh Emily
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Tomlinson, Dan
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, rh Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Chris
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 West, Catherine
 Western, Matt
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter

Bhatti, Saqib (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Blackman, Bob
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartlidge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 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*)
 Dinenage, Dame Caroline (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Duncan Smith, rh Sir Iain
 Easton, Alex
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley

Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Freeman, George (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 French, Mr Louie
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Griffith, Andrew
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Hunt, rh Sir Jeremy
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leigh, rh Sir Edward
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Lumsden, Douglas

Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Mayhew, Jerome
 McVey, rh Esther
 Mitchell, rh Sir Andrew
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Morrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Norman, rh Jesse
 O'Brien, Neil
 Patel, rh Priti
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pochin, Sarah
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Rankin, Jack
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil

Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Spencer, Patrick (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stride, rh Sir Mel
 Sunak, rh Rishi (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Tice, Richard
 Timothy, Nick
 Vickers, Martin
 Vickers, Matt
 Whately, Helen
 Whittingdale, rh Sir John
 Wild, James
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wright, rh Sir Jeremy

Question accordingly agreed to.

Westminster Hall

Wednesday 15 July 2026

[SIR ROGER GALE *in the Chair*]

Regional Accents and Social Mobility

9.30 am

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered regional accents and social mobility.

Thank you for chairing this debate, Sir Roger. The way we speak reveals so much about us. Long before we explain our politics, our profession or our background—the moment we open our mouths—our accents instantly signal a core part of who we are. Accents carry traces of our communities, our upbringing and our lived experience. They are part of our story. I grew up as a working-class woman from Salford, so my accent has always been woven into my identity, just as much as my values or my politics. After more than 20 years of living in Leigh, it has naturally taken on a Lancashire lilt. I say “beltin” when something is brilliant, “int’ it” when I agree, and “love-leh” instead of “lovely”.

However, what is harder to confront is the pressure that many people feel to change the way they speak in order to progress. Accents can be a barrier, and it is a barrier that not many people speak about. There is a hierarchy of accent prestige deeply rooted in British society, yet we should remind ourselves of a simple truth: everybody has an accent—there is no such thing as speaking without one. What we often describe as a neutral accent is simply an accent that has historically been associated with power and prestige. There is no linguistic basis for ranking accents. No accent is inherently more intelligent, professional, articulate or correct than another. These are social judgments, not linguistic facts.

Our life chances are too often defined by our backgrounds. Those from poorer backgrounds are almost twice as likely to end up in low-paid jobs than those from more privileged backgrounds. Accent bias can then become another barrier to social mobility. Our accent produces a judgment instantly. Often, it happens unconsciously. Research shows that people form impressions from someone’s voice within seconds. People make assumptions about our background, our capability and our education. We often think we are judging competence or professionalism, when in reality we may be responding to deeply ingrained social stereotypes associated with a particular way of speaking. For someone like me, from a northern city, the assumption has sometimes been that I am less intelligent or that I am “rough” or uncultured.

The issue is not how people speak; it is how we respond to how they speak. A Sutton Trust report in 2022 highlighted that less than 10% of the population speak with what is often called the BBC accent, or the Queen’s English, yet it remains the dominant accent in positions of authority. As a result, many young people with different accents worry about the impact of their accent on their career prospects. They think twice before

they dream big. Research by Co-op similarly found that many people have been mocked, criticised or singled out because of the way they speak. Together, those studies show how accent is often used as a proxy for social class, leading to unfair assumptions and discrimination.

It is sad to think about the number of young people who have missed out on opportunities because of their accent. Self-consciousness and anxiety about accent bias are highest during university and early professional life, which should be the very moment when ambition grows, rather than shrinks. They see their peers at university succeed, but they themselves may feel held back. I challenge anyone to watch the UK Youth Parliament in action and not feel energised by hearing young people from every corner of the UK speaking confidently in their own voices. The answer is not to talk their accents out of them; it is to talk our biases out of ourselves.

Accent diversity is part of Britain’s cultural richness; it is not a problem to be solved. In a country with such a remarkable variety of accents in a relatively small geographical space, our linguistic diversity should be celebrated as part of our national heritage. I admit that there was a time when I wondered whether softening my accent might make me sound more credible, more professional, more Westminster and less Salford. Even in my first marketing job as an apprentice in central Manchester, I worried that the way I spoke could limit my prospects so I toned my accent down. My friends used to say, “Why have you changed your voice? Why are you speaking like that?” That experience reflects research showing that many people change the way they speak when applying for jobs.

Of course, all of us naturally adapt aspects of how we speak depending on who we are talking to or the setting we are in: our telephone voice or when we speak here in the Chamber—we all do it. That is entirely normal. The problem comes when people feel pressure to change the way they speak not out of choice but because they fear prejudice, exclusion or lost opportunities. Before I arrived in Westminster, I worried about whether I would fit in. After all, many of the politicians occupying the highest offices of state have rarely sounded like me—with notable exceptions, of course, such as our Secretary of State for Education and our great Speaker, whose Lancashire voice is heard loud and proud in this place every day. The more time I have spent in Parliament, the more I realise that beneath the public image lies an increasingly diverse collection of accents, backgrounds and life experiences.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): I am sure I’ll be using a slightly different accent this evening when watching the football—a few expletives might come out as I shout at the TV. Does my hon. Friend agree that a part of public life is being authentic? One way to build trust and authenticity is to just be ourselves. That is important for diversity and, as she says, for our national culture.

Jo Platt: I cannot agree more with that statement; I think we are grasping that more and more. We do not have to come from the places we represent—I do not—but representing our communities does matter and it is about being ourselves. I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention.

[Jo Platt]

Colleagues across both Houses are proud of where they come from and of the voices that reflect that, and we should celebrate that diversity. But let us not pretend that the battle has been won. The way my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) has been mocked and criticised for how she speaks demonstrates that accent prejudice remains alive and well in our politics. If somebody can reach one of the highest offices in the land and still face those attitudes, there is clearly lots more work to do.

My experience has shaped my interest in how regional accents influence people's opportunities and representation. That is why I was delighted to host a parliamentary drop-in session for the Westminster Voices project and to support the important research being led by Professor Rob Drummond of Manchester Metropolitan University and Dr Amanda Cole of the University of Cambridge. I pay tribute to them both for leading the conversation on this. The turnout was exceptional. Every MP, peer and member of staff who attended had their own story about their accent, background and journey into Westminster. All that is why I felt it important to hold a debate on this issue today, because we all have a story to tell.

We should be clear: communication skills and accent are not the same thing. We should judge people on what they say and how effectively they communicate, not how closely they sound like an outdated idea of professionalism. That applies in Westminster and in the rest of the country. Action to tackle accent bias should be recognised as an important diversity issue. That means tackling bias through training, research and a greater appreciation of accent diversity in workplaces and education. The recent Commission on the Future of Oracy Education in England made an important point: communication is not about sounding a particular way. Every child should develop the confidence to communicate effectively in their own authentic voice.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important and interesting speech. Confidence is incredibly important, especially for young people. We have a huge youth unemployment crisis in this country, and part of that is down to young people not having confidence. Does she agree, first, that we must ensure that there is not accent bias so that people do not lose confidence and, secondly, that we must build young people's confidence, partly through work experience and other schemes?

Jo Platt: My hon. Friend is absolutely right about confidence. Politicians have a lot of work to do in supporting our constituents, including children and young people in schools and the workplace. I hope we can continue having this conversation with the Department to ensure that that happens.

The Co-op has done a lot of research on this issue and is calling for socioeconomic background to become a legally protected characteristic. That would ensure that accent bias and related forms of discrimination are confronted head on.

Our accents carry who we are—our identities, our communities and our lived experiences—and that diversity enriches our country. Criticism of the way someone

speaks is rarely just about language; more often, it reflects assumptions about class, region and identity. We cannot solve every form of social inequality by addressing accent bias alone, but we can ensure that the way people speak is one less barrier to opportunity. We should stop asking people to change the way they speak, and instead change the way we as a society listen. From Parliament to every workplace, university and institution across the country, every voice deserves to be heard, respected and represented. When every voice can rise, our nation rises with it—louder, prouder and stronger than ever.

9.41 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Sir Roger, for giving me the chance to participate. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt), my cousin from across the sea—or across the shuck, as we would say back in Northern Ireland—for highlighting this issue. It is a real pleasure to speak in this debate.

When I first came here, there was a time in our friendship, Sir Roger—I have learned to value your advice on many things—when you would have said, “What’s that boy saying?” You never said it to offend, of course, but you might have asked yourself that question.

When we talk about diversity, inclusion and breaking down barriers to social mobility in the country, we rightly talk about race, gender, background and socioeconomic status. But, as the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton said, there is a silent, pervasive form of prejudice that remains entirely socially acceptable in corporate boardrooms, academic institutions and possibly the very corridors of power in this place. I am talking about accentism. I have a very clear accent. I think it is normal, but when I came over here I realised that I might be the only one with it. People's intelligence, competence and worth can be judged entirely on how they sound.

I will give an example. I was saying to the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) that when I asked a question in the Adjournment debate one night, the Minister said, “That’s a great question. I’ll come back to you with the answer.” I just thought that was what she meant; I never had any reason to think otherwise. She happened to meet one of my colleagues, David Simpson, who used to be an MP, and she said, “Jim asked me a question in the Chamber the other night. I have no idea what he said, so I just told him that I would come back to him with a written response.” That illustrates that, in the early days, it took a wee bit longer for people to understand.

I stand here today as a proud son of County Down, and I speak with the voice of my constituency. All my constituents can understand it—I suppose that is the important thing. It is a voice heavily shaped by our rich Ulster Scots linguistic heritage. To me and the people of Strangford and Northern Ireland, it is the language of our hearts, our history and our homes. It is a dialect full of warmth, character and deep-rooted culture. But if we step outside Northern Ireland, that same voice is too often treated as a barrier. I speak not for me but for some of my constituents who have come here for university or to seek employment.

Studies into accent bias, such as the landmark “Speaking Up” report by the Sutton Trust, have shown that regional working-class accents, including those from Northern Ireland, are consistently ranked lower for prestige and perceived professional capability than received pronunciation or standard BBC English. I remember, at school as a young boy, my earliest words were in Ulster Scots. Education was different at that time. Whenever a child said something wrong, the teacher, Mr Whisker, would say, “That’s not proper English.” I would say, “Those are the words my granny and mum use.” In those days, a child would get a clip round the ear for that. That is not a criticism; it did not do me any harm. Teaching was done in a different way.

Young people from my constituency, who travel across the water and study at top universities or apply for corporate roles in London, are routinely told—sometimes subtly, sometimes brutally—that they need to soften their accents if they want to be taken seriously. That it is a damning indictment of our social mobility framework. Why should a young person have to trade away their identity just to get a foot on the career ladder?

We speak pretty fast in Northern Ireland, and the speed of words may be part of the problem. Kate Hoey, the former Member for Vauxhall, said, “Jim Shannon gets more words to the minute than any other MP.” In all honesty, she told me that and I took it as a compliment, which I am sure it was. The fact is we do talk a wee bit fast. The House will know I am not a man who is shy about speaking up for his constituents. I mention Strangford almost as many times as the hon. Member for Harlow (Chris Vince) mentions Harlow.

I make it a point of principle to participate in as many debates, urgent questions and statements as I humanly can. I have lost count of the number of times the brilliant and hard-working staff from *Hansard* have had to chase me—down the corridor sometimes—saying, “Mr Shannon, have you got a wee minute, please? Could you send me your notes? Who was that person you mentioned? Where was that place? Will you spell it, please?” They do it for urgent clarification of names, towns or specific phrases I have used in a debate. I say that with the utmost fondness and kindness to the *Hansard* staff, who are incredibly understanding. I respect all of them for doing a heroic job. I know they go the extra mile for me to ensure that everything is correct.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): This is a serious issue—we must ensure that people are not disadvantaged for any type of accent—but does my hon. Friend agree there is sometimes a humorous side, as we saw this week in the European Parliament? A Sinn Féin MEP complained that they were not allowed to speak in Irish. When the chair reminded him that they could, the MEP replied that he was not prepared, so he would speak in English instead. It can be humorous—even if slightly embarrassing at times.

Jim Shannon: It certainly is. I appreciate that intervention from my hon. Friend and colleague.

The *Hansard* staff do a heroic job. They are always happy to write down the names of my local farmers, community groups and townlands such as Ballywalter—which we know as Whitkirk—or Kircubbin. Last week, I got a wee message, “Could you spell your sons’

names, please?” That perfectly illustrates the point of this debate, and the centre and core of what the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton had to say. If a Member of Parliament, with more than two decades of public service, still faces hurdles to be understood because of his or her regional tongue, what hope does a 21-year-old graduate from a working-class Ulster-Scots background have when trying to navigate an interview panel of elites? How challenging and hard could that be?

One of my favourite stories dates back to when my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and I served on the Northern Ireland Assembly. It is again about the accent being hard to understand. I had an American guest for a meal in the dining room there. The lady, an English professor at a prestigious American university, was really interested in Ulster Scots words and accent. We were served by a young boy I knew and had probably grown up with in Ballywalter—or Whitkirk. I chatted with him and asked after his mum and dad, as you do in small talk. That lovely, intelligent lady from Philadelphia leaned over to Naomi, my private secretary, and said, “That’s wonderful. Jim is speaking in Ulster Scots.” Naomi replied, “No, he always speaks like that.” Again, that is an illustration of this. It was not really Ulster Scots; it was the way I talked. That is how we speak, and although that story may be humorous in a way, it highlights the issues that an accent can bring.

I will come back to the seriousness of this issue and why it is important. When someone constantly has to repeat themselves, is met with blank stares—nobody is ignoring them; sometimes they just do not follow—or is asked, “Could you maybe say that again?” or “Speak more clearly, if possible,” it chips away at their confidence. The hon. Members for Leigh and Atherton and for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) both referred to that; it is a key issue. That breeds a form of imposter syndrome that tells our young people that they do not belong in high-flying professions, and it pushes them out of the rooms where decisions are made, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South said. Linguistic diversity is the ultimate sign of a rich and vibrant democracy. We should be celebrating the fact that the United Kingdom is a tapestry of different voices, dialects and accents. That enriches us all, and there are some people in this room—I am thinking of one in particular, and he knows who he is—whose accents I love listening to. I just love it when some other MPs, such as the Plaid Cymru Members, speak. Their voices and their words are almost like singing in the way they come over. There are also the Scotsmen. Angus MacNeil—I can use his name, because he is no longer a Member—was speaking one day in the Chamber, and my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry said to me, “Do you understand him?” I said, “I understand every word he said,” and he said, “I suppose you probably would.” Angus speaks fast; his words were at a rate similar to my own. That example underlines the issue.

What do we need? We need employers, universities and civil services to actively train interviewers to look past the phonetic wrapper and focus purely on the substance of what has been said. I will conclude with an Ulster Scots phrase for Members to work out—it will be a challenge, of course. Keep ‘er lit!

9.52 am

Mr Luke Charters (York Outer) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on securing today's debate. I have spent a fair bit of time near her patch over the past couple of months, and though we bang on about the Yorkshire-Lancashire rivalry, we are united by a few things: some of the best food in the country—including the finest pies—and of course, the warmth and friendliness that we are all proud of, and of which she is one of the finest examples in this House.

I want to be crystal clear: judging someone by their accent is an attitude that belongs firmly in the history books. I must admit that, when I first arrived in Parliament, I often felt out of place and like I did not belong—all because of my accent. Like many colleagues here today, I was not elected because I sounded polished; I was elected through hard graft and to represent the people who sent me here. I have done my best, though, to get a few Yorkshire phrases into *Hansard*, because that is how my constituents speak. I will kick off by giving a few more, having turned to Facebook for some inspiration.

There is some disagreement, and I am risking controversy here, but I stand firmly with saying “ginnel” over “gennel”—some things you have to get right. What came through clearly is that the Yorkshire dialect is not just colourful, it is precise. When someone is “mithering”, you know exactly what they are doing. If they have a “mardy”, you know what that means, and if they have “a monk on”, you know to stay well clear. When someone says, “It’s gone reyt,” you know it has gone properly well. Many of these words carry real history: “laiking”, “beck” and “fells” are all rooted in Old Norse. Long before Westminster caught up with the north, we were already shaping a language of our own. Yet too often, these words can draw blank looks—even within our own region. Mention a “snicket”, “ten foot” or “fuddle”, and you will quickly find out who understands proper Yorkshire.

It was not just in Parliament where I felt out of place; it was also at Oxford. I am incredibly proud to be a state-school kid who worked hard to get there, but when I did, some of the older tutors actually mocked the way I spoke. They were not correcting my grammar or debating my ideas; they were judging whether somebody who said “nowt” really belonged in their so-called hallowed halls. Research shows that nearly a third of university students have been mocked because of their accent, and almost half of workers say that they face jokes or jibes about the way that they speak in workplace settings—including me, in my experience at the Bank of England.

I felt it when I started doing national media as an MP, too. I turned up, ready to talk about serious issues, such as getting funding for a station in my constituency, or tackling antisocial behaviour—standing up for my constituents—but too often I felt as if only clipped southern voices sounded suitably authoritative. I was not always invited on to programmes—although, strangely enough, there was never any shortage of invitations to those where the producers would tell me how much they love a proper, thick Yorkshire accent. I really appreciate that, and those producers know who they are. I am especially grateful to broadcasters such as Matt Chorley, who is helping to challenge some of the assumptions in

national broadcasting and to get regional accents on air. The real success, of course, will be hearing someone from Yorkshire or Lancashire on national radio or TV without it being worth commenting on at all.

I am immensely proud to be from God's own county. I have always tried to stay authentic to my roots—a West Yorkshire family, a North Yorkshire upbringing, and always proud to represent York—but I would be lying if I said I had not softened my accent at times, including when working in the City, because I thought that was what I had to do if I wanted people to take me seriously. I do not want my two boys, Robin and Louis, to grow up believing that if they want to pass an interview or land a graduate job, the first thing that they have to do is to change how they speak. When a young person starts believing that they have to hide or change their accent, it chips away at their confidence. I believe also that we are wasting talent. Businesses across Britain are facing a productivity hit if they overlook good, honest graft for absolutely no reason.

A young person from Haxby or Bishopthorpe should not be marked down because they do not sound like they grew up in Belgravia. By the way, I should also give a special mention to “Bratford”—or, as some may say, “Bradford”—where the same applies, of course. If the best jobs in finance, law or politics still mean moving to London—and that has to change, by the way—and sounding like you have always lived there, we have not solved the problem; have we?

I want children watching Parliament on television to hear someone who sounds like them, not someone who they feel they have to become. Otherwise, too many young people will carry on believing that making it means leaving part of themselves behind. Whether someone grew up saying “ey up”, “nowt” or “summat”; whether they call an alleyway a snicket; whether they tell their mates “It’ll be reyt”; or whether they are simply “chuffed to bits”, their voice is never something to be ironed out; it is part of who they are.

9.57 am

Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this important debate.

I am proud to speak not just as the Member of Parliament for Wolverhampton North East but as someone who has felt the pressure to turn down the dial on my accent. From day one of my entering the House, many here made comments—well intentioned, I am sure—about how they could hear my accent, which were usually followed by a “Peaky Blinders” comment. I am absolutely fine with that, because I am a huge “Peaky Blinders” fan”. In isolation, it is fine, but when I hear it again and again, I cannot help but feel self-conscious, and it can become quite tiresome.

Shortly after I was elected, after I made my maiden speech, this was all put into context by a message I received from a former student. She said, “Miss”—I am always “Miss” to my former students—“I am so proud that I can see and hear somebody on the telly, somebody in Parliament, who looks and sounds like me.” That was it. That gave me the confidence to just plough forward and to continue to speak loud and proud in my not so dulcet Wolverhampton tones. That

is why representation matters for young people growing up in Wolverhampton and Willenhall. Hearing voices that sound like theirs in Parliament and in positions of leadership sends a powerful message: you belong here too. It tells them that they do not have to change who they are to succeed.

That matters because there is a clear link between accents and social mobility. Research for the Sutton Trust described accents as one of the strongest signals of socioeconomic background and found that accent bias continues to affect people's experiences throughout their education and employment. The evidence is striking: a Sutton Trust study found that 30% of university students and 29% of university applicants reported being mocked, criticised or singled out because of their accent. I was recently told of a young man who withdrew from the first day of his university interview at the University of Birmingham. He had applied to study medicine, but he felt belittled by the peers in his group. I have heard of a student on a placement in a scientific lab whose accent was mocked by others, day in, day out. Rather than bring out the best in him, that caused him to withdraw and become a shell of a person, not the brilliant person he usually is.

Of senior managers from working-class backgrounds, 29% said that they had been mocked or criticised at work because of their accent. Throwaway comments of that sort can affect people's self-esteem and make them question their value in the workplace. People do all that is asked of them—they work hard, achieve good qualifications, secure professional jobs and climb the career ladder—but still feel pressure to hide the sound of where they come from.

Social mobility should mean expanding opportunity, not conformity. The challenge for all of us is to broaden our understanding of what professionalism sounds like. Talent does not speak with one accent. The more our institutions, including Parliament, reflect a full diversity of voices across Britain, the stronger we all become. As someone from Wolverhampton North East, I want every person listening to know this: our accent is not something to overcome; it is something to be proud of. It connects us with our community, our families, our stories and our values. Social mobility should not mean conformity. We must ensure that people are judged on their ability, attitude, character and potential, not on whether they sound like they belong. I urge the Government to carry on their work to equalise opportunity and build on social mobility practices.

10.2 am

Ian Lavery (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): I say a big thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for bringing this important debate to the House. I am keen to discuss this issue, as someone who was forged in the coalfield community of Ashington, which was the biggest coalmining community in the world. After more than 16 years in this place, some people might say that I have lost my own accent, but I am really proud of it. An accent represents who you are, where you are from and who you represent. It is your identity.

There are two sides to this issue, which I think have already been mentioned: a humorous side and an important, serious side.

Jim Shannon: I love the hon. Gentleman's accent. It portrays the person he is: the history, the culture, and the locality he comes from. Every word that the hon. Gentleman speaks is a word from his constituency and from his people. I like him as a person, by the way, but I just wanted to say that I love his accent as well.

Ian Lavery: That is very kind of the hon. Gentleman. My youngest son Liam speaks with a much harsher dialect than me, but he speaks five times faster than the hon. Gentleman. Imagine the problems that causes us when we travel abroad, or even to Yorkshire, for example. People do not have a clue what he is saying, but he is university educated and is absolutely fantastic at the work he does.

My accent is pitmatic: it is from the pits, from the coalmines. Every little village and town had their own pit—some had more than one—and we all spoke different. In one town, we had our own language and dialect—our own speak. I am proud of that. I am really proud of the fact that, when I left school with very few qualifications, I went to work seven miles under the North sea with some of the finest and brightest people I will ever meet: the miners. Not many of them ever got the opportunity to go to university, but you should hear the way they speak. When I look at some of the videos and recordings of the miners in my patch from days gone by, I can hardly understand what they are saying, but it is so rich in heritage, it is absolutely wondrous, to be honest.

I have an anecdote before I get on to the serious part. Two or three years ago, in my patch in Ashington, a group of asylum seekers met a shadow Minister to discuss the situations they faced in towns like mine, and one of the big barriers was the dialect. They said that it was okay and that they could understand what we were saying; the big problem was that their children were going to school and picking up the dialect. When the children were coming in from school and speaking to their mams in their best Ashington dialect, their parents did not have a clue what they were talking about. That is how serious it is, and that is the situation in areas like mine up and down the country.

This place easily intimidates people. Fortunately, I am not the type of person to be intimidated, but I have faced my fair share of hostility in this place. It is as if someone with an accent like mine should not be in here. If anything underlines the lack of correlation between competence and dialect, we only need to look at the dialect of our Eton-educated former Prime Ministers. They did not do much good for my community.

My constituents are proud of where they come from. There are subtle, and often not so subtle, patterns of speech that mark communities that are only miles apart. Many people are forced to choose between maintaining an accent they are proud of or ditching it to try to move on in life. That is just not right. It is the last form of acceptable discrimination, and it is absolutely ridiculous in this country. Where you speak, how you speak and where you are from affects how people identify you, and people discriminate against you because of what you say.

Despite some recent setbacks, this country has done fantastically well to rid itself of many prejudices, but the one that remains is the one we suffer from the most: the prejudice around social markers and local dialects, and the ideas about who we are and where we should be in life because of how we speak. Before saying anything

[*Ian Lavery*]

more than a sentence, people from Ashington, Blyth, Bedlington, Newbiggin-by-the-Sea, Choppington and Stakeford are judged. The people in my patch refuse to compromise their dialects, but they are judged every single day for them, and we have to tackle that.

The north-east accent often acts as a proxy for social class and colours the opportunities for far too many people—mainly younger people. In some areas a local accent can be positively viewed, but they are too few in number. Trade unions, community organising, social work, youth work, skilled trades, emergency services, sport and local journalism stand apart, but even in those fields the class prejudices that follow a person's accent can limit their opportunities.

Nobody should be forced to ditch their accent for a job or to reach their potential. As I said, when I worked as a pitman I met some of the finest thinkers in the world, and I listened to their political analysis while sitting in the pitch black seven miles under the North sea. They are the people who built our nation, but they continue to be looked down on by those who see themselves as their betters. Accents are a proud part of the heritage and legacy of those who went before us—the giants of our movement we stand with, who should never be forgotten. That well-known red Clydesider John Maclean said:

“Rise with your class, not out of it.”

That should include maintaining your accent.

A whole number of issues have been raised in some of the briefings that have been sent out. It is worth mentioning some statistics at this point: 69% of people change their accent to fit in; 27% change the way they speak for a job interview; 24% change the way they speak at work; 26% have been teased in the workplace for their accent; 11% believe they missed out on a job because of their class and social status; 10% felt discriminated against when applying for a job because of their background and social class; and 61% of people would support making discrimination on the basis of socioeconomic background illegal.

Professor Rob Drummond says that people across England have expressed positive views about regional accents, but still rated northern-accented speakers as less intelligent and less “correct” when hearing identical speech. Earlier research found that lower-working-class speakers were judged to be 14% less intelligent, 4% less friendly and 5% less trustworthy than upper-middle-class speakers. There is huge prejudice about people with accents like mine.

I have often been asked if I am Dutch, Ukrainian or Russian. I am asked what part of Europe I am from. Am I German? Am I Irish? Although that is quite humorous, there is a serious point to it. I will never, ever change my accent, and when I say that I will never change it, I am speaking me best Queen's English. I have really slowed down my speech for this contribution today, because I am not far behind the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) in terms of how fast I speak. When a group of people from where I live get together and we have had a few pints, believe me: there's nobody can understand what is being said. Nobody has a clue.

I think my friend, the hon. Member for Strangford, said before that in this place you can be speaking to people about very serious issues, issues that your constituents

face, and you can tell that the person who you are talking to is not taking it in. They just say, “Yes. Yep. That's right.” Indeed, you can say some of the most extraordinary things and they will just say, “Yes, yes, yes, yes,” because they are not taking it in, and that is because of your accent. That is a serious issue.

I am a proud member of the Northumbrian Language Society, which since 1983 has championed the diverse dialects of Northumberland, north-west Durham and Tyneside. The man who did most to mark this organisation was the Ashington-dialect poet, Fred Reed. He has written some fantastic poetry, which I urge people to read. They will not understand it, but it is worth reading and it highlights and accentuates a point. He was very proud of the mining community that he came from, and he knew that working people created the wealth of the nation. In his own words, “Dividends were won by the pitmen's blood.” I think that is a fantastic saying from a fantastic individual. The legacy of the miners and workers who left us our rich dialects should be the eradication of that final, acceptable prejudice. That way, we can break down the barriers for brilliant working-class kids who, given the opportunity, can change the world.

10.15 am

Cat Eccles (Stourbridge) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship this morning, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this debate, and for hosting the excellent recent event on regional accents.

Yesterday, we celebrated Black Country Day—a moment to recognise the history, the heritage and everything wonderful about the Black Country, including our distinctive accent and dialect. However, in various polls over the years, the Black Country and Birmingham accents have frequently been cited as the least favoured in the UK, and they face unfair stigma, classism and stereotyping. I take this opportunity to clarify that Black Country and Brummie are not the same thing—as any Black Country person will say: “Ar bay a Brummie—arm from the Black Country!”

As my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Sureena Brackenridge) said, we are often mocked and judged for our accent. When I tell people that I am from Stourbridge, I am often met with a blank look, but when I say that it is near Dudley, I can hear what their brain is thinking before they say, “Dud-laay”. One time, it is funny—but when it happens repeatedly, it can become demeaning.

However, ours is one of the oldest and most historically preserved dialects in the UK, retaining roots from Old English and early Middle English—surely something to be proud of. The Black Country accent has been associated with laziness, lower intelligence and a lack of sophistication, but that is far from the truth. Our accent is history that we can hear in every single word, shaped by hundreds of years of grit and graft. It is the sound of proud, hard-working folk who led the industrial revolution, helping to develop the modern world. In fact, Shakespeare himself would have probably understood Black Country people better than Londoners, as our dialect is so closely linked to Old English, with phrases like “Ow bist yow?” and “bostin fittle”.

I remember my parents and teachers discouraging my accent due to biases and stigma, leading to beliefs that I could face discrimination or be seen as inferior in the

working world. Other Members have alluded to similar prejudices with their accents. I was criticised for saying “buz” instead of “bus”, or “doower” instead of “door”, and I was told that my accent could impact my chances of getting on in life. The Sutton Trust report on accents highlighted a case in 2013 of a primary school in the Black Country that banned students from talking in Black Country dialect. No wonder some feel the need to tone down their accents.

When I came to this place, my accent got a mixed reception from constituents, with comments such as, “No one will listen to you with that stupid accent.” However, I also had many people saying how great it was to see someone in Parliament who sounds like them, and my view is definitely more of the latter. As I have got older, I have become prouder of my accent and what it represents, but I still find myself slipping into that telephone voice—or “spakin’ proper”. It is a hangover from years of being told that my accent would hold me back or cause me to be judged.

No one should be judged for how they speak, nor should it affect their life chances. It is heartening that, in recent years, we hear a broader representation in the media of the wonderful range of accents up and down our country. However, we would be naive to think that prejudice is not still harboured in some quarters. In this place, there are a variety of accents, as we have heard this morning, to represent the towns, villages and regions up and down the country. I think that helps elected Members to be more relatable to their constituents and to encourage aspiration. We are not inferior for how we speak, nor should we hide it, and I will continue to champion the bostin Black Country for as long as I am here.

10.19 am

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for introducing this really interesting debate. I have not been in a debate that has brought such a lovely smile to my face in a long time. We are celebrating diversity, which is what regional accents are really about. We should be celebrating diversity much more, rather than trying to tell people to do things differently, and it is a real opportunity to do that, so I have genuinely enjoyed listening to this debate.

I probably have a fairly neutral accent, but that does not mean that I have been immune in my life to people telling me to change it. I represent Chelmsford in Essex. Essex has a fairly well-known accent, thanks to programmes such as “The Only Way Is Essex” and “Gavin and Stacey”, which obviously celebrates other parts of the country as well. I really like the Essex accent, because it is really interesting—not just the tone of voice that people use, but the way that they say certain words, just as Members from across the country have highlighted with the phrases that they use.

I am originally from Devon and grew up in the west country, which has quite a strong accent as well. The hon. Member for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles) talked about teachers encouraging students to tone down their accent, and I was also told that as a child. I was privileged to take part in readings that we celebrated in the cathedral every year at my school when I was 12 or 13 years old.

I remember doing a practice run and there was a line in the reading I had to do that said, “The old man’s past it,” but I said “past” the way that we would in Devon. I was told by a teacher, “That was very good, but you need to tone that down a little bit,” and I did. I remember another word: my parents have always said “tuth”; I remember being mocked about that once, so I now say “tooth”—I am slightly ashamed to say that I corrected my accent. I have not been immune to that.

I am a linguist, and although I might have a fairly neutral accent in this country, I know that when I have lived abroad and tried to speak another language, my accent has stood out. As much as I like to think that I have a good French or German accent, compared with native speakers I stand out a mile. I know how difficult and uncomfortable that can be for people. We need to make sure that people feel comfortable in whatever job they are doing.

We are privileged to be able to do this job. As other hon. Members have said, it is important that we represent the people who have elected us to this place, and that we give people the opportunity to see people who look and sound like them. Many hon. Members have spoken very passionately about how important it is to them and to their constituents that people are here, standing up, being heard, speaking and sounding exactly like the constituents who elected them. That is incredibly important.

The hon. Member for York Outer (Mr Charters) mentioned how important it is that more broadcasters are encouraging regional accents. I commend those broadcasters. It is hard to be inspired if we only see people who look and sound like something completely different from us. If we are seeing something that is familiar to us, it is more inspirational and gives us more courage to take part, so I commend those broadcasters for giving that a platform.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about blank stares when we hear an accent that we do not completely understand. He is right to point that out. When we have those blank stares, it is hard to make a connection; but the more we hear different accents, the more we get used to them, and familiarity breeds friendship. That is why it is so important that we expose ourselves to many different accents, regions, customs and traditions.

Various hon. Members have mentioned the Sutton Trust’s 2022 report. I want to highlight a particular statistic mentioned in that about university students. The report found that, across all stages of life, individuals are concerned about how their accent affects their ability to succeed. That is worrying enough, but it went on to say that 33% of university students, 19% of employees and 18% of university applicants felt that. I want to draw out that difference between 18% of university applicants and 33% of university students. Something goes wrong between applying for university and being at university: that concern gets worse. We must tackle that, and I encourage all universities to reflect deeply on what they can do, because that is not the right way around. People should be going to university and thinking, “Hey, isn’t this great? I fit in, and I am accepted—in fact, I do not just fit in; I stand out in a good way.” We should definitely be looking more at that.

Hon. Members mentioned other studies, including a University of Edinburgh study that suggests that individuals with regional accents find themselves code switching to

[*Marie Goldman*]

be taken seriously. Other hon. Members mentioned the fact that students alter their pronunciation to avoid negative judgment.

Returning to question of linguistics. I like reading; I can see words in front of me even when I am just speaking. I can see the way that the word is written, so I think about how I am going to pronounce it. But pronunciation changes over time. As a linguist, as much as I find that a little bit frustrating sometimes, I have to understand that language is constantly evolving. I think we should embrace that. If we think back 200 years, there are many words from 200 years ago that we do not even use now or that have changed over time, and we should embrace that and be joyful about how things change over time.

Cat Eccles: That point made me think about the fact that a lot of regional dialects and accents have been lost over the years simply because people have moved away or been forced to tone them down. That is another reason why it is important to embrace our regional differences, so that we do not lose any more of these precious dialects and accents.

Marie Goldman: The hon. Member reminds me that my aunt sadly lost her partner a few months ago. He was three days off his 90th birthday, and he was a true Cornishman. He had lived in Cornwall his entire life—in a very small area of Cornwall, in fact. He was incredibly well known, and I had the privilege of being able to love spending time with him. Listening to the way that he spoke and the stories that he used to tell was just beautiful, but the phrases that he used to use are unfortunately dying out. They will be lost over time, so we have to take advantage of modern technology to record some of these things, so that they are not lost and we should also continue to encourage them in our schools through spoken histories. I thank the hon. Member for raising that.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady referred to her aunt's father, who was almost 90 years old, and that reminds me of my own dad, who is dead and gone. He was a very proud Donegal man, and one of the wee poems or verses that he taught me when I was small was this:

"Where ye fa?
Donegal.
How's your purties?
Great or small.
How do you eat them?
Skins an a."

Those wee verses will be lost forever if they are not retained and written down. It is important to retain some of those wee stories from days past, as well as the fact that potatoes was what it was all about. Potatoes in Donegal—that is what they lived on, for their dinner and their tea. That is just a wee step back in time.

Marie Goldman: There are so many lovely stories to tell about this subject, and that is why this has been such a lovely debate. We genuinely should be continuing to encourage the retention of regional phrases, stories and poems, and I thank the hon. Gentleman very much for bringing us that poem.

In conclusion, my Liberal Democrat colleagues and I believe very strongly in a society with strong social mobility. Our regional accents, backgrounds and experiences should never hold us back from social mobility; people's opportunities should definitely never ever be limited by their accent. I thank the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton for bringing us this debate.

10.29 am

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): It is a pleasure to listen to and take part in this debate on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition, and it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger. I congratulate the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) on securing the debate and on her personal, informative and engaging speech. I had the pleasure of welcoming the Youth Parliament to my county last year, and I was delighted to hear from all those young people from across the country; it was a pleasure to listen to them. The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) mentioned her pronunciation of "tooth"; I was born on the "two-th" of June—I had to continually be corrected on that one.

I must declare an interest, as co-chair of the all-party parliamentary group for youth employment. I have the pleasure of working with Youth Employment UK on promoting youth employment in all its forms, the role of young people in the economy and ensuring that young people's voices are heard. I also co-chair the APPG on men and boys' issues, and it is a pleasure to work with the Centre for Policy Research on Men and Boys in that role on improving the wellbeing, opportunities and life chances of our boys. I think it is clear that this is one of the things that drives me in politics.

As we have rightly heard today, a regional accent must never be seen as a badge of shame, and I will come on to talk about my mother's experience of that. Every single one of our regional accents—from the north-east to the south-west, the Welsh valleys to the highlands of Scotland, Merseyside through to the Black Country and down to the Thames estuary—is a reminder of the people and places that make this country so special, and that is why we have enjoyed this debate so much.

After 10 years of living and working in Wales, I have had a very messy accent. In my county of Sussex, our native accent has largely been replaced, except for a few old place names and words—for example, a twitten is an alley—due to the rise of mass education and accent correction in favour of perceived "better" pronunciation. Otherwise, I would be speaking more akin to the west country accent and using the rhotic "r". That was an accent that my dad had, as a Sussex farmer, and that two Cornish people in my office would recognise.

My dad married my mum, who was from Stoke and had elocution lessons at grammar school, where she had to wear a boater, not eat in the street and most certainly not chew gum in the street. When she took dad to football, most people presumed she was in the wrong end, watching the wrong team. Pride in where she came from was undermined by the fact that her accent as a youngster was deemed to need to be ironed out, as the hon. Member for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) said.

I had the pleasure of serving as a Minister in the Department for Work and Pensions for over five years, and a title I fought for and had the honour of holding

was Minister for Social Mobility. I know there is a huge amount of talent in every part of Britain, which is why I care so much about ensuring that everybody has a chance to succeed, no matter where they come from, their postcode or, of course, their accent.

I would like to share a couple of things from my time as a Minister. My very Liverpudlian private office lead had about 15 different ways of saying no to many of my bright ideas, which I learnt meant how much she liked them. At the DWP, we created 140 youth hubs, which I am delighted this Government are taking forward, and Members have highlighted the importance of young people's confidence. In creating those youth hubs, we learned from the Birmingham model, under the leadership of another well-known and very well thought of former mayor, Andy Street. Manchesterism is now extremely fashionable, and I think we are all delighted to highlight the fact that there is so much talent and ability across the country.

The DWP is unique in the fact that it is in every single community, and our second headquarters was in Leeds. One thing I found during my time working with the amazing civil service was that too many people cannot progress in that Department or more widely, because if they do not have the ability to get to London or be supported there, and perhaps if they do not have the right accent, they do not get the social mobility and the opportunities they need to progress. I worked with the care leavers in our Department and really listened to and learned from them. I hope that that is continuing, as I know this is a focus for the Government.

Hon. Members have rightly spoken passionately, in their wonderful accents, about their constituencies. The hon. Members for York Outer (Mr Charters) and for Leigh and Atherton spoke about the BBC accent. When I, a former Croydon schoolgirl, worked at the BBC, they briefly tried to train my accent out of me. Again, that was about softening an accent, or perhaps it was about improving it—we need to read between those lines. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—good luck to *Hansard* on capturing all the magical recollections that he shared—shows off his magnificent accent. Once we have had time to tune in, frankly, we never get a chance to tune out. It was lovely to hear about learning phrases across generations; when we hold on to our past, our family and our area, it really makes a difference.

Research has found that when interview candidates demonstrate technical knowledge or speak confidently, they are subject to less accent-based differential treatment. It is important to challenge the Government on the fact that they are lowering their ambitions around vocational qualifications and moving away from high standards and specialist knowledge—I leave that with the Minister to think about.

My party is very much about meritocracy. We should be raising people up, and giving our young people the best start and the skills and knowledge they need to succeed, instead of lowering expectations and pushing them down to the bottom. That has been highlighted in speeches today. As I have said before in the House, you will do great when you are your true, authentic self—that will serve you. Confidence in being ourselves is everything we need.

The Leader of the Opposition, my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), has rightly said:

“diversity and inclusion should never put any individual or group at a disadvantage, and should never damage cohesion and morale in the workplace”,

and that anti-discrimination should not be

“used as a mechanism to undermine meritocracy”.

That is the nub of what we are talking about today. What is the point in pushing for us all to be the same? As the hon. Member for Wolverhampton North East (Sureena Brackenridge) said, this is not about conformity. We might have different approaches to this issue, but the challenge is there for us all, and we need to find a way to fix it.

We need to insist on not seeing people as victims who need saving. We need to see people as talented individuals with agency, or we risk reinforcing stereotypes and pulling up the social mobility ladder. The new legal duties may sometimes make us politicians feel good about ourselves, but all too often the outcomes fail to live up to the talk. That, again, has been highlighted today. As the public sector equality duty shows, such duties can lead to more harm being done in the name of equality. We need to recognise that.

The ongoing obsession with putting people into boxes and categorising them according to their characteristics is not the answer, as I think we all agree. It leads only to more division when, frankly, we need less. Instead, we should be celebrating achievement, holding up examples of excellence and promoting role models in every walk of life.

In the age of social media influencers, a man named Wilfred Pickles is a somewhat unlikely role model, but his reading of the news on BBC radio during the war, in his broad Yorkshire accent, broke barriers and redefined the idea of who could be on a national broadcaster. Young people today, no matter where they are from, should feel confident that their accent will never be a barrier to them reaching their potential. That will be possible only if we build a society that is focused on individual merit and access to opportunity for all, rather than group characteristics and tick-box exercises.

I have a couple of questions for the Minister. Will she commit to a full assessment of the implementation of the socioeconomic duty in Scotland and Wales, and can she update us on what conversations she has had about it with the devolved Administrations? What impact does the Minister think devolution has had on promoting social mobility in the regions and nations? I certainly have my views on that, and I am interested in the those of the Minister.

Conservative Members believe people should have the opportunity to succeed in life regardless of background or accent with the opportunity to go as far as their talent and hard work takes them. We should never judge people solely on protected characteristics or limit their chances and ambition based on where they are from. I agree with the hon. Member for Leigh and Atherton: it is not about how we speak but how we listen and, crucially, act to make a difference in social mobility and open the doors for others.

10.40 am

The Minister for Equalities (Seema Malhotra): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton (Jo Platt) for securing this important debate, which

[Seema Malhotra]

I have thoroughly enjoyed listening to. In all the stories shared, I recognise how powerful and rich the debate is. I thank her for the work that she has done in Parliament.

This is one of those topics that leads us to wonder why we have not had the conversation before. This must be its time as it has captured the imagination of Parliament so effectively and powerfully. It is already achieving the goals that my hon. Friend wants: that important culture change, a shift in attitudes and an understanding that where accentism might be holding back social mobility, it is our responsibility to do all that we can to tackle it.

I pay tribute to Professor Rob Drummond and Dr Amanda Cole and the accentism project for their Westminster Voices initiative, as well as their other important work in this field, particularly the “This is English” project with the British Council, which champions the powerful idea that the English language belongs to everyone who speaks it in all its rich, diverse and regional variations. Too often, debates in this House are defined by columns of statistics, spreadsheets and policy levers, but today my hon. Friend and all who have taken part have given our debate a rare and special thing: the space to tell stories and talk about identity and belonging and what it can be like for our constituents to navigate modern Britain.

I want to address some of the points raised in the debate, including about how accents have such an important relationship to identity and how, from what has been shared, they can be a barrier. It is important to recognise that everyone has an accent and that there is, as my hon. Friend said, no linguistic basis for a hierarchy of accent. We see in the research that life chances may be defined by background with accent bias. It is important to tackle that unconscious bias and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton described, the culture that drives it. It is important to tackle it so that young people do not lack confidence and feel unable to achieve their ambitions.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer (Mr Charters), for Wolverhampton North East (Sureena Brackenridge), for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery), for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles), for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) and for Glasgow South (Gordon McKee) for their contributions. I also thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) and of course, the Front-Bench spokeswomen, the hon. Members for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) and for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman).

I will highlight a couple of things in my remarks, including the message to young people across the UK about softening their accents. The hon. Member for Strangford made a very relatable point about *Hansard*. I have found that Hounslow has also fallen into that need for clarity on the names of places and people, but it is important that we get that right and that *Hansard* records our contributions correctly, because they are on the record for posterity. Everyone wants their names and places spelled right, and that is important for respect. I am grateful to *Hansard* for checking with us and making sure our contributions are represented accurately.

The attitudes that hon. Members have spoken about belong in the history books, as my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer said. I am grateful that he

bravely risked controversy with his speech, but his points about local dialects and language, and about his experience at Oxford, are incredibly important for the House and his constituents. I am grateful to the pupils of my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East, who spoke for all of us in highlighting the importance of seeing people who look and sound like them represent them in this House.

The Sutton Trust’s landmark “Speaking Up” report demonstrated why this issue matters. It states that accent remains

“the primary signal of socio-economic status”

in this country. Members have shared some of that research, but I want to pull out a few of its findings. It says that 35% of university students feel deeply self-conscious about their accent, and that 41% from the north of England fear that their voice will negatively affect their future success.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Blyth and Ashington for his contribution. I have had conversations with him after he has had a pint or two, and he does speak much faster. I hope that his powerful, important contribution will be replayed across the north-east, because he shared why it is so important that people are proud of their accent and who they are. Young people need confidence—we see that in the data from the north-east. All opportunities should be open to them, and it is important to have respect for each other.

Shockingly—this is a staggering statistic—nearly 30% of senior managers from working-class backgrounds report having been openly mocked for their accent in the workplace. As the data shows, there remains an outdated snobbery around accent that reduces a person’s intellect, capability and potential to the way that they speak. That is unacceptable, so it is important to shine a new light on the issue. For generations, the message to those who want to enter public life or elite professions has been that if they want to get on, they must sound like everybody else. When Margaret Thatcher became leader of her party in the 1970s, she famously underwent intensive elocution lessons with a tutor from the National Theatre. Authority had to sound a certain way. The message, particularly at that time, was that if somebody wanted power, they had to shed their origins. As my hon. Friend the Member for York Outer said in his powerful contribution, making it should not mean leaving part of yourself behind.

Decades later, while noting the much greater diversity of this place and our country, we must recognise that progress can and must still be made. We may find that progress accelerates as Manchesterism becomes part of our national conversation. Interestingly, studies also regularly show that regional accents such as Welsh or Yorkshire are rated by the public as trustworthy, warm and honest. Yet when those same studies measure perceived intelligence or employability, standard southern English and received pronunciation invariably top the metrics. We are effectively telling working-class people that we trust them to work on the frontline in our schools and NHS but not to lead our boardrooms, teach in our elite universities or perhaps represent us in this place.

Yet the diversity of British speech is a mark of our cultural richness. Our language is vibrant and alive. I may say these in a Hounslow accent, but depending on where someone stands in this country, a bread roll is a

cob, a bap, a barm, a stottie or a muffin—no matter what you call it, it is still pretty tasty. To flatten our regional dialects into a single homogenised corporate drone is to strip Britain of its character.

This debate really matters here because Parliament is a workplace, but it is also the engine room of our democracy. If we genuinely believe in representation, that representation must extend to how the Chamber sounds. Our constituents do not want a Parliament of homogenous voices; they want to hear their own lives, regions and communities reflected from the green Benches and every debating part of this House.

When a Member stands up in any debate in the House and speaks with their own unvarnished accent, whether they represent constituencies in the north-east, Yorkshire, the Midlands, the Black Country, Northern Ireland, Wales, Scotland, working-class London, Essex or Sussex—as also reflected in this debate—they are undertaking, on equal terms, their democratic duty in this House. They are telling every young person or constituent in their communities who is watching at home that their voice belongs in the rooms where power resides.

I agree with the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield that social mobility should not mean conformity. Indeed, those barriers do not start at the doors of this House; we see them much earlier, when working-class young people arrive at our world-leading universities. They have worked staggeringly hard to earn their places, yet the culture shock they face is frequently linguistic. They are met with eyebrows or mimicking, as has also been relayed very powerfully in this debate.

We also want to take practical action to challenge some of that and change access to opportunity. As has been referenced in this House, far from limiting and lowering ambition, I am proud that from 2028 we are reintroducing means-tested maintenance grants of up to £1,000 a year, putting vital cash back into the pockets of students who need it the most—often from working-class backgrounds—without increasing their debt.

We are also investing £20 million this year into Uni Connect to build local partnerships between schools, colleges and employers. Whether a young person chooses a degree or a trade, their journey must be determined by merit and their potential—never by whether they have to change their voice or pretend to be someone else to fit in. As Minister for Equalities with responsibility on race and women, I know that those in this House will know how important it is that this Government are working to ensure that whoever someone is and wherever they come from, Britain is a country that will respect their contribution. That is a guiding principle of the work that we are doing in this Labour Government.

The Equality Act 2010 brought together and built upon 40 years of hard-won progress. While the Act may not directly reference place or accent-based inequality, its protections against discrimination related to sex, race and age frequently intersect with those issues. Intersectionality matters very much because we know that accentism can intersect with race and gender. For a working-class woman, a regional accent can be unfairly

stereotyped as a lack of professionalism or authority. When an ethnic minority person speaks with a regional working-class accent or a multi-ethnic dialect like multicultural London English, they face a double layer of prejudice. That is based on evidence that we cannot ignore.

We must also recognise the importance of rewarding talent. That is why our gender pay gap reporting will be built on to introduce mandatory ethnicity and disability pay gap reporting. Another important step in this space will be our commitment to ensure that everyone can succeed, no matter their background. We will be working to commence the socioeconomic duty on public bodies in section 1 of the Equality Act to require public authorities to put addressing socioeconomic disadvantage at the heart of their strategic decision making. There will be more on that to follow.

Let me again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leigh and Atherton, and say how impactful the debate has been. It is a clarion call for a fundamental culture shift so that we start to see a world in which everyone can succeed based on their talents, their drive and their potential, and never be held back by their background, their postcode or the sound of their voice. We need our world-class institutions, our elite universities, our media and our employers to stop listening so much to people's accents and how they speak, and start listening much more to what they have to say.

10.56 am

Jo Platt: Thank you for chairing this debate, Sir Roger. It has been enlightening and humorous but serious in its cause. I thank the Minister for her response, and for acknowledging the importance of ensuring that accents are not a barrier and of tackling the unconscious bias in society today.

I thank all hon. Members who contributed. As I say, it was humorous but serious. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). He coined, I think, a new term: I am going to use “phonetic wrapper” again. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for York Outer (Mr Charters) and for Wolverhampton North East (Sureena Brackenridge), who spoke so passionately about the barriers in education, and in particular at university. We need to continue the conversation on that. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Blyth and Ashington (Ian Lavery) and for Stourbridge (Cat Eccles); they both spoke about how the giants of our industrial past have shaped our accents and dialects, from the factories, the mills and the mines in communities such as ours. I close by saying to the Minister that I will enjoy continuing the conversation, with an accent, about how we close the barriers.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): I am sure that the whole House will have appreciated the contribution by Strangford's own answer to Professor Henry Higgins.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered regional accents and social mobility.

Peak Cluster Pipeline and Project

11 am

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Before I call Esther McVey to move the motion, and then the Minister to respond, I remind Members that they may make a speech only with the prior permission of the Member in charge of the debate. No such notice has been given. There will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up the debate, as is the convention for 30-minute debates.

Esther McVey (Tatton) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of the Peak Cluster Pipeline and project.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Roger.

It is good to see the Minister in his place. I hope to get some meaningful answers from him today on this project; up until now, those have proved elusive from his Department and the Government. The Peak Cluster is a carbon capture and storage project. It will take carbon dioxide from cement and lime plants in Derbyshire and Staffordshire, pressurise it, and transfer it 125 miles across Cheshire, Wirral and then off the coast from Wirral, where it will be stored beneath the seabed. It has been made clear to me by scientists and engineers that the project is wrong-minded and wholly unnecessary.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I fully support the right hon. Lady's efforts on behalf of her constituents. I have an understanding of the issues. Does she agree that any final approval for the Peak Cluster project must include cast-iron, legally binding guarantees to protect landowners' rights, and that local environmental objections and community safety fears must be genuinely addressed rather than bypassed by central Government?

Esther McVey: I agree, but none of that has been forthcoming to the public, no matter how hard they have tried, and the public do not want the project. Right across the region, there have been demonstrations and councils have voted against it. At a recent public meeting in Byley, close to one of the proposed pipeline routes, the failings were laid bare. The local communities of Cheshire, Wirral and Derbyshire know this, and that is why they are calling for the project to be stopped. The project is completely unnecessary. It is a madness of a project—a net zero vanity project.

I stand here today on behalf of all those members of the public calling for the Peak Cluster project to be stopped. I call, too, for the Government to answer the most basic of questions about the project, and to stop treating the public like mushrooms, keeping them in the dark and feeding them absolute rubbish. The Government cannot dodge responsibility and accountability for this project, as they seek to by ducking parliamentary questions and freedom of information requests.

Last week I raised a point of order on the Floor of the House about the woeful responses on this matter, only for the Minister to reply that the project is nothing to do with the Government. He said:

"It is a private project."—[*Official Report*, 7 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 175.]

Really, Minister? If one delves a little bit deeper into the Peak Cluster project, it is revealed that it has deep, direct, structural and financial links to Government, with the final sign-off being from none other than the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero.

If the Government are still trying to say that they have made no estimate of the overall costs, that they have not worked out how much of the bill will land on the taxpayer, that they have done no cost-benefit analysis of it, and that they have made no assessment of the environmental impact—in fact, that they have not even bothered to work out whether the project is necessary at all—then that is a disgrace. If the Government are really trying to say that they have done no homework whatsoever on the project, then they really do need to do some, because if they did, they would come to the same conclusion as the public: that it is not necessary.

Instead, the Government, in ignorance or in full-throttle support, are pushing ahead with the project. In fact, they have deemed it a nationally significant infrastructure project, which means that the local authorities cannot either approve or reject it, despite significant objections from local constituents; rather, it falls for sign-off to the Government. The storage of the carbon dioxide beneath the seabed will require approval from the North Sea Transition Authority, another Government quango—wholly owned by the UK Government—which has responsibility for offshore carbon dioxide storage.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): The North Sea Transition Authority deals with many private sector companies around oil and gas drilling. I agree that it is a public quango, but surely the right hon. Member agrees that it does not have responsibility for what Shell or BP do in the North sea any more than it has responsibility for what Peak Cluster may or may not do through Cheshire and underneath the Liverpool bay?

Esther McVey: I thank my neighbour for asking that question. If he listens to the rest of the debate, he will see that this is not a private project; it has deep structural and financial ties to, and sign-off by, the Government. It is not, as he wrongly refers to it, a Shell or a BP. That is not true. That is the myth that we have to dispel today. So far, £28 million of funding for the project—nearly half of the money to date—has come from the National Wealth Fund, which is wholly owned by the Government. When announcing the project, the National Wealth Fund said on its own website that it

"has an important role to play in helping to amplify government policy",

and on the gov.uk website, the Energy Secretary classed it as a "landmark investment".

The issues I am raising are not highly technical or obscure; they are straightforward, basic questions about safety, cost and the use of taxpayers' money. The cost is billions of pounds, which rests on the shoulders of the taxpayer. The amount already spent is in the region of £60 million, and that was just to secure planning permission. The full construction costs are estimated at £5 billion, although the full cost is likely to exceed that. HyNet, a similar project, has cost £2.5 billion for just 31 km of new pipeline, in comparison with the 200 km planned for the Peak Cluster. As the Government have so far committed £28 million through the National Wealth Fund, will the Minister say what process was followed before the fund invested in the project? How was it approved, and what role did Ministers play in that?

There are huge concerns about the cost-effectiveness of the technology, too. Last year, the Public Accounts Committee warned of a “high degree of uncertainty” over whether carbon capture projects would deliver value for money, so I can see why the Government are ducking away and not doing anything. The chief executive of Octopus Energy also questioned whether carbon capture represents a worthwhile use of taxpayers’ money. Surely, the Department responsible for energy infrastructure did a value-for-money assessment before committing public money to the project. If so, what is that assessment?

Residents I have spoken to are rightly and understandably concerned about the health and safety hazards, too. What if a leak were to happen? What emergency procedures are in place? What assessments have been made of the risks to nearby communities and to the maritime environment? The project could cause untold damage to agricultural land, sites of scientific interest and some of our towns and villages. It is ironic that the Government consider this to be an environmental project when it could very well destroy—and is already destroying—the environment. This would be laughable if it were not so serious. Have I received any reassurances on those health and safety matters? No, I have not. Have the Government even taken this into account? They cannot wash their hands of this project. If something goes wrong, the public will want answers.

Another claim by the Government, and by some of the people who might be getting tenders from them, paid for by the taxpayer, is that the project will support around 3,500 jobs. What will those jobs be? How many will be permanent rather than temporary construction roles? How many will go to local people, and how many will require specialist contractors to be brought in from overseas? Regarding the future of the project, how long is the infrastructure guaranteed for? I hear that the pipes are only guaranteed for 30 years. Can the Minister confirm or deny that?

The north-west should not be a dumping ground for carbon dioxide from not only elsewhere in the country, but elsewhere in the world. Although the project says it will initially be used to store carbon dioxide captured from Derbyshire and Staffordshire, it has been reported that the infrastructure will be designed to allow it to import and transport carbon dioxide from other countries in future. Can the Minister confirm whether those reports are correct? What additional approval would the Government require to grant those permissions?

All that the project will do is store up problems for future generations to tackle and pay for. The physicists and scientists who have contacted me mock the Government’s ignorance on this matter, saying that carbon dioxide is needed, and that if the Government really wanted to do something, they could just plant some trees. I am afraid that the Government have been suckered into a multibillion-pound waste of a project about which, as we know, they have no business acumen or know-how.

Before the Minister rises and dismisses my questions, as he did last week on the Floor of the House, saying that the Government have nothing to do with this project, I remind him—I ask him to reflect on this point—that the Peak Cluster project has deep, direct, structural and financial links to the Government, with the final sign-off coming via a development consent order by the Energy Secretary. The Government are a

stakeholder in Peak Cluster Ltd, the private company the Minister referred to. Local authorities cannot object to the project, as the Government have deemed it a nationally significant infrastructure project. The money invested in it comes from the National Wealth Fund, wholly owned by the Government.

With that in mind, will the Government and the Minister kindly give some meaningful answers? If he cannot do so today and needs to go away to do some homework, I will happily accept a written response, but the Government cannot keep using obfuscation and excuses to try to hoodwink the public. The public demand answers today.

11.12 am

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Roger, although the debate has probably not been conducted in the best way to discuss this topic. I draw the attention of the right hon. Member for Tatton (Esther McVey) to the recent Adjournment debate secured by her colleague the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), which I think she was unable to attend.

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order. I assume that the Minister is not suggesting that the debate has been in any way out of order.

Michael Shanks: That is not what I said at all, Sir Roger. The debate has been perfectly in order, but I do not think the public watching will have got much from it. That is my assessment and, I am sure, the assessment of many others watching. As I was saying, I encourage the right hon. Lady, if she did not see the recent debate on this topic, to look at the remarks by her hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury, who rightly raised concerns about local communities, but in a way that was, I think, based slightly more in fact than in rhetoric. I will come to the right hon. Lady’s questions.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: No, I will not just now, because the right hon. Lady has just given a speech. I will respond to some of her points.

Esther McVey: Then don’t be so dismissive!

Sir Roger Gale (in the Chair): Order.

Michael Shanks: Let me respond to the right hon. Lady’s points. She has now accused me twice in this House of being “elusive” and of “obfuscation”. I have answered every single one of her written parliamentary questions. I am not responsible for the fact that she may or may not like the answers I give, but I have answered every single one of her questions, and I responded to her point of order in the main Chamber. I resent the implication that I have not done that, because I take my responsibilities to Parliament very seriously.

First, I will come back a little from the Peak Cluster itself to make some points about why carbon capture is important. I say that partly because carbon capture technology has been around a long time. The previous Government, in which the right hon. Lady served in various ministerial roles, drove forward investment in carbon capture, which we have continued. This is not

[*Michael Shanks*]

something that just appeared in July last year; it is a technology that Governments have recognised will play an important part in decarbonising our energy system.

This technology is also important for particular parts of our industry, which are now competing against imports from other parts of Europe that utilise carbon capture, usage and storage. Cement is one example that the Peak Cluster project is looking at, but we are taking forward other important clusters, such as the Viking and Acorn clusters, that the previous Conservative Government supported.

Decarbonising cement might not seem like a particularly important topic to a lot of people, but it is actually critical. Around 40% of UK cement and lime production takes place in Derbyshire and Staffordshire. Cement is one of the foundational heavy industries, and one of our most important substances, to underpin growth in our economy. As a result, the industry was recognised in the industrial strategy as a foundational input for growth. It is also an economically important sector, contributing around £350 million in gross value added and supporting thousands of jobs.

The challenge we have is future-proofing the industry. A number of businesses now want to buy low-carbon cement to construct their projects, but low-carbon cement is produced elsewhere in the world, so it is important to find ways to be competitive in that market. As I said in the Adjournment debate, other technologies for creating low-carbon cement exist, but they are not yet at a stage where they can be deployed at scale. Carbon capture is important, and there is no route to net zero that does not involve this technology.

I want to remind the right hon. Member for Tatton why net zero is important, although I know that not everyone will agree. Given that we are living through climate change on such a scale, we as a country should be taking our responsibility seriously to do everything we can, and this is an important part of how we tackle it. This is also an economic opportunity that not only creates thousands of jobs in carbon capture but protects thousands of jobs in the heavy industry that we do not want to see leaving this country to go elsewhere. It plays a strategically important part, along with our economic growth and industrial strategy, in how we will broadly deliver net zero.

Before I address some of the right hon. Lady's points on the Peak Cluster, I want to repeat a point I made in the Adjournment debate about the voice of local communities, which is one that she also rightly made. She made a point about the nationally significant infrastructure project regime, which I want to clarify. Perhaps I misunderstood, but I think she was trying to suggest that the Government have somehow contrived for the Secretary of State to make a decision on a particular project. The NSIP regime exists—indeed, it existed under the previous Conservative Government—to recognise that there are some projects of such a scale that local councils cannot individually decide on them, so they should be decided on at a national level.

That is a process that has been undertaken for many years. I want to be really clear, however, that that recognition does not suggest, in any way, that there will be a particular outcome from the process. Not only has

there been no decision from Government on this project, but it has not even been submitted for a decision at this stage. It is a long way from that process.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will give way in just a second. The right hon. Lady's point about the NSIP regime was quite wrong. Decisions are made based on applications that are submitted, but no application has been submitted. They are based on all the facts, including the community engagement that takes place—I will come back to that after I have given way. Applications must demonstrate genuine community engagement and learning from the views of communities; it is not just a listening exercise but a shaping exercise, and that has not yet concluded.

Esther McVey: Can the Minister confirm that the final sign-off on this project, via a development consent order, will be done by the Secretary of State for Energy—by, in other words, the Government? Is that true or false?

Michael Shanks: I think I just said that the nationally significant infrastructure project regime exists so that decisions can be made at a national level by different Secretaries of State. In this case, it is an energy project, so yes, the decision will be made by the Secretary of State for Energy. The right hon. Lady seems to be implying that there is somehow a predetermined outcome, but the application has not even been submitted for consideration, so I do not think that is a sensible position to take.

The right hon. Lady also cast aspersions on the North Sea Transition Authority, which is an independent regulator. It was the Oil and Gas Authority for many years; it is now the North Sea Transition Authority. It has operated under Governments of all political persuasions to make decisions about how we steward the North sea licensing regime not only for oil and gas but, increasingly, for carbon capture. It makes those decisions independently of Government; Ministers do not interfere in the decision making of the NSTA. Again, she seems to be drawing conclusions about an independent regulator that are neither fair on the regulator nor accurate in fact.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way on another inaccurate piece of information?

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): Will the Minister give way?

Michael Shanks: I will give way to my hon. Friend.

Sarah Russell: The Minister has referred to the fact that, as yet, there has been no application and therefore no ministerial decision, but he has also said that community engagement is an important part of the decision-making process. My concern on behalf of my constituents is that they do not feel engaged with; they do not feel that they have a voice in this process and they do not feel that they are getting information at all. I appreciate that it is not the Minister's job to provide that information, but can he be extremely clear about the level of engagement that is required?

Michael Shanks: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and that was the point I was going to come on to. Community engagement is absolutely critical. It is an absolutely firm expectation from Ministers that any of these large-scale infrastructure projects should have

meaningful engagement with communities. However, it is also absolutely critical for any project that wants to succeed in the NSIP process to demonstrate not only that it has carried out consultation but that that consultation has had a meaningful impact on the shaping of the project. That is one of the key factors in decision making in NSIP applications.

I want to echo a point that was made in the Adjournment debate on this subject and that many Members have raised with me outside of debates in Parliament, which is about the need for extensive consultation on this particular project. Criticisms have been levelled at the Peak Cluster project that its consultation with communities has not yet been good enough. I understand that it is planning to do more, but it is not for me to direct it to do that. It must engage meaningfully with communities because, once a proposal has been submitted, if community engagement has not been meaningful, that will count against the project.

There is a wider argument here about principle. The Government have said from day one of coming into office that it is important that we build things as a country again and that we do not become a country that just spends decades talking about important infrastructure but never builds it. However, that building should never be done without proper engagement with communities, which means communities feeling that they have had their say and that their say has been listened to. This project is one example of where much more consultation has to happen.

Andrew Cooper: The important thing for my residents is this: does this project work and is it safe? Those are the two key points. I note that my hon. Friend the Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick) is in his place today. He has been challenging these plans on behalf of his community, as have I and my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell). This is not a done deal, and Peak Cluster needs to listen to the community's concerns and act on them. Does the Minister agree with all those points?

Michael Shanks: First, on the point about this somehow being a Government project, it is absolutely not. That is why my answers to the right hon. Member for Tatton reflected the fact that, right now, private developers across the country in a whole range of sectors are developing private propositions for all sorts of things.

Until those proposals come to Government, either with a request for funding or as part of the NSIP regime, the Government do not have a view on whether they are Government projects or not. They are not delivered by Government; they are private investments and therefore it is for those companies to put forward their proposition. The Government will then take a view on it, as we do with all nationally significant infrastructure projects. That is the first point about this being a Government project, which it is absolutely not. Peak Cluster is also not one of the clusters that the Government have initially taken forward. We are taking forward two clusters initially to drive carbon capture and storage; the Peak Cluster is not one of them. I make that point again on the record.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) made a second point about safety. It is really important to say that carbon capture and storage is not

a new technology; it has been tried and tested, across industry and across power generation at scale, for a long time. Geological carbon dioxide storage has been in operation for decades. Norway has stored CO₂ since 1996—it has stored over 20 million tonnes of it so far—and a safe and robust regulatory regime exists precisely to ensure that safety standards are as high as they possibly can be.

Safety will be at the forefront of any decision about how we take this project forward. It is absolutely critical but, as I have said, CCS is not some novel technology whose safety considerations we do not understand. It is managed, understood and regulated effectively at the moment.

Esther McVey: I see the hon. Member for Wirral West (Matthew Patrick) in the seat behind the Minister, although I appreciate that, as a Parliamentary Private Secretary, he is not able to speak. The Minister might not know this, but I confirm that Wirral council in its entirety, across all parties, objected to the Peak Cluster project. Do the Minister and the PPS sitting behind him know that?

Michael Shanks: I am aware of that. Councils can take a view on a whole range of things; I do not think there is anything controversial about a council making its views known on a particular project. It is very welcome to do that, and that is why we have democratically elected councillors in this country.

On a final point by the right hon. Lady and others about Government funding for this project, she draws a connection between the investment of the National Wealth Fund and the fact that it is wholly owned by the Government. I understand the connection, but equally, it is not correct to say that that represents financial support from my Department or the Government for a project.

The National Wealth Fund was set up to provide investment for important infrastructure projects, and it makes its decisions independently from Government. I have not seen or signed off any funding applications for the Peak Cluster pipeline and nor have any Ministers. The NWF makes those decisions on its own framework, as set out by the Treasury and Parliament. It should not be taken as any indication of my Department's support or otherwise for a particular project.

Sarah Russell: What sort of people work at the National Wealth Fund and make these decisions? Who is evaluating this?

Michael Shanks: I can write to my hon. Friend with the specifics of the investment committee, but the National Wealth Fund is set up independently from Government to take stakes in projects on behalf of the British public, so that we would own a stake in some of these projects—instead of just handing out grants for things, we would actually own part of them. There is an investment committee that sets up these decisions, and the Treasury is the body responsible for the National Wealth Fund. I can write to her with specifics.

Esther McVey: Did the Minister just say, “so that the Government can part-own some of this”? Were those the words he used?

Michael Shanks: The principle of the National Wealth Fund is that we can make financial investments in projects. In some of those cases, that means taking an equity stake. Sometimes it does not, but sometimes it does. The National Wealth Fund has been around for long enough now; I am sure Members are aware of it.

I will close with something that, in part, reflects what Members said in the Adjournment debate secured by the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury. Any large-scale infrastructure project comes with concerns from local communities, and it is right and proper that such communities voice those concerns in any way they can. That has to be a respectful exchange of views, which has not always been the case thus far, but I understand the strength of feeling on this—it is absolutely understandable.

The exchange of views is important, and everyone, whether or not they are listening to this debate, should know that the Government take community engagement very seriously. We expect to see meaningful engagement with communities, but at the same time the Government have set out an ambitious plan to decarbonise our economy. That is important for a whole range of reasons, but it is also a hugely important economic opportunity for us as a country.

Decarbonising hard-to-abate sectors such as cement and lime, which are critical to our economy, is difficult. CCUS is a route to doing that. It is essential not only for meeting our climate commitments, but for the economic opportunities that it offers. Future project proposals are subject to scrutiny, high standards and a tough regulatory regime. The Government will look at all of this in the round in terms of individual projects.

I repeat the point that I made at the beginning: this is not a project that the Government are driving forward, and it is not a project that we are saying we do or do not support, because at this point in time no proposal has come before us to do that. In due course, we will do that. In the meantime, I encourage everyone in the local community, Members of Parliament, the Peak Cluster itself and others to engage with the process.

Esther McVey: Will the Minister give way in the final 30 seconds?

Michael Shanks: I am just rounding up. In the end, I hope that we will come to a view where communities feel they have been heard and where projects can move forward on their individual merits. That will be part of the process when we come to it.

Question put and agreed to.

11.29 am

Sitting suspended.

Waste Management Sites

[DR ANDREW MURRISON *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Lorraine Beavers (Blackpool North and Fleetwood) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of waste management sites on local communities.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Morrison.

For nearly three years, the people of Fleetwood have been forced to live with an intolerable smell from the Jameson Road landfill site. They have complained, protested and reported the effects on their health to the council, the Environment Agency, the Government and to me, their Member of Parliament. Over the past two and a half years, the Environment Agency has taken increasingly severe action against the operator of the site. Each time, the operator has breached its permit and acted unlawfully in the process, and still the smell remains. At times recently, it has been worse than ever. In March of this year alone, more than 4,000 complaints were made.

The central point that I wish to make is that this is proof of a broken regulatory system. Residents can make thousands of complaints, and people and businesses can be forced to leave an area because of an operator acting unlawfully, and still they are left breathing the same foul air. If our system cannot prevent that from happening, it is broken. If the regulatory system's purpose is to record suffering, issue notices and hold meetings, but not to prevent suffering for the local community, its purpose and objectives are the wrong way around. In Fleetwood, it is as simple as this: a private company is making money from stinking out the entire town and damaging livelihoods, breaking the law in the process, while the British state appears too weak, too slow and too broken to stop it.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): As my hon. Friend knows—we have discussed this many times—we in Newcastle-under-Lyme know all about the impact that the idea of profit over people can have on the health and wellbeing of communities such as hers and mine, and about the consequences of landfill sites. She is right to say that this is a case of the state going missing in action. I look forward to working with her to ensure that we get the policies needed to keep our communities safe, our air clean and our people living in the situations we want them to live in.

Lorraine Beavers: I agree. I hope that we will get that done—or start the battle to do so—today.

Absurdly, none of the waste is even from Fleetwood. It seems that waste can be transported from across the country to any landfill site that is happy to take it—a form of waste tourism. The waste comes from outside Lancashire, harming people and the environment in the process. Of course, working-class northern communities such as mine are allowed to be collateral damage. This is not just about Fleetwood; communities across the country have found themselves trapped in the same nightmare that we have experienced.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. She may be aware that we have had a plastics recycling facility in my constituency for several years. Only when it opened did we suffer an awful fly infestation across the town, as well as a horrendous odour. It is on a normal industrial estate, but it is immediately next to a residential area. Surely the Environment Agency should have had some sort of involvement in the decision to allow it to open.

Lorraine Beavers: My hon. Friend is correct, and I agree with him. I will address that point in my remarks.

Communities across the country have found themselves trapped in the same nightmare that we have experienced: living beside waste sites, making complaint after complaint and discovering that the system is better at documenting their suffering than ending it. People have reported headaches, nausea, nosebleeds, vomiting and breathing difficulties, with some requiring hospital treatment. The prolonged stress is also harming my residents' mental health. Children do not want to play outside, parents have had to keep the windows shut—even during the recent hot weather—and businesses are losing customers. Some residents are considering leaving the town they have lived in all their lives, while others have already left.

I take this opportunity to raise the case of my hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns), who, unfortunately, cannot join us today as she is attending a Select Committee. Her constituents have also had to keep their windows shut and stay indoors because of the awful smell coming from a landfill site. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) has constituents who can smell the landfill site in my constituency, as the odour blows across the Wyre estuary to Knott End and Preesall. Nobody should have to live like that, in Fleetwood or anywhere else.

Let me share some of the experiences that residents have reported to me. One wrote to say that the landfill has affected her already severe chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. She feels like a prisoner in her own home; when the smell is at its worst, she cannot leave her house for days on end. Like many in Fleetwood, she moved to the area for the fresh sea air. Instead, she says, it has ruined her life.

Another wrote to say that their family had to leave Fleetwood because of the smell. One member of the family, who suffers from multiple sclerosis, found the additional strain impossible to cope with, and their adult disabled daughter experienced throat irritation and disrupted sleep. They could not put up with it any longer and had to move away. That meant leaving behind their daughter's established social and support network, registering with a completely new medical team and changing her care package.

Another of my constituents has emphysema. He too moved to Fleetwood for better air, but because of the landfill, he suffers with sore and itchy eyes, has difficulty breathing and feels worse than ever. He asked one simple question: why is this allowed? I ask the Minister the same question. I do not want to hear that it is not allowed, because the fact that the problem continues proves that it is. If a national Government cannot put a stop to it, will the Minister suggest who can? These are not isolated complaints.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): The issue of enforcement is a serious one. An incinerator in south London has breached its air pollution limits almost 1,000 times in 18 months, but nothing has been done by the EA—no court proceedings, no licence suspension, nothing. A similar plant is planned for my constituency. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must act now to ensure that all operators—be they water companies or waste management companies—are held to account when they break the rules? How am I meant to assure my constituents that they will be safe from health risks?

Lorraine Beavers: I agree.

The problems began following the transfer of ownership from SUEZ to Transwaste Recycling and Aggregates, and the resumption of tipping in January 2024. SUEZ proved that sites like Jameson Road can be operated properly without a detrimental impact on the local community, but across the country more operators are cutting corners and operating outside of the law.

Meanwhile, our enforcement framework has not kept up. It is designed around the assumption that operators will do the right thing, often with local authorities in mind. As we have learned in Fleetwood, we cannot afford to make that assumption any longer. The nature of waste management has changed. Small waste management firms are now operating sites that were previously considered economically unviable. As the Jameson Road debacle suggests, to make such sites profitable, companies are now operating them poorly, breaching the terms to their permits and ignoring planning conditions. Local people are left to bear the brunt of their corner cutting.

The issuing and transferring of environmental permits needs to be more robust. Perhaps a new environmental permit should be issued with each change of ownership. If an economically unviable site has been closed, any prospective operator should surely be asked how they will overcome the financial issues. The way in which operators plan to make a site profitable without cutting corners should be scrutinised, and permits should not be carried over if operators cannot produce credible plans. Instead of the company bearing the burden to run a site properly, the burden has fallen on residents to prove that the operator has no such ability. That demonstrates that the weight of scrutiny in the system is in the wrong place. How does the Minister plan to address that? At present, the regulation is self-evidently ineffective.

As the local Member of Parliament, I meet representatives of the Environment Agency every Friday morning. My team and the wider community have pursued every possible avenue to stop the smell and get the site closed. Over the course of those meetings, I have concluded that one of two things must be true: either the Environment Agency does not have sufficient powers to intervene quickly enough, or it is not using the powers it has with the necessary urgency. Which does the Minister think it is? Either explanation demands Government action.

If the Environment Agency lacks the powers to suspend activity before further harm is caused, Parliament must provide such powers. If existing powers are unusable because of legal tests, internal processes or fears of legal challenge, those barriers must be removed. The agency must also have the resources to enforce the law. The issues at Jameson Road have resulted in the Environment Agency needing to pull experts in from all over the country.

Kim Johnson (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this timely and important debate, and for her tireless work on these matters over such a long time. Fourteen years of austerity have meant cuts to important resources in our public services, including the Environment Agency, and those services do not have the funding or resources to undertake the work that is so essential right here, right now. Does she agree?

Lorraine Beavers: I agree. I thank the Environment Agency, which has worked tirelessly despite massive staff shortages and everything else. It has worked with me and my community to resolve this problem.

The passing on of responsibility while communities suffer cannot continue. The regulators point to the limits of their powers; the operators point to the weather; Departments point to the regulators. Meanwhile, residents are told to make another complaint and keep filling in their diary sheets. That is how faith in Government is destroyed, especially when that pattern is so recognisable in other aspects of the way the country is run. A private company is making money from stinking out an entire town, damaging people's health and livelihoods, and the British state has so far been incapable of stopping it. I have dedicated much of my time as an MP to working out why.

The children of Flakefleet primary school understand the injustice. A year ago, they wrote to the Prime Minister and handed a petition into 10 Downing Street. The smell from Jameson Road dominates their life at school, and those pupils believe that when something is clearly wrong, those in power will listen and act. That is why I invited this Prime Minister to come to Fleetwood, and I will be inviting the next one to do so as well.

My constituents are tired. They feel ignored and forgotten. Many believe this situation would never have been allowed to continue for so long in a wealthy commuter town in Surrey, and I agree with them. Working-class communities should not be expected to tolerate lower standards because they have less political and economic power. Fleetwood's health, dignity and future cannot be treated as less important than the financial interest of the private waste companies. No community should be treated in this way.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I will be talking about a waste site in Surrey, where unfortunately we have some very similar issues. I hope the hon. Lady understands that this is a national issue, not one that is confined to certain locations of the United Kingdom.

Lorraine Beavers: I apologise for naming Surrey.

The wider enforcement framework must change. Regulators need clear powers to suspend operators quickly, stronger tests of operators' competence and the ability to consider the cumulative impact of sites on communities. Penalties must change behaviour, rather than become a cost of doing business. The financial consequences must fall on the polluters, and we must make sure that companies cannot take the profits while leaving residents and taxpayers to carry the costs when things go wrong.

We need a system that learns from the crisis in Fleetwood rather than one that waits for the same crisis to unfold elsewhere. A Labour Government should not stand by while private operators profit from the suffering of working-class towns. We were elected to show that

government can work and that the state can protect people and stand up to private interests when they cause harm. Jameson Road is a test of that promise. It is also a test of whether we are prepared to fix a national regulatory failure. Reforming the system would show communities across the country that they will not be abandoned when the same failures occur on their doorstep. The next community to face this problem should not have to start from the beginning—keeping diaries, gathering medical evidence and begging regulators to act, while the operators continue to profit. The British state must prove that it is not too broken to stop this.

With that in mind, I have several questions for the Minister. Does she acknowledge that the reality of the situation in Fleetwood is that a private company has made profit through unlawful activity at the expense of the health and wellbeing of an entire town, and that that is unacceptable? Will she commission a full review of the current waste management framework, taking into consideration the following questions. Does the Environment Agency have sufficient powers to take decisive action quickly enough? Is it not fully using the powers it already has? Does the Minister believe that the Environment Agency is adequately resourced, and if not, how will the Government increase its funding to deal with the scale of these challenges? Will she legislate to ensure that new environmental permits must be sought when the ownership of a site changes? How does she plan to address the scrutiny gap, whereby companies do not have to prove their ability to run a site properly before operating it? Fleetwood needs action, communities across Britain need protection and this country needs a regulatory system that puts people before polluters.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. We are under time pressure, so I will place an indicative limit of four minutes on speeches.

2.49 pm

Sarah Gibson (Chippenham) (LD): It is a huge pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison, as I know that much of what I am going to say will be familiar to you. I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) for securing this debate.

Waste facilities provide an essential public service, but communities living alongside them must not be expected to bear the consequences of weak regulation or poor waste handling. Two problems are affecting residents in my constituency: the persistent landfill gas odour around Lower Compton, and the growing fire risk over the last few years caused by lithium-ion batteries entering the household waste system.

The Environment Agency has received almost 4,000 odour reports over the last three months. As the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood mentioned, the system is not working. Residents have described an overpowering sulphurous smell entering their homes, disrupting their sleep and preventing them from opening their windows or using their gardens. Many have reported headaches, nausea, coughing and feeling unwell. When I visited the landfill site, I was left with a headache and felt unwell for several hours. Although that is only my experience, it gives me some understanding of what the residents have been repeatedly describing.

I have pressed the Environment Agency and the operator for action, raised the issue at Prime Minister's questions and written to the Environment Secretary. The sustained pressure has secured action for my constituents, but we now need evidence that it has actually produced results. The Environment Agency has managed to trace the principal source to an open landfill cell, requiring permanent capping, improved gas extraction and changes to the type of waste being handled. I welcome the completion of the capping works, but for residents it will be a question of whether they can breathe clean air and live normally, not whether the project is said to have been completed.

The UK Health Security Agency found no evidence of actual toxic risk, but its monitoring site is not downwind of the site—it is to the west. Although its finding is welcome, it also found strong evidence of odour annoyance and acknowledged that people may experience headaches, throat irritation, stress and sleep disruption. That exposure, although perhaps not as toxic as we expected, is not acceptable, especially for people with respiratory conditions.

The issue seems to be that responsibility is completely fragmented. The Environment Agency monitors permit compliance and the UKHSA assesses the health risk, but the local authority considers statutory nuisance. Residents are having to navigate an institutional maze while the smell continues. Will the Minister introduce a clearer joint response framework, with one lead body responsible for co-ordinating monitoring and health advice?

We also need to understand why it is happening. The Environment Agency identified an issue with the trommel fines, which can contain sulphate-bearing materials and contribute to the production of hydrogen sulphide when mixed with organic waste. Although the operators are changing the way they handle those materials, it was extremely worrying that when I asked the Environment Agency, it did not seem to be aware of where the responsibility lies for testing how much of the wrong types of material go into the trommel fines as they go into the landfill site. Will the Minister consider who is responsible for independent sampling and whether compositional controls can be better implemented?

The second issue affecting the same constituents is lithium-ion battery fires. Recent fires have, in theory, been caused by the crushing of lithium-ion batteries, which sparks a fire that is very difficult to put out. That is putting waste workers, firefighters and nearby residents at risk. The Government must start to properly enforce the existing retailer take-back duties, make return schemes more convenient and more visible, and ensure that producers meet the full cost of collection and treatment.

Finally, drawing on my 20-odd years as an architect and my experience in local government, I believe the planning system must properly assess the risk of building our homes, schools and care facilities near to waste infrastructure, as mentioned by the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western). Waste sites are necessary, but communities should not be expected to tolerate unacceptable odour and risk of pollution and fire. My constituents have shown extraordinary patience, but they should not have to fight to be heard any more than those of the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Dr Andrew Murrison (in the Chair): Order. Members will have to be brief. I am sure that Adam Jogee will be an exemplar.

2.55 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): You have never said that before, Dr Murrison. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) for securing the debate. As I said in my intervention, I know she is committed to working on the same issues that I have spent much of my first few years in this House working on.

In my first Westminster Hall speech as the MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme, I said I would not stop going on about Walleys Quarry landfill site until it is closed, capped and restored. It is now closed; capping is, broadly speaking, in operation; and soon, all being well, we will be able to get it restored so that local people in my community can use it. I am proud that after almost a year and a half since the closure notice was issued, we finally chased the cowboy operators of that landfill site out of our town and shut Walleys for good.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood described, and as the Minister knows, because I have told her many times, for far too long, my community was blighted by respiratory irritation, headaches, disrupted sleep, mental health strain and a constant foul odour in the air from high levels of hydrogen sulphide. We were blighted by pollution and constant worry. Children could not play outside, schools could not open their windows and, disgracefully, it reached the corridors of the Royal Stoke hospital. Furthermore, many older people were left housebound.

My hon. Friend talked about putting people before polluters. I would say we must also put people over profits. These operators—I am afraid to say this, but I will be as polite as I can—took the proverbial out of my constituents. The sooner we hold those who did so to account, the better it is for all of us. They had no interest in operating safely, no regard for the community and no idea how to be a good neighbour to those who suffered the worst excesses of their criminality.

My relationship with the Environment Agency has changed in recent years. With our zero-tolerance approach to waste crime, we finally got Walleys closed—just 147 days after my party won the election. This transformed life for my community. It is a shame to say this, but for years we had a Conservative Government, a Conservative MP, a Conservative county council in Staffordshire and a Conservative Newcastle-under-Lyme borough council, and to quote a Prime Minister, “nothing changed”.

It should not have taken a change in Government for action to be taken, for the criminals to be held to account and for the damned site to be closed. I acknowledge the campaigning work of my predecessor; I am just sorry that his colleagues were missing in action. The shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Epping Forest (Dr Hudson), is a friend of mine, and I am not directing this at him personally, but my community was let down by the Conservative Government, and we will not let his colleagues forget it.

It is unforgivable that local people in Blackpool, Newcastle-under-Lyme and other parts of the country are left living in unliveable situations such as this, so I would be grateful if my hon. Friend the Minister touched

[Adam Jogee]

on the benefits of a fit-and-proper-person test for those seeking a permit to operate a landfill site. I also urge the Minister to engage with her colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government regarding planning permissions, as noted by the hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson), for homes being built in the shadows—or should I say fumes—of landfill sites. Until we get a grip of the waste sector and the crime we find in it, we should not be building homes around those sites.

As I have done many times, I thank all those who helped to get the job done and close Walleys Quarry, including my colleagues in Government and in the Environment Agency, who worked with us to ensure we could clean our air and give the good people of Newcastle-under-Lyme the quality of life that they deserve. There is more to do, and I look forward to working with colleagues in Blackpool and around the country to ensure that we do it.

2.58 pm

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) on securing this debate. I have several waste management sites in my constituency. At most of them, we just get the odd problem now and again, and we can deal with it by talking to them, but one causes particular problems.

Grunty Fen sits in the heart of the countryside and is accessed from narrow fen roads. In normal operation, the residents of the nearest village, Witchford, suffer large volumes of heavy lorries and litter blowing from those lorries. The fen roads used by the lorries sit on peat soils, which expand when it is wet and contract when it is dry. The combination of the changing subsoil and the regular heavy lorries corrugates those roads vertically and horizontally, breaks the road edges away, and creates ever-growing potholes. The roads are virtually unusable by ordinary cars, let alone cyclists. The residents feel that they have no say in the timing and volume of the traffic, nor do they see extra funding for road maintenance.

That would all be bad enough, but there have recently been several fires at the site. One such fire in April burned for about 17 hours, generated significant black smoke that spread over Witchford, and required an extensive fire and rescue response. The Environment Agency recently published the findings of its inspection. It found that the emissions from the fire breached one of the permit conditions. It also found that the fire risk assessment, emergency management plan and cell 11 environmental action plan failed to adequately identify and control the risks associated with fires. The operator, East Waste Ltd, has to rectify those issues, or the Environment Agency says it will take enforcement action. Meanwhile, the residents who have suffered from the fires—especially those with pre-existing respiratory illnesses such as asthma—fear further fires. They would like to see the site closed, at least temporarily, until all the changes are in place.

As part of the plans for the new unitary authorities, the Government must ensure that councils have adequate powers and funding to monitor waste sites, and the

Environment Agency needs the powers and the funding to enforce their proper management. Will the Minister confirm that there are plans to make sure that the Environment Agency does indeed have those powers and the capacity, and that it will use them?

3.1 pm

Mrs Elsie Blundell (Heywood and Middleton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) for securing the debate.

As parliamentarians, each of us recognises the necessity of waste facilities and the function that they perform, but local communities should not have to tolerate the conditions that residents of mine in Heywood have been forced to put up with in recent years. Due to the prevailing wind direction in my part of the world, my constituents continue to endure appalling odours emitted from the Valencia Waste Management site on Pilsworth Road. The landfill there opened over 50 years ago. As it has gradually filled, it has become increasingly unbearable for local residents, which has led to the creation of the Heywood Against Landfill group. I take this opportunity to commend them for their enduring activism. The site also hosts a recycling centre, which I understand is also contributing significantly to the current issues.

Heywood Against Landfill has made it clear to Valencia, as have I, that the operation of the site has driven so many nearby to the point of utter dismay, with stark implications for their quality of life. Windows had to remain shut, people could not put washing out to dry, and many even began to question the elevated number of respiratory illnesses in the town. Heywood Against Landfill rightly urged members of the public to raise their concerns with the Environment Agency and lobbied for action to be taken. We eventually ensured that the site was closed while remedial action was taken. That lasted about 18 months, demonstrating the scale of what local people had been forced to deal with.

In my view, it would be legitimate to say—as we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood—that working-class communities such as mine are disproportionately bearing the brunt of these impacts. Despite the supposed remedial action that has been taken and the supposed monitoring of the site by the Environment Agency, this is something that my constituents are having to contend with yet again—truly, it is groundhog day for people in Heywood.

Following the site's reopening, the odour from it continued to affect the wellbeing of local people. The tireless campaign group met with Valencia on 1 June, but the company continues to say that no breaches are taking place.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an important speech and representing her constituents very well. I want, perhaps unusually, to put on record an example of good practice by a waste management company. In my constituency, the community engagement team at Viridor, led by Karen Peer, do excellent work with local schools and the community to make sure that they are aware of what is happening. Does my hon. Friend agree that we should see that kind of practice across the country?

Mrs Blundell: I absolutely agree, and I would like to see more of that, not least in my constituency.

The Environment Agency countenanced the site's reopening, and it was adamant that it had the means to monitor the air quality and odour levels, yet less than a year down the line, we are back where we started, and my constituents, like many represented here today, are suffering the consequences of the agency's inability to address the core problems. That is because we do not have the means to handle nuisance concerns around recycling in the same way that we do for landfill. In such situations, lived experience matters. The executives of Valencia would not live anywhere near one of these sites themselves, but our constituents are expected to suck it up and put up with entirely unacceptable conditions.

Heywood Against Landfill has now designed an online odour complaint reporting log, which sends each instance directly to the Environment Agency. That is great, but the group would rather not spend its valuable time doing that. The group's efforts will highlight once again the scale of the issue in Heywood, but it remains clear that there needs to be enforcement action to match the level of ongoing outrage.

I understand that the waste strategy is due for review in this Parliament. From speaking with local residents, it is clear that they are desperate for the strategy to give greater consideration to the impact of poorly managed sites that also take recycling. They want legislation to safeguard local people. In many cases, there seems to be no way of scrutinising the operations of these sites, as other hon. Members have said, with much of the so-called enforcement action being toothless and ineffective.

What consideration has been given to delivering a bold and transformative waste strategy that protects people in Heywood from living in such conditions—specifically one that factors in poorly performing sites that handle recycling waste? What assessment has been made of the effectiveness of the Environment Agency? I appreciate the point made about successive Conservative Governments cutting its funding and staff, but what consideration has been given to strengthening penalties for the executives of waste operators that pay no mind to the communities in which they function? What consideration has been given to making community engagement mandatory for operators such as Valencia, and the implementation of robust standards in this respect?

The people of Heywood should not have to put up with this any longer, and they should not have had to put up with it in the first place. My hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood is right: working-class communities shoulder the burden of regulators lacking the will or the means to engage with the lived experience of those affected by this sort of behaviour by operators. I hope that the Minister can offer some clarity on these points, and will make it clear to residents in Heywood that they are not without a voice, that the Government are listening, and that living in these conditions should not be a collateral consequence that those in power seem all too willing to accept.

3.7 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) for securing this debate.

Residents of the part of Calne that is in my constituency have long reported strong and unpleasant sulphurous odours from the Lower Compton landfill. The odours have at times been severe enough for people stuck in their homes to keep the windows shut—not a pleasant situation given the current heatwave—and have been reported by the local BBC as causing illness. This has been a periodic problem in Calne and other towns.

I am pleased to report that, with the help of my neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson), we have got the Environment Agency on the case. The offending landfill vaults are being closed and additional landfill gas wells will be installed to increase gas capture and reduce emissions from the site.

Additionally, there has recently been a spate of fires at Lower Compton landfill, caused by batteries in vapes, endangering residents and staff. Every week in the UK more than 6 million vapes are thrown away instead of being recycled. When crushed, lithium batteries can spark, smoke or catch fire, creating a danger to waste facilities, those who work on them and those who live near them. I urge the Government to increase public awareness of how to safely dispose of vapes.

Single-use plastic waste is another long-standing issue that needs to be addressed. None of us likes seeing waste plastic in the environment, where it can become a serious hazard to wildlife. It is bad enough seeing plastic waste on our streets and in our countryside, but with the UK exporting around 600,000 tonnes a year, much of it ends up in the developing world, where it can become an environmental hazard of massive proportions.

A few years ago, a company in Swindon attempted to address the use of single-use plastic recycling using a pyrolysis process that chemically reduced the waste plastic into its polymer constituents, which could be used again and again to create fresh plastics. Although that company went bust due to the difficult economics, another company, Mura Technology, is investing in a similar process in Newcastle. However, it seems that the holy grail of a cyclical plastic economy will be reached only when the economics are right, so it would be timely for the Government to look at a single-use plastic tax to generate sufficient funds to invest in this process. We need local chemical recycling plants in every county in the UK. In the spirit of “polluter pays”, a tax on the production and use of single-use plastics is a must if we are to make the economics work for plastic recycling and thus stop this scourge on the environment.

3.10 pm

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) on securing this very important debate.

I want to speak about a case in my constituency that shows the problem and, importantly, what the solution can look like. Last July, business owners near the Hurstwood Court recycling centre on Raikes Lane in Burnden contacted me about traffic and road safety. Queues for the site were backing up on to St Peter's Way and spilling on to Manchester Road. Access to local businesses was being blocked, and there was a real safety risk. That was happening day after day.

[Yasmin Qureshi]

I brought together Bolton council, Recycle for Greater Manchester and the operator, SUEZ, to address the problem. To their credit, all parties acted. A hatched yellow box has been painted at the entrance and exit to keep it clear. The entrance has been reprofiled so that more vehicles can wait on the site while speaking to the gate attendant, rather than queuing on the public road. A new turning space has been created for vehicles leaving without entering the centre, and cones have been installed to stop the parking that was blocking sightlines. To be honest, those measures have not solved the problem completely, but they have mitigated some of the worst of it and have made real differences to residents and businesses.

Alongside the physical changes, Recycle for Greater Manchester has been suggesting alternative, less busy sites, and advising people on when the centre is quiet. There are more than 20 recycling centres across Greater Manchester, and spreading visits across them eases the pressure on individual sites.

The wider point is that traffic build-up at waste sites is not a one-off; it is a recurring and entirely foreseeable pattern, particularly at older sites that simply were not designed for today's volumes of traffic and waste. Too often, the response is reactive: action comes only after residents, businesses or Members of Parliament push for it. Communities should not have to run a campaign to get a yellow box painted on the road.

I have three questions for the Minister. First, will the Department encourage joined-up working among councils, waste authorities and operators as standard practice, rather than as something that happens only when it is demanded locally? Secondly, what support and funding are available to councils for physical improvements at older sites, such as the reprofiled entrances and turning space that made the difference in Bolton? Thirdly, will the Government look at establishing a clearer, ongoing channel so that residents and businesses near waste sites can raise concerns and do not have to rely on ad hoc local campaigns?

Raikes Lane shows what can be achieved when everyone gets around the table, but we still have a lot further to go. What is missing is a system that acts before communities have to fight for change.

3.13 pm

Sarah Pochin (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) on securing the debate.

It is so important that I speak on this issue, as in my constituency we have an incinerator operated by a company called Viridor, which has been in operation for the last 12 years. Like the example in Fleetwood, it processes waste from all around the country, very little of which is produced by the actual residents of Runcorn. Local residents have to live with the problems that hon. Members have talked about this afternoon, including dreadful smells at times and rubbish strewn around the approaching roads from the heavy goods vehicles that deliver the waste. There is noise 24 hours a day—the HGVs have an operational licence for 24 hours a day, and there is the mechanical noise from the plant itself. Every day,

275 HGVs are allowed to go in and out of the plant. I have stood there, endlessly watching one after another. The noise and smell are horrific, with 3,000 tonnes of waste processed in the plant every day. The air pollution at times is a disgrace. As we have heard, people cannot hang out their washing. There are even layers of dust on cars. There is a physical and mental effect on health. Local residents cannot sleep or open their windows. Light pollution from the headlights of HGVs coming down the road is constant through the night, which is worse in winter, of course.

As a consequence, local house prices are severely devalued. Why should residents have to move, when some have lived there all their lives? Now, even if they wanted to move, they cannot sell their homes because of the incinerator and they feel trapped. On that note, I ask the Minister to consider offering financial support to those families who are unable to move because they cannot sell their homes due to the proximity of incinerators such as the one in Runcorn.

To return to the operator, in December 2023, Viridor paid out £1 million across 180 local households to keep them quiet. They signed a non-disclosure agreement so they could never talk to the press about the conditions they live in. That £4,500 per household is a lot of money for some of my residents, and would have been especially welcome at Christmas. It was meant to keep them quiet and it is a disgrace.

I would like to echo the points made about the Environment Agency. It should be timely in its response; it is no good residents ringing and the Environment Agency coming out a week later, when the smog or smell has gone. There are now also issues with vermin such as rats and flies, and concerns about diseases spread by birds flying in and out of operating doors left open. Those doors are meant to shut between each delivery but are left open for birds to fly in and out, potentially spreading disease.

The burden of proof is always on the residents to clock and document all this. Why should it be that way? I again ask the Minister to shift the burden of proof from the residents and give the Environment Agency the power to shut down the operation until the complaint or issue is sorted. It is often not just one major incident, such as a fire—it is a continual build-up, wearing down residents until they are desperate. They feel forgotten and unheard.

Deprived towns such as Runcorn have been used as a dumping ground for the nation's rubbish. The least the Government can do is listen to residents, let their voices be heard and compensate them for what is happening to their day-to-day lives.

3.18 pm

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) for securing this timely debate.

Two separate areas in my constituency are suffering difficulties. The first is West Heath in Congleton, where there is an awful fly problem. Residents report they are unable to have barbecues, and do not wish to open their windows or doors. It appears that the problem may be associated with a local metal recycling plant. The plant

has issued a statement that it is co-operating with the council and the Environment Agency and does not believe the problem emanates from it.

Although the long-standing feeling among local people is that it may very well be an issue with the recycling plant, they would also like the Environment Agency to investigate nearby standing water and other possible sources. I do not want to pin the blame too specifically on any one factor at the moment, but it is important that the Environment Agency has the resources, the powers and inclination to investigate thoroughly as soon as possible.

My residents report similar experiences to those described by many people in the Chamber, talking about how it is making their houses difficult to enjoy, particularly in the summer months. They are worried about disease and about opening their children's bedroom windows at night, which in the current environment is straightforwardly dangerous. I absolutely call on the Minister to encourage the Environment Agency to take steps rapidly, because this is a significant, ongoing problem.

The other area of concern in my constituency is a former landfill site, which is now a golf course. It was set up as a golf course by Cheshire East council. Again, I want to be circumspect in what I say here, because Cheshire East council says absolutely, adamantly, that the site is safe for its current use and that there is no reason to doubt that the operators are operating appropriately. I do not want to do or say anything that might damage their business, but *The Guardian* has reported significant dumping, not only conventional landfill dumping during the 1950s and 1960s, but chemical dumping by ICI and Shell in the 1970s with forever-type chemicals.

Again, there has been extensive testing, and the set of facts is clearly disputed. What I am really concerned about, however, is that Cheshire East, when asked, apparently stated—I have not seen the documents myself—that remediating the whole site fully would cost more than £1 billion. Although Cheshire East is trying to manage the problem, properly it seems to belong with the Environment Agency and, potentially, central Government. That scale of a problem—if the scale of the problem is as alleged by some parties—is absolutely massive, and beyond the capacity of a local authority properly to investigate and manage.

We need to be very sure about what exact chemicals enter the water system. It is believed that they are retained within the site and do not enter the wider water system—I do not want to create alarm—but I want to ensure that this is being properly investigated for my local residents, so that either their minds can be put at rest or appropriate steps can be taken to remediate if necessary. I want to emphasise, however, that there is nothing to suggest that the golf course is not safe for use as it is at the moment. None the less, the lack of proper landfill capping is noted and this does not feel like it has been investigated in the way that I would hope it to be.

The Minister is passionate about the environment, water courses and all such topics, but I echo what my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood said: it is so important that we put people before polluters.

3.22 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a real pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. We owe a big thank you to the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) for setting the scene and addressing a matter that has been an overwhelming source of anxiety and frustration for my constituents—the physical, environmental and social effects of waste management sites on our local communities. I welcome the Minister to her place. We are very fortunate to have her here, and I am sure that she will have all the answers that we seek. I hope she will give us some encouragement.

I wish to give a Northern Ireland perspective. Northern Ireland is not the Minister's responsibility, but I would like her help, and my request to her would be to enter discussions with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland, Andrew Muir at the Northern Ireland Assembly, to ensure that we can work together on such things. In this House, in debates on waste management strategy, we often get bogged down in talking about percentages, targets and EU-aligned frameworks. I will bring something from ground level to this Chamber, however, from the Ards and North Down borough council, in my beautiful constituency of Strangford.

Let it be known that the people of Ards and North Down are not against recycling. For example, recycling rates of nearly 56% have been reached through the commitment of nearly every house—indeed, of every house—in Ards and North Down. Households separate their glass, they compost and they wash their plastics, but there is a tipping point, and that is what we are talking about today. The hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood has brought forward the question of what happens when, literally and metaphorically, the burden placed on local communities by waste management sites becomes entirely unsustainable.

The Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has submitted clearly that Northern Ireland simply does not have enough waste infrastructure to handle what we throw away. I know that the Minister is always amenable to my requests, and everyone's, but will she have some discussion with the relevant Minister to see how the actions, methods, experience and knowledge gained here can be used for us back home?

Whether this is a waste transfer station, a commercial heavy-recycling depot or a landfill site boundary straight up against residential lines, the community pays the price. My concern is that areas such as ours, Comber and parts of the Ards peninsula are dealing with the harsh reality of those limits every day: excessive heavy goods, with vehicle traffic pounding down narrow rural roads that were never built to handle 30-tonne waste trucks; persistent issues with odour; airborne litter; and the psychological strain of living next to the expanding footprint of regional refuse.

The Arc21 waste management plan has faced years of delay in delivering modern infrastructure. Local sites have been pushed to their absolute limits to manage the waste. Many of our local facilities are hydrologically linked to the uniquely sensitive ecosystem of Strangford lough; I live on the edge of that, so I understand what it means: an immediate ecological threat to a globally recognised marine conservation zone.

In an effort to curb waste tourism and management costs, the council has had to introduce rigid online booking systems. It has taken many steps to try to address the issue,

[Jim Shannon]

including residency identity checks at our nine household recycling centres. When councils make local centres too complicated to use and restrict their hours, it becomes a knock-on crisis, resulting in fly-tipping in the rural countryside and agricultural fields with farmers left holding the bill.

Environmental protection and planning policy is devolved to the Northern Ireland Executive, so we need a planning framework that respects the proximity principle—the very thing that the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood mentioned. What discussions will the Minister have with the relevant Minister in Northern Ireland to help local councils like Ards and North Down when it comes to moving towards hyper-local, lower-carbon circular economies that do not require massive, sprawling, intrusive regional depots. If we can work hand in hand, we can find a solution that perhaps helps us all.

3.26 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) for securing this very important debate. I must emphasise that this is a nationwide issue: it affects not just working-class constituencies but leafy Surrey, including Epsom and Ewell.

I will set the scene. It is a peaceful early morning in the residential community on the edge of Epsom Downs, a picturesque, 600-acre area of unspoiled chalk downland with panoramic views of London. We are right next to the Chalk Pit, a waste-processing site in Epsom in Surrey. Crash! Bang! Boom! Residents are suddenly awoken. It is 6 o'clock on 20 July. They hear the scraping, clanking and banging of metal, the humming of industrial machinery and the roaring of the trommel. Workmen shout loudly. Car horns honk. Dust chokes the air. Lorries speed up and down the road. It does not end until late in the evening, and this goes on and on all day, every single working day.

Could the Minister, and all those in the Chamber today, live with that constant noise, dust and disruption? Would the Minister be willing to accept this lack of action and change? My residents have no choice. Their homes are here. Their lives are here. This site was never meant to become what it is now when it went to planning 10 years ago, moving from a waste transfer site to a waste processing site. The management of this site is unacceptable, and my constituents—the residents—have long deserved better. Action must be taken, and it must be taken now.

There are four systemic failures: planning by Surrey county council; enforcement by Epsom and Ewell borough council; the environment, whether dust, noise or the potential contamination of water, which is the responsibility of the Environment Agency; and accountability, because there is no single lead on this and one agency passes the buck to another. This has disrupted my residents' lives for more than 10 years.

On excessive dust, the atmosphere average is 10 micrograms per cubic metre; the Chalk Pit has an average concentration of 40 micrograms. On multiple occasions, it has exceeded the quality standard of 50, but let us remember that 10 is normal. There has been persistent noise, as well as breaches of permitted operating

hours, with lorries leaving the site as early as 5.40 am when the operational hours should be 7 am until 6 pm. Then there is the impact of heavy vehicles: lorries regularly exceed the speed limit of 30 mph on roads that are simply not designed for them.

Tests cannot fully capture the human impact and the unintended disruption to daily lives, for years. A constituent said to me:

“Hoped for a peaceful afternoon in the garden—no chance with the Chalk Pit at full throttle”.

Another wrote:

“So much for a quiet relaxing Saturday morning. My day off ruined.”

One constituent said that it feels

“like the trommel is at work in my living room”,

And another said:

“Our garden table, covered in dust—no chance of going outside.”

When there has been monitoring, I have been told that operators are informed in advance when it will occur, so we can guess what happens: there is suddenly no noise or dust and the site does not operate. How is that effective monitoring or true accountability?

There have been planning conditions, environmental permits, monitoring equipment for noise and dust, thousands of complaints, multiple inspection reports, and statutory guidance, yet the same problems continue. The issue is not a lack of legislation; it is the repeated failure of enforcement, of leadership—there is none—and of accountability. Why are my residents forced to continually fight this? Why are the authorities not taking action? There are three agencies responsible for the issue: Surrey county council, Epsom and Ewell borough council and the Environment Agency. The unending buck-passing must stop; someone must take the lead and act now.

The governance is completely divided, with Surrey county council responsible as the waste planning authority, the Environment Agency responsible for dust and noise and for making sure water is safe to drink, and Epsom and Ewell borough council responsible for enforcement. The result? We have no single authority taking the lead, no organisation accountable for resolving the overall problem, separate investigations instead of co-ordinated action, and residents forced to navigate multiple regulators. It is a planning system that rewards non-compliance. Lack of enforcement leads to retrospective planning applications, which encourages operators to build first and apply later. That leaves planners mitigating impacts rather than deciding whether a development should occur in the first place, and creates the perception that compliance is optional. How can compliance be optional when it impacts my residents daily?

In the case of planning, economic growth is often given greater weight than things such as residential amenity, environmental impact, long-term public costs and community wellbeing. Local views and the experience of my residents have been overridden since the site changed its use over 10 years ago. Residents and local councils have objected. Planning officers have raised concerns. Elected representatives have opposed proposals. And the Environment Agency described the site as

“wildly out of character in a residential area”.

Despite that, permissions continue to be granted, undermining confidence that local views and feedback carry any meaningful weight at all.

Let us talk about enforcement. There are many planning conditions that could have been regulated, such as the operating hours. However, as we have heard, my residents are continually woken up at 6.06 am or even earlier, even though the operator is not meant to start before 7 am. There is continual noise nuisance, with the operator flouting the abatement notice. There is dust on a regular basis, which residents see on their tables and chairs outside or on their washing out hanging on the washing line. There are regular vehicle movements before 7 o'clock, and the number of lorries going in and out sometimes exceeds the permitted amount.

However, enforcements work only if they are actually enforced. To help with that, residents have provided complaints, photographs, videos and witness evidence. Authorities have gathered noise monitoring data, CCTV, site inspections and monitoring reports, yet residents continue to report the same again and again. Breaches happen again and again, over and over, but the repeated breaches do not lead to action. Understandably, residents believe that breaches do not lead to consequences. All their efforts are just in vain. They feel like giving up. Why should they continue if there is no action?

There are repeated findings without resolution. Those who are meant to regulate have repeatedly identified concerns—dust, noise, operating hours, site management and residential impacts. Instead of action, the response has included more inspections, more monitoring, more meetings, revised management plans, additional planning conditions and permit reviews—and still nothing changes. The same complaints continue. How many complaints are needed to trigger change? How many reports need to be conducted? How many dust tests and noise tests do we need? The lives of my residents are affected every single day, and all the authorities keep showing them is their unwillingness to improve their lives.

A regulatory system should not simply document non-compliance; it should enforce compliance. Success must be measured by improvements in people's quality of life. Effective performance is not the number of meetings held, reports produced or warnings issued. A high number of ongoing complaints highlights the need for urgent action. The true measure of successful site management is whether conditions and outcomes are actually improved for the people affected.

Residents rightly expect and deserve that their elected representatives will help resolve persistent problems. In practice, councillors have limited to no influence. MPs cannot direct regulators, and residents cannot demand action; that creates a democratic gap. Those making enforcement decisions are not directly accountable to the communities affected by them, so there is understandably a loss of public confidence. Over time, residents question whether planning conditions have real value, whether environmental permits provide meaningful protection, whether complaints make any difference at all and whether regulators are measuring activity rather than results. Residents become exhausted and stop reporting incidents, yet the reduced number of complaints is sometimes treated as evidence that the problem has been sorted; it has not—residents are just exhausted and fed up of dealing with this issue day in, day out.

The Liberal Democrats believe that community engagement in waste management is an essential part of the journey towards a more sustainable and circular economy. That means ensuring that local councils can

operate waste management sites effectively, without unnecessarily impacting the lives of nearby residents. Residents should not experience excessive environmental effects, health impacts or disruption. We also believe that local communities must have a genuine stake in planning decisions that affect them. Proper consultation and community engagement must be at the heart of proposals for new waste management sites. Full consideration must be given to the environmental health impacts of waste management sites on local residents.

We must go further, as the best waste management system is one that generates less waste in the first place. That is why we support embedding circular economy principles across the UK's industrial strategy and product design, reducing the amount of waste that communities and councils need to manage.

Effective regulation of waste management sites also requires a properly resourced oversight body, ensuring that our environment is protected and health risks are mitigated. That is why we support increased funding to the EA to ensure that it can enforce environmental standards and hold operators to account where sites cause harm to local communities, as in Epsom. The Government must also commit to an independent review into the entire waste crime system.

In conclusion, the Chalk Pit in Epsom exposes wider weaknesses within the planning and environmental regulatory system: fragmented governance, no single accountable authority, poor co-ordination between regulators, retrospective planning reducing the consequences of unauthorised development, appeals that weaken local decision making, enforcement powers that are not consistently exercised, and residents whose concerns are not listened to.

This is not just an issue of the absence of legislation; it is an issue of leadership, accountability and enforcement. Without effective enforcement, planning conditions and environmental permits become protections that exist only on paper, not in practice. The EA, Surrey county council and Epsom and Ewell borough council can conduct their site visits and tests and go home, and the contractors can clock in, do a day's work and then clock out and go home, but my residents do not have that privilege. Their lives and their homes are there. They are entitled to a higher quality of life in their community. I urge the Minister to listen to the contributions made by myself and others today and to take action to end the suffering of my constituents in Epsom.

3.37 pm

Dr Neil Hudson (Epping Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) on securing this important debate. As she strongly articulated, she has had significant issues with sites in her constituency. This debate is an excellent opportunity for her to share her concerns with the Minister.

We have heard powerful contributions from across the House and from places across the country—urban, rural and, as ever, in Northern Ireland—about the important health and human impacts. The hon. Member for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) talked about fire issues related to batteries. The hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) discussed the health impacts

[Dr Neil Hudson]

affecting people young and old. The hon. Member for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane) also discussed the fire issue. The hon. Member for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) discussed odour and wellbeing issues. The hon. Member for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) also discussed odour issues, as well as the hazards posed by plastics to wildlife and the environment.

The hon. Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi) discussed access issues in terms of traffic build-up at sites. The hon. Member for Runcorn and Helsby (Sarah Pochin) powerfully articulated the mental health impacts of some of these sites. The hon. Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) discussed issues relating to flies. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) discussed the heavy traffic and the knock-on consequences of these sites, leading people into fly-tipping.

I am very proud of the previous Conservative Government's record on this issue. We introduced the 2018 resources and waste strategy, the 2023 waste prevention programme and a statutory target to halve residual waste per person by 2042. It is essential that the current Government build on that record, with an approach that remains sensible and pragmatic, by taking account of the concerns of local residents while ensuring that the UK reuses more and wastes less.

Although all types of waste sites can affect local communities, the worst harm comes from those operating illegally, whether they were illegal from the outset or drifted into illegality over time. Those sites degrade local environments, create safety hazards, can be damaging to health and, in some cases, cut off access to community spaces altogether. Sites that are managed poorly and left to get out of hand by the authorities can lead to a vicious cycle where unscrupulous operators move in, fly-tipping is exacerbated and local communities and the environment are negatively impacted.

The Countryside Alliance's recent report on waste crime is useful here. It identifies major illegal fly-tips, such as the horrendous 150 metre-long dump beside the River Cherwell and the A34 near Kidlington. It also highlights Walleys Quarry, which was closed in 2024 after years of complaints. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme for his efforts on that; he has followed the good work of his predecessor. The report also finds that compliant waste sites can drive fly-tipping if they are made too costly or inconvenient to use. I would be grateful if the Minister confirmed whether she has looked at the report's recommendations on vehicle owner liability and access to municipal sites.

Turning to incineration, prior to the general election, the previous Government issued a moratorium on new environmental permits for waste incineration. That gave the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs the chance to properly consider the role incineration should play in managing residual waste in England. That moratorium applied regardless of whether a site already held planning permission, though it rightly excluded hazardous and clinical waste facilities, small incinerators and sites seeking permit variations for carbon capture. In December 2024, the current Government announced that new waste incinerators would receive planning approval only if they met strict new local and environmental conditions.

As the Minister may be aware, Friends of the Earth opposes incinerators for environmental reasons. They contribute to climate change through carbon emissions, destroy materials that could be reused and fail to provide an incentive for reducing waste. Moreover, it is important to consider the human element of incinerators and the consequences they can have on local residents' physical health—including respiratory conditions—but also on their mental health. Does the Minister accept that even a small rise in local air pollutants can affect residents' mental health? Studies suggest that environmental contamination can bring

"heightened stress and anxiety to the point of dread".

The UK Health Security Agency found that

"it is not possible to rule out adverse health effects from MWI completely",

which will offer little reassurance to constituents living near one. What are the Government doing to support the health—both mental and physical—of those communities?

You are by some quirk of fate in the Chair for this debate, Mr Murrison, but you have long campaigned on the issue of waste incinerators, and I note a point that you raised:

"Not only does the incineration of plastic produce 175 times as much CO₂ as landfill, but the emissions per unit of energy produced from burning mixed waste is the same as coal and nearly double that of gas."—[*Official Report*, 25 November 2025; Vol. 776, c. 263.]

On the issue of energy, which is pertinent, given that incinerators provide around 3% of the UK's total energy generation, much of Britain's total energy needs are still met by oil and gas. Both the Government and the Climate Change Committee have admitted that we will still need oil and gas for decades to come. It is vital, therefore, that we make the North sea an investable basin. Reducing domestic production will not mean that we consume any less oil and gas; it will simply make us more dependent on imports. That will mean that we do not benefit from more jobs and investment or higher tax revenues. It will also increase our carbon footprint if we import liquified natural gas from countries such as the US or Qatar. It is therefore much better for both our economy and the environment that we harvest our own oil and gas. Regrettably, we will now not hear from the incoming Prime Minister for many, many weeks about what his new Government's approach to domestic oil and gas might be.

I turn to recycling, which we have heard about today. It was disappointing to see London's recycling rate show no improvement in 2024-25. It has gone down 0.9% since 2020 and, at 32.7%, is the lowest rate since 2016. It is welcome that the Government have continued the simpler recycling measures begun by the previous Conservative Government. What can and cannot be recycled should not be a postcode lottery. His Majesty's most loyal Opposition support a more consistent and streamlined system. Put simply, waste that is not recycled is destined for incineration or landfill.

The Government should follow the lead of the previous Government in carefully assessing the need for new incinerators so that we do not end up with more capacity than we need. The Government must also ensure that waste site operators are operating legally and with due regard to their environmental responsibilities so that they do not blight local communities, as we have heard powerfully from across the House and across the country.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman mentioned the Countryside Alliance. The Countryside Alliance is, of course, a country sports organisation, but it is a very credible and influential organisation that highlights things such as rural crime and waste sites as well. Does he recognise that it has an important role to play in the countryside and that should be commended for doing so?

Dr Hudson: It is always a huge pleasure to be intervened on by the hon. Gentleman. He has been very kind to me over the years. After my maiden speech, he came across the Chamber to speak to me and was very kind, so I will always take an intervention from him, as I am sure everyone else will.

I totally agree. The Countryside Alliance is a powerful organisation. The report that I cited earlier shows that it is a powerful voice and that it does its research. The rural voice does need to be listened to in this debate; the report highlighted some of the key issues across the country such as waste crime and fly-tipping, including in the constituency of the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme. The issue affects the whole country—urban, suburban and rural—and we need to recognise that.

Finally, the Government should look hard at what can be done before waste ever reaches these sites. Above all, they should listen to local residents and take seriously the effect that these sites have on people's mental and physical health. The Government must, through all their authorities, keep monitoring health data closely and act to help people in their daily lives.

3.47 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I begin by apologising to my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) and to the rest of the House for my late arrival to the debate. I thank my hon. Friend for securing the debate. She may have noticed that I am not the Minister for Nature, my hon. Friend for Coventry East (Mary Creagh), but I hope to do her justice in responding to this debate because I know how hard she has worked on this issue and how seriously she takes it. I thank hon. Members from across the House, who have made valuable points today. This debate reminds me why it is so important to deal properly with rubbish and why all Members of the House support bins, whether they are Counts or not—sorry for my throwaway comment.

People rightly expect their community to be a safe, clean and pleasant place to live. They expect clean air, thriving natural spaces and confidence that waste is being managed responsibly. Most importantly, they expect environmental regulation and waste management to be working in the interests of local people. I absolutely agree, and so do the Government.

I will quickly summarise some of the actions that the Government have taken, led by my hon. Friend the Minister for Nature, and the achievements of the waste crime action plan commitments. My hon. Friend has already reformed the carriers, brokers and dealers regime, which was debated in the House of Commons just last week. She introduced digital waste tracking, the legislation for which was debated on 16 June. In March, she published updated statutory guidance and a code of

practice for local authorities on litter enforcement powers and how to use them. She has also published best practice guidance for local authorities on using their powers to seize vehicles related to fly-tipping.

As well as that, the Minister has overseen the doubling of the Environment Agency's waste crime enforcement budget, with an additional £45 million over the next three years. As my hon. Friends have rightly pointed out, it has been difficult for the Environment Agency to do its job given that it has faced 14 years of austerity and cuts, but it is now getting additional money to carry out its duties. The Environment Agency is building a new waste intelligence and analysis unit and has already started interviewing new staff for it. It has also secured access to key land registry data sets, allowing for quicker identification of the landowner when new illegal waste sites appear.

Courts can use their powers in the Crime and Policing Act 2026 to put points on the driving licences of those guilty of fly-tipping. We will make fly-tippers clear up their own mess, and we will consult on how to make that commitment a reality. We have also started clearing up some of the worst illegal waste sites that blight communities up and down the country. We are moving quickly for the clear-up of the site at Bolton House Road in Wigan and installing fire and security mitigations.

This is not time for reviews of waste; it is time for more action, and that is exactly what this Government are doing. In that context, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood for her tireless efforts in drawing attention to the Jameson Road landfill in her constituency. Her constituents made a fantastic choice at the last election in voting for a tireless champion for their community and someone who—I know this from experience—does not let an issue go once she gets on to it. When it comes to my hon. Friend, we know that we have to do exactly what we are told.

As my hon. Friend set out, too many of her constituents have struggled with persistent odour complaints for far too long. Nobody should feel trapped in their homes, workplaces or schools because bad smells mean that they cannot go outside or even open their windows. We are obviously keeping a very close eye on sites such as Jameson Road, and we are using our regulatory powers through the Environment Agency to ensure that operators are held accountable for poor compliance.

The Environment Agency has already served enforcement notices to mitigate the worst effects of the odour at Jameson Road. My hon. Friend knows that because, as she mentioned, she meets with the Environment Agency every week; she is doing a brilliant job of holding them to account. In May earlier this year, the Environment Agency varied the permit to restrict the site to accepting only low-risk waste such as soil, concrete and bricks. A regulatory notice is also in force, which requires the operator to remediate the site, including temporary covering and subsequent permanent capping works. Those measures, alongside enhanced inspections and expanded monitoring arrangements, are expected to lead to a reduction in the incident reports associated with the site.

The Environment Agency will continue to maintain close regulatory oversight of the site and hold the operator to account—I know that my hon. Friend will, too—for delivering improvements that local communities rightly expect. The operator must continue to deliver

[Emma Hardy]

the required improvements, and local communities should be confident that regulatory intervention will follow if standards are not met. Let me be clear: where compliance falls short at any waste site, the regulator is prepared to take further action as necessary, and it will work closely with the Government to ensure that communities are protected from serious harm.

I recognise that many other hon. Members in attendance today have poorly performing waste sites in their constituencies, and I will do my absolute best to answer as many questions as possible. My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) raised concerns about what is happening at the landfill in her area. As she will know, we already have the extra £45 million, which should help in her area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) and I have had a meeting about the flies; flies were also mentioned by a couple other people. It is awful when we see a huge swarm of them, and they can enter people's homes. We have had a number of meetings about the issue and we are staying in close contact. To answer another of my hon. Friend's questions, I should say that our analysis is that the Environment Agency needs better enforcement powers, which is why we have committed in the waste crime action plan to give more powers to the EA as a priority for the teams. It is also why we are giving an extra £45 million, as has already been mentioned.

I have to pay tribute to the campaigning of my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee). He has not missed an opportunity in the voting Lobby or when seeing me around Parliament to raise what is happening in Walleys Quarry. The latest information I have for him is that, following the operator's liquidation, the Environment Agency is managing the site to prevent pollution risks. Work is focused on site stability, maintaining capping, managing leachate and developing longer-term engineering solutions. Although the odour reports remain very low, the Environment Agency is continuing to monitor the site to see if there is any increase in the odour. I know that my hon. Friend is on the case and will mention it to me if anything changes there.

The hon. Members for Chippenham (Sarah Gibson) and for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew) mentioned the Lower Compton landfill site. The latest I can tell them about that site is that permanent capping of the operational area has been completed, and new gas infrastructure is due to be installed. The monitoring identified occasional exceedances of odour annoyance guidelines, but no exceedance of the World Health Organisation's human health guidelines. The waste permits specify acceptance controls, and those can include sampling and testing.

Let me see who else I have on my list: to respond to the hon. Member for Ely and East Cambridgeshire (Charlotte Cane), I should say that the site she mentioned has had 30 fires since reopening in February 2025. I believe most of those to be due to arson, and most to be outside the site. The Environment Agency is working closely with the operator and other partners on investigating the fires on the site.

I turn to what my hon. Friend the Member for Heywood and Middleton North (Mrs Blundell) said. The Government committed in our manifesto to moving the UK towards a circular economy. We will be publishing our circular economy growth plan soon. On the Pilsworth site in my hon. Friend's constituency, the Environment Agency continues to closely monitor odour issues, which remain below World Health Organisation levels of concern, although that is not sufficient to reassure my hon. Friend's constituents. That is why we are investing in the EA, with new enforcement powers and new funding.

I absolutely champion the local constituents whom my hon. Friend mentioned, who have come together to campaign on this issue. I reassure them and her that they absolutely have a voice with this Government. We are listening to them and taking them seriously.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi). We know each other from previous campaigns together, so I know what a brilliant campaigner she is. I am pleased that some mitigations have been made and that things are starting to show improvements. I support her call for more joined-up work across the different agencies. If I can support her in helping to get that joined-up work, I absolutely will.

Brian Mathew: Could the Minister say a few words about a plastics tax, or a tax on single-use plastics, to make the recycling of plastics economic?

Emma Hardy: I am conscious that I am speaking outside my brief in responding to this debate, but I will ensure that my hon. Friend the Minister for Nature hears the hon. Member's comment and gets back to him with her thoughts on that one.

I do not want to miss anyone out. My hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) raised the work that the Environment Agency is doing and—again—the problems that people have with flies. I totally agree with her point about putting people before profit—it should never be the other way round. A land remediation pathfinder scheme is launching this autumn, and support is available for local authorities' work if needed. That will fund additional local authority resources, so additional money is coming in for some local authorities.

I want to give my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood time to respond, so I will speed up.

I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that although waste policy is devolved and the Northern Irish circumstances are unique, we enjoy a strong relationship with our colleagues in Northern Ireland. We are soon to commission new research on the drivers and regulatory factors underpinning waste crime, and are actively working with Northern Ireland colleagues on the design of that research.

I hope I have responded to most of the comments made by hon. Members. I know that they will continue to speak to my hon. Friend the Minister for Nature where necessary and make sure that the issue continues to be a priority for her and the rest of the Government.

Just in case this is my last time addressing everyone in this role, Dr Murrison, can I say thank you to my wonderful officials? Thank you to all the team I have

worked with; it has been an absolute pleasure. Hopefully I will be back in the new term, but we never know. For the moment, over and out.

3.58 pm

Lorraine Beavers: Thank you for your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I also thank all hon. Members who have spoken and intervened, and the Minister for her response.

I again pay tribute to the tireless campaigners who have never given up in their struggle against Transwaste's disdain for our community. Over the coming months, I will keep pushing in Parliament for the closure of that site once and for all, and for the enforcement needed to tackle the epidemic of waste crime across this country.

I will work with the new Prime Minister to ensure that working-class communities such as mine and his are no longer an afterthought for those in Westminster. Delivering on issues as fundamental as this is a mission of the Labour Government; it is a test of our ability to change things for the better. I came into politics to fight for justice at every level. Social and environmental justice are part of the same struggle, and I will not stop fighting until we deliver both for the British people.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the impact of waste management sites on local communities.

Northern Ireland Hospitality Sector

4 pm

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of a VAT reduction pilot for hospitality businesses in Northern Ireland.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I welcome the opportunity to speak in support of a pilot scheme to reduce VAT for the hospitality and food sectors in Northern Ireland. This proposal enjoys support from across the political spectrum and the commercial sector. It has the backing of businesses, Hospitality Ulster, the Northern Ireland Food To Go Association, Ministers of the Northern Ireland Executive, Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and the Assembly's all-party group on food to go, of which my party colleagues John Stewart and Diana Armstrong are both officers.

This is a request not for special treatment but for fairness, economic common sense and the opportunity to test a policy that could strengthen businesses, protect jobs and support communities across every part of Northern Ireland while providing valuable evidence for policymakers across the United Kingdom. Hospitality is one of our most important industries in Northern Ireland. It contributes approximately £1.4 billion to our economy in gross value added, accounts for 2.5% of our economic activity and supports roughly 50,000 jobs.

Those are not simply statistics; they represent family businesses, local employers, tourism operators, cafés, restaurants, hotels, pubs and food-to-go outlets. They are the very lifeblood of our towns, villages and cities, yet the sector is under immense pressure. Businesses have faced a perfect storm of rising energy costs, inflation, increased national insurance contributions, increases in the minimum wage and a continuing cost of living crisis that is reducing the disposable income of their customers.

Many businesses that I have met in my South Antrim constituency, from the Stone Hound in Antrim town to Brown's Coffee in Ballyclare, the McKeever group of seven hotels and many more businesses that I do not have time to mention are being forced to make difficult decisions.

Adam Jooe (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend—he knows he is my friend—for giving way. I am enjoying his introductory remarks. Although I will not comment on the specifics of the pilot, I was married at the Dunadry hotel in his constituency, so I will take any opportunity to celebrate the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland. It is world-renowned, and it is loved by all those who get to enjoy it. It is second only to Staffordshire.

Robin Swann: I agreed with the hon. Member until his last point. The McKeever group owns the hotel in which he was married. I had my wedding reception at the group's Dunsilly hotel, and it is just celebrating the 40th anniversary—*[Interruption.]* Of the hotel, not my marriage, just to be clear to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). The group is being forced to make difficult decisions, looking at staff numbers, reducing opening hours and stalling or even cancelling investment plans. It is simply fighting to survive.

[*Robin Swann*]

The Northern Ireland Food To Go Association has told me that over 200 of its businesses have closed in 2026 to date, but Northern Ireland faces an additional challenge that does not exist elsewhere in the United Kingdom, as we share a land border with another jurisdiction.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman, who is a friend and colleague, for securing this vital debate. I rise to support the UK-wide #VATsTheProblem campaign, alongside our local champions at Hospitality Ulster. The hospitality sector in Northern Ireland is an industry trapped in an impossible competitive vice. This month, the Republic of Ireland dropped its VAT on food and café catering to 9%, meaning that our border communities face a 120% tax disparity compared with neighbours just a short drive away. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we are asking only for a fair fighting chance for our hospitality sector?

Robin Swann: I thank the hon. Member for raising that point, because we do share a land border with another jurisdiction. In the Republic of Ireland, hospitality businesses already benefit from a significantly lower VAT rate of 13.5%, but the Irish Government have gone further by moving towards a 9% rate for food-led hospitality, as he said. That creates a clear competitive imbalance.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate on an important issue. Does he agree that in my constituency and right across Northern Ireland, many pubs, cafés, hotels, B&Bs and local attractions are operating on extremely narrow margins? Targeted VAT relief would improve cash flows and strengthen their resilience, particularly amid rising wage, energy, food and insurance costs.

Robin Swann: I agree with the hon. Member. That is why many representative organisations think that VAT reduction would be a key enabler. It would not solve all those problems, but it would definitely help.

With regard to the cross-border imbalance, a family deciding where to spend their money, a couple booking a wedding reception, an organisation booking an event or a visitor choosing accommodation is increasingly influenced by price. Businesses on the other side of the border enjoy a tax advantage that can amount to tens or even hundreds of thousands of pounds each year, depending on their size. The result is obvious. Northern Ireland businesses are competing with one hand tied behind their back, and the problem is about to get worse unless action is taken.

It is especially striking that the United Kingdom's 20% VAT rate for hospitality is increasingly an outlier across Europe. France applies 10%, Italy 10%, Croatia 13% and Germany is moving towards a reduced hospitality rate. Across Europe, Governments recognise hospitality as a strategically important sector deserving of support because of its role in employment, tourism and local economic development.

The question we are asking the Government is simple: if other countries are using VAT policy to support growth, jobs and investment, why are they unwilling to even test whether such an approach could work in Northern

Ireland? That is why the proposal for a Northern Ireland VAT pilot is so compelling. A pilot is not a permanent commitment or a leap in the dark; it is evidence-driven policymaking. It would allow the Treasury to assess whether a reduced rate increases economic activity, protects employment, boosts tourism and stimulates wider tax revenues through income tax, national insurance contributions and corporation tax.

The advantages could be substantial. First, it would help businesses remain viable. For many hospitality operators, a VAT reduction would improve margins at a time when costs are rising dramatically. Some businesses would pass savings directly to customers through lower prices, while others may reinvest those savings into staffing, wages, training or expansion. Either way, the money would remain within the real economy. Secondly, it would support jobs. Hospitality is one of the largest employers of our young people, and it provides opportunities for people entering the workforce, developing skills or returning to employment. Protecting hospitality means protecting livelihoods in every constituency across our country.

Thirdly, it would strengthen tourism. Visitors do not separate hotels, restaurants, cafés and attractions from their overall experience of Northern Ireland, so a more competitive hospitality sector would help to create a stronger visitor economy. Recent successes in attracting major international events have demonstrated Northern Ireland's potential to attract visitors and generate significant economic returns, and a more competitive VAT regime would build on that success. Fourthly, it would support our high streets and local communities. Hospitality businesses create footfall, bring people into town centres and occupy premises that might otherwise stand vacant. Every restaurant, café or takeaway that survives and prospers contributes to the wider vitality of our communities.

However, there is another important question: can this be done legally? The answer is yes. Too often, discussions about Northern Ireland are dominated by what cannot be done because of the protocol or Windsor framework. On this occasion, the legal advice is clear that neither the VAT provisions that apply to Northern Ireland nor state aid considerations would prevent the UK Government from introducing a reduced VAT pilot for the hospitality sector in Northern Ireland. Indeed, article 8 of the Northern Ireland protocol specifically envisages a situation where VAT arrangements may diverge to address competitive imbalances with the Republic of Ireland, which is the case here. The legal route, the economic case and the practical mechanism exist. What is required now is the political will to act.

Of course, we have to be honest about the challenges. A reduction of VAT would have an up-front fiscal cost. The purpose of such a pilot is to measure whether increased economic activity could offset some or all of that additional revenue loss over time through growth, investment and employment. The question before us is not whether there is a cost, but whether the cost of doing nothing is greater. What is the cost of businesses closing? What is the cost of jobs being lost? What is the cost of investment leaving Northern Ireland? What is the cost of allowing a widening competitive gap between businesses north and south of the border? Those questions deserve answers, and a Northern Ireland pilot would provide them.

Northern Ireland has often been described as unique. In this case, our unique circumstances provide a unique opportunity. We have a clearly defined geographical market, face a distinct cross-border competitive challenge and have an obvious comparator in the Republic of Ireland. That makes Northern Ireland the ideal test bed for a hospitality VAT pilot. If successful, the lessons learned could inform policy across the wider United Kingdom. This proposal is pro-business, pro-worker, pro-tourism and pro-growth. More importantly, it is practical and evidence-based and deserves to be tested rather than dismissed.

The incoming Prime Minister talks of more devolution. Here is an opportunity for the Minister to put such a case in front of him. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee has opened an evidence call for an inquiry on this subject, so it will not go away at the close of this debate. I therefore urge the Government and the Treasury to work with the Northern Ireland Executive, industry representatives and local businesses to establish a reduced VAT pilot for hospitality businesses in Northern Ireland. Let us give this vital sector a fair chance to compete, protect jobs and investment, strengthen our tourism offering and demonstrate that creative economic policy can help to unlock Northern Ireland's full economic potential.

4.13 pm

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann) for securing this debate on an important issue facing hospitality businesses in Northern Ireland and for his recent question to me in Treasury orals on the same topic. I look forward to meeting him to discuss it further, as I committed to on the Floor of the House.

I thank hon. Members for their interventions, too. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) on his festivities over in Northern Ireland.

Adam Jogee: I am grateful for the Minister's belated congratulations. My wife probably feels like she has been married to me for a lifetime, although it has been three and something years.

Dan Tomlinson *rose—*

Jim Shannon: Will the Minister give way on that point?

Dan Tomlinson: I will.

Jim Shannon: It is no wonder that the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) had to go all the way to Northern Ireland to get an Ulster girl to marry. That tells you what Ulster women are like. They are the best.

Dan Tomlinson *rose—*

Adam Jogee: Will the Minister give way? This is important.

Dan Tomlinson: I will.

Adam Jogee: I just want to put on record that I did not go to get anyone; she found me.

Dan Tomlinson: It is important that we return to the topic at hand, but I am very glad that my hon. Friend is happily married to, I am sure, a fantastic partner.

The Government recognise the important contribution that hospitality businesses make to jobs, growth and local communities across Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom as a whole. Cafés, pubs, restaurants and hotels support local economies and, as the hon. Member for South Antrim set out, are important for employment, particularly of young people who are trying to find their way in the jobs market, get experience, get a foot in the door and ready themselves for a career of productive work. They also play a vital role in our high streets and town centres.

I hear the concerns that have been raised about pressures facing the sector in Northern Ireland and across the wider country in terms of operating costs. I also understand the particular challenge in Northern Ireland from the comparisons with the hospitality VAT rate in the Republic of Ireland and cross-border competition. I recognise that the fact that consumers have that much more readily available choice is, as the hon. Gentleman said, a unique challenge facing businesses in Northern Ireland. I fully understand why he is raising the issue and campaigning on it on behalf of his constituents, and I commend him for his sterling work as a constituency MP.

Alex Easton: Will the Minister also acknowledge and comment on the added pressures of the Northern Ireland protocol and the Windsor framework, which add extra burdens to businesses in Northern Ireland?

Dan Tomlinson: There are a whole range of challenges and also benefits from the protocol and the Windsor framework. I agree with the hon. Member that they do not provide constraints on the policy choice on VAT. I always find it frustrating when Ministers hide behind legal constraints that perhaps are not always there, and I want to be up front with him: if a Government chose to do this, the protocol would not be a barrier.

Members have focused on the potential merits of a Northern Ireland VAT reduction pilot for hospitality, but VAT is a broad-based tax on consumption that applies to a range of sectors, and it also applies on a UK-wide basis. The Government's view is that different VAT rates would create divergence between Great Britain and Northern Ireland, and impact the competitiveness of businesses between the two regions. I understand that Members are specifically talking about Northern Ireland, but across the country as a whole—some hon. Members did mention the broader campaign around reductions in VAT across the UK—a reduction to 10% in VAT for hospitality would cost around £11 billion a year, which is equivalent to the total expenditure on the Royal Navy or the annual child benefit bill.

There would be significant practical challenges associated with introducing a pilot for a different VAT treatment for hospitality in Northern Ireland only. Businesses, His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and consumers would then need to operate in a system that created different treatments for otherwise similar transactions. There would be boundary issues and administrative complexity to work through.

The fact that I am not announcing this change today does not mean that the Government do not take this issue seriously and understand the representations being made.

[*Dan Tomlinson*]

We are also not standing aside. The Chancellor has introduced the Great British summer savings scheme, which is a temporary reduction in VAT on eligible family attractions and children's meals over this summer, helping families with costs and encouraging footfall during the summer holidays. In England, the Government have also introduced new business rates multipliers for eligible retail, hospitality and leisure properties, a package of transitional reliefs, and the supporting small business scheme, which together amount to £4.3 billion of additional spending. The Barnett formula is applied in the normal way to those changes, so the Northern Ireland Executive received £185 million in consequentials as a result of those decisions.

The Government—and I personally, if I have the honour of staying in this role—will continue to listen carefully to representations from the hospitality sector, from the Northern Ireland Executive and, of course, from hon. Members. We will meet after the summer recess; I am as good as my word. However, we do not believe that a Northern Ireland-specific hospitality pilot is the right approach. As tempting as it is to burnish my devolution credentials ahead of an impending reshuffle, I will not make that commitment today.

I thank the hon. Member for South Antrim for securing this debate and for strongly representing his community. This is an important issue, and I am happy to continue discussing it.

Jim Shannon: The Minister is making a very good and clear speech. He referred to parts of Europe whose Governments are considering a VAT reduction because they recognise the importance of the hospitality sector. Are the Government considering that? If there is an evidential

base for it, perhaps they and the Minister will at least consider it at some stage to see what can be used to our advantage.

Dan Tomlinson: Right now, we are engaging in what could be seen as a similar proposal to the one put forward today. We are doing a time-limited reduction in VAT, not for one sector and one part of the country, but for particular leisure and hospitality activities and consumption across the country as a whole. I am sure that His Majesty's Revenue and Customs and others will conduct thorough evaluations of that, so that we can see the impact that it had.

We expect businesses to pass the reduction in VAT on to consumers. Some big organisations, such as Merlin Entertainments, have already done that by setting new ticketing prices for families this summer, and many small businesses have been changing the prices on their menus for children's meals. I hope that once this Great British summer savings period ends on 1 September, we will review that and look at the impact.

Of course, the challenge with any VAT reduction is whether it will be passed on to consumers. To be clear, I do not begrudge businesses having more margin, but the objective of the hon. Member for South Antrim is to see prices fall. When VAT changes have been made in times gone by, the gains have not always flowed entirely to consumers. The Government have been working really hard to ensure that businesses pass on the reduction in the Great British summer savings scheme. As I say, we are really glad that many have done so. I look forward to continuing to discuss this important topic, and to seeing the impact of the temporary and targeted changes that we have made to VAT this summer.

Question put and agreed to.

4.23 pm

Sitting suspended.

Estate Regeneration

4.30 pm

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered estate regeneration.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I want to use this debate to talk about the principles of estate regeneration, its real-life impacts and the process through which it should be handled. I will speak specifically about the current regeneration in Buckskin and South Ham in my constituency.

First, I want to cover what good regeneration looks like. When done right, good estate regeneration has the power to breathe new life into communities, restore civic pride and improve quality of life through better infrastructure such as schools, GP surgeries and green spaces. In all cases, there is a community that lives there, often close-knit and deeply rooted across generations. Those communities deserve not just respect but full and genuine engagement, shaping and driving the future of their own areas. That is at the heart of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government's 2016 guidance on estate regeneration, although I will go on to say that that guidance needs to be refreshed and strengthened.

Buckskin and South Ham are proud, strongly knit communities where many have lived for decades and neighbours look out for each other. They were transformed when Basingstoke became a London overspill town post-war. By 1973, more than 3,250 homes had been built in South Ham alone. With new housing came new schools and the associations and religious groups that bind an area into a community, each with its own congregation, and that now run projects such as the community pantry in Buckskin or the street pastors.

The Westside Community Association, following the much-mourned closure of its premises, now runs the Ridgeway centre and the Russell Howard pavilion, hubs known across Basingstoke. They have hosted countless birthday parties, christenings and events, including my coffee afternoons, but they are so much more than a space for hire. They house nurseries and run clubs for the over-55s at risk of isolation. I have seen at first hand the work they do, such as the food bank at the Ridgeway centre, which supports people in Buckskin and South Ham when they struggle to make ends meet.

Today, both areas contain more than 4,600 households and 10,000 residents. A regeneration proposal was first identified for development in the 2016 local plan. In 2023, Basingstoke and Deane borough council and Sovereign Network Group signed a memorandum of understanding to take forward, in their words, "transformation plans, covering community engagement, master planning, working with Hampshire county council on transport and infrastructure, land assembly, partnerships and funding." The housing association, Sovereign Network Group, then partnered with the Hill Group to form the Sovereign Hill Partnership to deliver the scheme.

There is no doubt that change is needed for parts of Buckskin and South Ham, and the flats in Pinkerton Road have been identified as a particular priority. I and many residents recognise that there are clearly homes and areas in need of investment; that is not in doubt. The Sovereign Hill Partnership says it has held 33 events, knocked on 1,200 doors and received 1,800 survey

responses as part of the regeneration process. I know that staff at SNG and the SHP, many based locally, have tried hard to engage with residents; this is not about them. In my surgeries, at the SHP's own drop-ins and on the doorstep, too many residents remain frustrated, uncertain and anxious about the future.

Issues raised with me focus on three key areas: accountability and transparency over finances; uncertainty; and trust linked to performance on repairs and maintenance. First, on accountability and transparency over finances, residents are frustrated with what they see as a lack of accountability in this project. The memorandum of understanding was updated in 2025, in the council's own words, to "reflect updated ambitions, aims, objectives and working arrangements of the partners." That means the council and Sovereign Network Group. I am not aware that any version has ever been made widely available, which itself raises questions over transparency.

That speaks to a broader issue that residents raise with me time and again. If the council agreed the memorandum of understanding with the Sovereign Network Group, and they are working in partnership together, but the Sovereign Hill Partnership, which is a partnership between the Sovereign Network Group and a private house builder, is delivering the regeneration, who exactly should residents hold to account? Many tell me that they feel left in the dark. Does the Minister agree that accountability for such schemes should be crystal clear? There needs to be clarity on which body is accountable, alongside greater democratic accountability.

In London, regeneration projects involving more than 150 dwellings or the demolition of any social homes that seek Greater London Authority funding require a resident ballot demonstrating support. In Basingstoke, even though direct funding is not involved, a partnership with the local authority still exists. The parties should look at measures to introduce greater democratic accountability, including the use of resident ballots, as increasingly is normal practice. I ask the Minister whether the Government would consider including resident ballots or similar mechanisms as standard in updated guidance for schemes with or without Government funding.

We must also consider the financial model for the regeneration. SNG is a not-for-profit with a social purpose, but it has formed a joint venture with private house builder the Hill Group to help deliver this regeneration. Many residents want greater clarity on how any surplus will be reinvested, and on the details of the financial model underpinning the regeneration. Given the scale of the proposals, it is essential that residents can understand whether the benefits will be retained locally, particularly for housing, affordable housing, infrastructure and community provision. Does the Minister agree that transparency over the financial model is crucial for resident confidence, and will the Department consider updating the national guidance to that effect for all regeneration schemes?

My next point is about the significant uncertainty caused to both social and private tenants, as well as to homeowners, by the regeneration proposals. Following nearly two and a half years of consultation, the Sovereign Hill Partnership confirmed in February what it calls the priority areas for redevelopment and refurbishment, as well as areas of limited change, the latter covering around a third of homes—roughly 1,500—in Buckskin and South Ham.

[Luke Murphy]

That clarity is welcome for those residents, but it leaves nearly 3,000 households in areas of further study with no certainty at all. Residents have told me that they are unclear as to why and how these boundaries were determined—another example of a lack of clarity and transparency over decision making. Does the Minister agree that it is good practice to explain such decisions in an accessible way?

On the point about uncertainty, the Sovereign Hill Partnership has acknowledged that wide-scale regeneration would take multiple decades. In the meantime, thousands of my constituents have no idea whether they will be asked to move next year, the year after, in 10 years or not at all. I have spoken to residents unsure whether to redecorate, lay patios, redo gardens and kitchens, or make other home improvements. They do not know whether they will see any return on improvements already made, including significant accessibility works for disabled residents. Those considering selling have also raised concerns about their ability to get a fair price.

In short, too many people are having to put big life decisions on hold. Three years on, do residents not deserve clarity and a clear timeline as soon as possible? I urge the SHP to give that clarity quickly. Updated national guidance should set out what a realistic timeline for such schemes looks like, and I would be grateful for the Minister's view. Perhaps most prominently, many residents are deeply fearful about the potential use of compulsory purchase orders. I do not believe that the widespread use of CPOs is justified, and their potential use only strengthens the case for resident ballots.

The third area of concern revolves around a lack of trust, driven in large part by Sovereign Network Group's performance on housing repairs. Put simply, that is the largest single source of casework in my office. I am afraid that we hear the story all too regularly: complaints ignored, wait times running into months or years, missed appointments, and wrong jobs or poor repairs that mean starting the whole process all over again.

Recently, an elderly constituent had scaffolding on their SNG property from November 2025 until this month for a roof repair that never took place. They were unable to open their windows for eight months, including during the recent heatwave. The work has now been cancelled, the scaffolding has been removed, and the problem has been left unsolved.

Likewise, a constituent whose depression and anxiety leaves them almost entirely housebound reported a roof leak last November. It remained unresolved until March, despite multiple SNG visits confirming the property was extremely damp and infested with mould and woodlice. These are just samples, but the pattern is borne out in both tenant survey data and the judgment of the Regulator of Social Housing.

In the tenant satisfaction measures headline report, published last November, SNG performed worse than the national average across a range of measures, including overall satisfaction, repairs service, time taken to complete repairs, home maintenance, listening to residents and complaints handling. The regulator has found weaknesses in SNG's delivery of an effective, efficient and timely repairs service, and a related failure to meet complaints handling timescales. I am aware that improvement plans are said to be in place, but the record points to a real

issue of trust. Residents tell me repeatedly that they struggle to believe SNG can deliver a regeneration of this scale when it is struggling to deliver day-to-day repairs. Let us remind ourselves that this is one of the largest regenerations in the country.

Does the Minister agree that improvement is needed on repairs and maintenance? Does she recognise that the record erodes residents' trust in SNG's ability to handle a scheme of this size? Might there be scope to update national guidance on estate regeneration so that minimum standards on repairs must be met?

In conclusion, how does the Department monitor adherence to its 2016 guidance, and what plans are there to update it and make it statutory for both local authorities and housing associations? I recognise the role that estate regeneration can play in restoring civic pride, breathing new life into communities and improving quality of life, but it must be done with communities—with them shaping and directing the change, with clear accountability, with trust between all parties, and with the provision of as much certainty as possible. I will continue to fight for the residents of Buckskin and South Ham for as long as is needed. I look forward to the Minister's response.

4.41 pm

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) on securing this debate. I want to speak about the importance of housing-led regeneration. Done well, it transforms lives, rebuilds communities, unlocks economic growth and creates places where people want to live, work and raise families. Yet for many communities across the north, that aspiration remains out of reach.

Too many families live in ageing homes that are expensive to maintain, difficult to modernise and increasingly unfit for today's needs. In many neighbourhoods, outdated layouts and ageing infrastructure no longer meet the needs of the communities they serve. Without significant intervention, 100,000 social homes could be lost over the coming decade, further reducing the supply of affordable housing. It is against that backdrop that the interim findings of the Renew inquiry are so important—I declare my interest as chair of the Westminster group for the inquiry.

Led by the Northern Housing Consortium, the inquiry highlights the vital role that regeneration can play in addressing housing needs, supporting economic development and strengthening communities across the north of England. The Renew report found that more than half a million good-quality homes could be unlocked through regeneration and renewal programmes, demonstrating the scale of the opportunity before us. The report highlights the transformative impact that regeneration can have on people and places. Beyond increasing housing supply, it offers an opportunity to create healthier, more sustainable communities, to reduce energy costs for residents, and to improve the overall quality of life in neighbourhoods that have experienced years of under-investment.

Importantly, regeneration delivers benefits that extend far beyond housing alone. Investment in homes can help attract investment in infrastructure, town centres and local services. It creates jobs, supports skills development and gives communities greater confidence in their future.

The impact therefore reaches well beyond the development site itself, generating wider social value and helping to create vibrant, sustainable places. However, successful regeneration cannot simply be done to communities; it must be delivered with communities. Residents should be at the heart of regeneration plans, helping to shape the future of the places they call home.

A good example can be found in the Gleadless Valley regeneration project in Sheffield. Residents' involvement has shaped the vision for the valley to include commercial and community space, improved parks, paths, and jobs and training for local residents. Lara Joyce, from the Gleadless Valley tenants and residents association, described the process as

“making hope feel safe again”.

That clearly demonstrates the importance of building trust with residents and ensuring local voices are heard throughout the process.

What is particularly encouraging is the growing recognition that the success of regeneration should not be measured solely by the number of homes delivered. Its value can also be seen in a stronger local economy, improved wellbeing and a more resilient community. The challenge now is to turn that ambition into delivery. If we get regeneration right, we will not simply build more homes. We will rebuild neighbourhoods, revitalise businesses and restore pride in communities. That is why housing-led regeneration matters, and why it deserves our continued support.

4.44 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) for highlighting this issue.

Many of us can be guilty of forgetting that a house is not just a unit on a spreadsheet, but the anchor of a family's life. I see it that way, as do others, including the hon. Gentleman. Our historical, post-war social housing estates across Northern Ireland possess an incredible and undeniable community spirit, but are too often choked by generational underinvestment, outdated design and structural neglect. As always, I will give the Northern Ireland perspective on this topic to support the hon. Gentleman in his challenge and focus, and in what he wants to achieve, as it is what I want as well. It is nice to see the Minister in her place again—she is becoming a regular in Westminster Hall. I look forward to hearing her contribution.

I stand here to speak up for the thousands of families living in social housing across my constituency. Those estates were built decades ago, and although they were built with the best of intentions, time, by its very nature, has taken its toll. We are dealing with ageing housing stock that suffers from chronic dampness, poor insulation and completely outdated heating systems. In an era where energy prices remain painfully high, it is a tragedy that our lowest-income families are living in the hardest-to-heat homes and are forced to choose between heating their homes—or even just their front rooms—and feeding their children.

Considered estate regeneration is about so much more than putting a new lick of paint on a building, replacing a roof or putting in insulation; it is about having a holistic blueprint for community renewal. I thank the

hon. Member for Basingstoke for highlighting the community aspect, because I want to focus on the community drive as well. It means looking at the layout of our estates to eradicate the poorly lit alleys that breed antisocial behaviour. It also means investing in community infrastructure: the playgrounds where our children can play safely; the community hubs where our elderly residents can find a reprieve from chronic loneliness; and the green spaces that support mental wellbeing and social interaction.

True regeneration must be considered, meaning that it must be done with the community, not to the community. As the hon. Gentleman outlined incredibly well, our local communities must be the co-architects of their own future. We must empower local tenant associations and community groups to lead the design process. If they are drawn into that project and focus, it will make a community and a family atmosphere, and it will bring people together. That is what I would love to see.

To know how to fix a troubled estate—I say this respectfully—just ask the grandmother who has lived on that street for 40 years. She knows exactly where the problems are and exactly what the neighbourhood needs to thrive. Her love for that estate—the place she stayed in for 40 years of her life—should focus us all in the future.

Although housing policy and the Northern Ireland Housing Executive are devolved matters managed by the Minister for Communities in Stormont, the fiscal reality is that our devolved Administration cannot deliver the scale of transformation needed on their own. That is why the Barnett consequential and what the Government give the Northern Ireland Assembly to dish out are so important. The Northern Ireland Housing Executive faces a multi-billion-pound maintenance and investment deficit over the next decade, just to bring its current stock up to a decent standard. That is why we need a joined-up, UK-wide approach to funding capital infrastructure. The UK levelling-up and building frameworks must ensure that Northern Ireland receives a fair, proportionate share of macro investment specifically earmarked for social housing regeneration.

This subject means a lot to me. Back in 1985, when I was first elected to a council, the social, bread-and-butter issues were about housing; it is still one of the biggest issues that my constituency office receives in the mailbag every week. Today's debate means a lot to me. I congratulate the hon. Member for Basingstoke on securing it and look forward to hearing what the Minister can do to encourage him and us.

4.49 pm

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Murrison. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) for securing this debate and giving me a chance to talk about the Alton estate in Roehampton in my constituency. It is also a pleasure to follow on from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who always brings wisdom and a flavour of Northern Ireland to every debate, which I fully appreciate.

The Alton estate in Roehampton in my constituency is home to over 13,000 people. It is one of the largest housing estates in the country, and it was built in 1954. It is a beautiful area; it is right next to Richmond Park,

[Fleur Anderson]

and it has some listed stilt blocks designed by Le Corbusier. It is a beautiful estate and a fantastic community. I am so proud to be the MP for Roehampton.

However, the estate has been run down for too long. It is an area of high deprivation and high health inequalities. From one side of my Putney constituency to the other, in the Alton, there is a 10-year life expectancy difference. It also suffers from poor transport links. The failure of the estate was recognised in 2010 by the then Conservative council of Wandsworth, which said, “Yes, we need to do some regeneration. We will look into this.” Since 2010, regeneration of the Alton estate has been discussed, but as yet it has not yet been delivered to the people of the Alton.

A plan was developed by the Conservative council, but it was unpopular and widely not liked. People very much wanted regeneration, but not that plan. The developer pulled out of the plan during covid—it pulled out from all the regenerations that it was doing in London—so in 2022, when the Labour council came in, it looked at it again. That Labour council became the developer, and that has been key to the success of the plan so far. It employed the HTA Design architecture company, which did a community co-design, stripped things back and talked to people, and has a good plan that the community really like.

The plan has a new library, a new dedicated youth centre—I was a bit obsessed with that part, because the stripping back of our youth clubs in the previous regeneration plan and the estate as a whole has been dreadful—and a new community centre. It will have a shopping parade, with shops—I spoke to Lidl only this week—that will have affordable fruit and vegetables, and two GP surgeries with the space to do preventative healthcare, which will build healthy living into the regeneration. It will have a new police hub, a new family hub and a nursery. It will demolish 177 substandard houses, which have been left to become run down, and build 615 new homes. In total, 473 new homes will be created, with priority given to Alton residents, who will watch them being built.

The largest regeneration ballot ever in this country was held last October, and the people on the Alton estate voted by 82% for the plan—that is an overwhelming majority, a real yes vote. That yes vote has unlocked an additional £60 million of funding from the Mayor of London. I am disappointed that then Conservative opposition campaigned against the Alton renewal plan.

A couple of months ago, we had local elections, and the Conservatives now run Wandsworth council by a vote of 29 councillors to 28—a small margin. I hope that the new council will understand how important the regeneration is to the people of the Alton and will go ahead with the plan, without doing a whole new round of consolation or lots of cutbacks that reduce it. I also hope that they will keep the amount of social housing in the plan. The GLA funding for social housing is £220,000 per unit, but it is £70,000 per unit for shared ownership, so it makes sense for the new Conservative administration to keep the high levels of social housing in the regeneration plan.

I recently met the new cabinet member for housing at Wandsworth council, and I made clear the residents’ strong view that the full plan is needed. He has not said that he will cut it back, but I am worried that he might.

I hope that the Minister will lend full support to the Alton renewal project. To do anything less than the full plan will be to let down the residents on the Alton estate—they have waited for so long.

I would like to end by paying tribute to the Our Roehampton organisation, which provides amazing support and brings together brilliant people across the estate to create community social cohesion. To do anything other than fully go ahead with the plan would stop significant growth and opportunity for residents. The plan will provide a safer, healthier and revitalised Alton that everyone can be really proud of, and I hope the Minister will give it her full support.

4.54 pm

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison.

Estate regeneration must be about more than replacing bricks and mortar. It must restore confidence, strengthen communities and give residents pride in place in what they call their home. In Duncroft, in my constituency, local people want to see sustained investment in their estates and neighbourhoods, not just one-off quick fixes that rapidly degrade. They want better-quality housing, safer streets, improved green spaces, well-maintained public areas, and community facilities that bring people together. Residents have told me at local positive action groups—resident-led groups that action local improvement that they believe will make a change—that living in a place where they see reminders of neglect has a real impact on their mental health, their sense of pride, their local identity and the day-to-day lived experience of everyone who calls the place home. To be clear, local people are still doing amazing things in those areas. I recently met the Duncroft and Friends communities group at the Duncroft Warriors junior football team’s annual gala. They are doing great work in difficult circumstances, but they need more support. They have the ideas and the know-how, and they know their area, but they just need a little more help from Government. Residents know where investment is most urgently needed, so regeneration must be shaped by them, not imposed on them.

Pride in Place funding gives councils and communities the resources to tackle long-standing problems and deliver improvements that people can see in their everyday lives. That means repairing neglected spaces, supporting local shops and services, improving routes through the community, and creating places where children and families feel safe and welcome. However, short-term or piecemeal funding will not be enough. Communities such as Duncroft need a long-term commitment and a fair opportunity to benefit from national regeneration programmes. These places are not looking for continuous hand-outs; they are just looking for a hand-up to get back on their feet. Moreover, they want to do that together, as a team. For me, that is what pride in place is all about.

I urge the Government and ask the Minister to consider providing a bit more Pride in Place funding in future, to work directly with the residents and to ensure that Duncroft receives the investment it deserves. Regeneration should leave people not only with better homes and public spaces, but with renewed confidence in the future of their community and with hope, which we all very much need in our lives.

4.57 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Dr Murrison. I congratulate the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) on securing the debate. His call for minimum repair standards seems very reasonable, and I am happy to echo it. I was pleased to hear the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) identifying the regular attendees in this Chamber—I am tempted to say that it takes one to know one. I am sure we will see him again; it is always a pleasure to have him with us in a debate.

It is a shame that the constituents of the hon. Member for Basingstoke do not feel they have been fully consulted, as they should have been, on the regeneration project he mentioned. Regeneration, when done with genuine community involvement, can change lives in some of the best ways possible. Community involvement, consent and consultation are fundamental necessities if that kind of positive and transformative outcome is to be achieved.

Regeneration is one of the best tools we have to help solve the housing crisis. It allows us to build the new homes we desperately need—including, crucially, new social homes—on brownfield sites, saving precious greenfield from development. It allows residents to exchange some of the coldest, leakiest housing stock in Europe for better homes that are affordable to run, while adding the kind of infrastructure that the hon. Gentleman referred to, such as GP surgeries, school places and playparks, which some estates built 60 years ago never had.

Many Liberal Democrat councils are showing the way to do this. My Somerset councillor colleagues, including Federica Smith-Roberts, Tom Deakin and Lee Baker, have led the way on the regeneration of the North Taunton estate. There are 162 defective prefabricated concrete Woolaway homes, unfit for the 21st century, being demolished and replaced with 229 council homes for affordable rent—67 more than we had before. The scheme was built around a resident design group from the outset, not token consultations or consultation after the drawings were finished. Local community champions like Lesley Councill, who has done amazing work at the Priorswood community centre, helped to lead that involvement and deserve to be credited for a lot of the work. Existing tenants were rehoused during the works, with a guaranteed right to return.

Another example is the Cambridge road estate in Kingston upon Thames, in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey). The Liberal Democrat council there insisted on subjecting the proposed regeneration scheme to the kind of ballot that the hon. Member for Basingstoke referred to. Those involved worked hard with local residents and the proposal received overwhelming support, resulting in 2,100 new homes and 871 new council houses—218 more than were on the site before.

Those are not marginal examples; they are proof that the choice is not between going ahead with regeneration or getting community consent. With leadership and real involvement, communities can and do vote for more housing, not less. The Liberal Democrats want to see that ambition matched nationally, and we would go further. We want infrastructure to come first in these developments, so that regeneration comes with the GP surgeries, transport and drainage capacity that the extra density demands, rather than as an afterthought. As we have said: no doctors, no development.

We would also get serious about the housing that already exists, but sits empty. There are more than 359 homes across the country that have been empty for six months or longer. Addressing that would ease the pressure to drive up to unsustainable densities in other parts of towns and communities, and would relieve pressure on greenfield sites.

The same principle applies to our high streets. The Liberal Democrats want to see a properly funded high streets strategy that genuinely brings empty units back into use as accommodation and housing above shops, strengthens the town centre-first principle and supports property owners who want to do those conversions. We would deliver on our 10-year emergency home upgrade programme, starting with free insulation and heat pumps for low-income households, so that regeneration is not the only route to warm homes.

We welcome the fact that the Government have made housing a priority. We have read that the new Prime Minister will want to increase the number of council and social rent homes being built. Does the Minister believe that the new Prime Minister will match the Liberal Democrat ambition to reach 150,000 new social rent homes per year? I am sure we would all be interested to hear that.

We ask the Minister for an infrastructure-first requirement, so that regeneration schemes are properly funded to deliver the GP surgeries, schools and transport links that increased density requires; a national target for 150,000 social rent homes per year, rather than the market-led approach that we have at the moment; the delivery of a 10-year emergency home upgrade programme, starting with free insulation and heat pumps for low-income households, and a recognition that regeneration should never be done to a community, but done with and by the community.

5.2 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison, and to take part in this debate about estate regeneration. I find myself in agreement with much of what I have heard so far. I thank the hon. Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) for securing this important debate and for his opening speech about an estate regeneration scheme in his constituency; he made a strong argument. I also thank those who have spoken in the debate: the hon. Members for Putney (Fleur Anderson), for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I also somewhat belatedly congratulate the Minister on her promotion and welcome her to her place; this is the first time that I have had the pleasure of facing her in a debate.

Estate regeneration is an important process in delivering the right homes for local people. That is true across all the main types of estate regeneration, from refurbishments, where homes are retrofitted to bring them into line with regulations and make them safe, viable and modern places for people and families to call home, to infill developments, where new homes are built on previously developed or undeveloped land to increase density and provide housing for the local population, or full redevelopments and regenerations, meaning the wholesale demolition and reconstruction of entire estates to provide fresh stock for residents and for new buyers or tenants.

[Gareth Bacon]

That is why, alongside new housing delivery, the Government should think seriously about estate regeneration. Across the country, there are thousands of homes with untapped potential for renewal, regeneration and improvement, alongside the vast and preponderant unrealised space that is ripe for increased density and new homes. That is especially true here in London, as I am sure the Minister will agree; I know it all too well, as a former Conservative leader on the London Assembly and as a Member of Parliament for a Greater London constituency.

With a population that has never been higher and continues growing, London is bursting with demand for housing. Greater London has been set a target of 88,000 homes a year by the Government. That means, on average, the equivalent of one London borough-worth of homes being delivered every 16 months. So far, however, the Mayor of London and his supporters in MHCLG are falling very far short of that. According to GLA figures, in 2024-25 just 7,124 social rent and London affordable rent homes were completed. Of course, that does not even come close to helping the 366,000 Londoners on the social housing waiting list.

The need for new homes is stark and urgent. The Government's own figures show that across England, the number of new net additional dwellings was just 208,600 in Labour's first year in power—a 6% drop from 2023-24, the previous Conservative Government's final year in office. In Labour's first year, 190,600 new homes were built; that is a fall of 8,000, or around 4%, from 2023-24, and suggests that the Government are on course to fall well short of their self-imposed target of 1.5 million homes by the end of this Parliament. They are on track to build something like 400,000 fewer homes than they promised at the election. By contrast, from 2013 to 2023, under the previous Government, the nation saw the highest sustained level of new home formations in the past 50 years, surpassing even the levels of the 1970s. Between 2010 and 2024, 2.5 million new homes and 750,000 affordable homes were delivered.

That is where estate regeneration can play a key role, particularly, but not only, in London. According to the London Councils estate regeneration report from November 2025, London's boroughs have the potential to develop more than 10,000 new homes in a city that is starved of supply, but overflowing with demand. That is not true just inside the M25, but across the country, as Members from across the House have noted today. Estate regeneration is not a silver bullet, but it can certainly make a significant contribution.

The previous Government understood that. As the mover of today's motion, the hon. Member for Basingstoke, noted, they had a national strategy in 2016 to give this issue the national attention that it deserves. They also understood the role that estate regeneration can play in taking the pressure off our green belt by prioritising the regeneration of brownfield sites, as the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington, noted in his speech. Everyone has heard the lip service the Government pay to brownfield development, but MHCLG's actions since July 2024 have shown a clear desire to build all over the green belt.

Instead of the undesirable urban sprawl encouraged by this Government, the Conservatives believe in building where homes are wanted and needed, and where they

can be supported by existing necessary infrastructure such as in our cities and urban areas. Estate regeneration fits that rationale perfectly. As highlighted by the architect Chloë Phelps, the director of Grounded, estate regeneration schemes

“are going to be critical to delivering new homes on brownfield sites over the next few years, with estimates that there is capacity for more than 120,000 homes on small sites in London alone.”

The Minister's colleague the Planning and Housing Minister is well-versed in all aspects of his brief, but his Department's Social Housing Bill suggests otherwise. Not only does the Bill fail to recognise the importance of delivering social homes on brownfield sites, but estate regeneration remains largely absent from it. That is because the Bill is dressed up as a law to support social housing and increase its supply, but is in fact more about destroying the right to buy.

If the Government were serious about social housing, they would have actually built some. In 20% of council areas across England, not one social home was built under this Government over the last two years.

Fleur Anderson: Does the shadow Minister know that since Wandsworth council became Conservative, the only decisions it has made have been to cancel all of the housing development on one estate and partially cancel it on another? We are now wondering what will happen with the Alton estate. Does he support building more houses and keeping them as social housing, especially on the Alton estate?

Gareth Bacon: I am not going to comment on that particular scheme, because I am not across the detail of it, but of course I support building more houses, and we need more houses of all tenure. That is something that we have said repeatedly, here and in the main Chamber.

Once again, Whitehall has the wrong priorities: targeting our green belt, the ideological attack on the right to buy and the failing new towns programme. Those come before the right priorities, such as estate regeneration. Replacement rates are too low for social homes and too many councils have been unable to deliver. The Government would therefore be wise to generate an appetite for regeneration, to feed the desperate hunger for new social housing. To date, they have not done that.

The Conservative Opposition believe in building more homes, prioritising brownfield land and making the dream of home ownership a reality. We believe in aspiration and, critically, in regeneration. Only through those priorities, and by acting on those beliefs, can we provide the much needed, much demanded and much wanted decent and modern social homes that people deserve. I hope the Minister will address those concerns in full and give our constituents on the waiting list, the developers in a position to build, and local leaders the confidence that the nation needs in order to make estate regeneration real.

5.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Murrison. May I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), for his generous words? I also thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon); he and I are competing for appearances in this Chamber this week—

Jim Shannon: You're playing catch-up!

Nesil Caliskan: Yes, and I have a long way to go.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Luke Murphy) for securing this important debate and thank all Members for their contributions. Each one has provided an important perspective on the challenges of estate renewal and the need generally to build homes in a way that works for communities. My hon. Friend spoke powerfully about the difference between good regeneration and poor examples in his constituency. The Government recognise that good estate regen is critical to delivering our housing target and to providing decent homes for everybody to live in.

There are many reasons why estate regeneration might be the best thing for existing tenants or for a local area. In some cases, years of neglect from a Conservative Government that failed to invest in existing estates and mandated council rent reductions, which meant even less for housing revenue accounts, has left many estates in dire need of regeneration. I know that only too well, having led a local authority that felt the burden of pressures on the HRA account. Social housing was the tenure most affected by damp and mould issues—my hon. Friend correctly highlighted the impact that that has on many of his constituents, and I know that many other Members have cases involving the same problem.

An ageing housing stock not only impacts life chances, but costs the taxpayer more in the long term, because disrepair has a bigger impact on communities and also on the stock itself. In that context, it might make more sense for an entire estate to be regenerated than to take a sticking-plaster approach, particularly when some buildings reach the end of their life. In other cases, estates are the best places to build more affordable homes, particularly in our towns and cities, where there may be fewer development sites available, but more social infrastructure in local areas.

The people often forgotten in housing debates are the 1 million families on council housing waiting lists and the thousands of people trapped in temporary accommodation. I know that there are something like 4,000 on the housing register in my hon. Friend's local authority area, and the figure is similar in my borough of Barking and Dagenham. Everyone deserves a decent home—a safe home, in a clean neighbourhood, with decent social infrastructure. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson), who spoke so passionately and accurately about the importance of the facilities that make a community, whether that is a youth centre or much needed GPs. I pay tribute to her long-standing campaign, which reflects the need to build neighbourhoods with homes that are more than just the buildings that house people.

In my view, the simplest, most powerful thing we can do to lift people out of poverty and improve life chances in this country is to provide more decent homes. First and foremost, we must recognise that the supply of homes is the foundation for everything. Indeed, we will only address the housing crisis by building more homes, period. I listened with great interest to the shadow Minister, who made important points about house building and getting on with it. I have to say, though, having been a council leader in and now a Labour Member of Parliament in London, that it is a great shame that Conservative and Lib Dem councils, councillors and MPs frequently object to house building.

Of course, brownfield sites are a really important part of the solution; but the idea that we can meet housing need in London or the rest of the country only by using brownfield sites or doing infill on existing estates is, I am afraid, misleading. That does not mean that we look at only one aspect of house building. I recognise that the picture is complicated, and it will take a multitude of approaches to make sure that regeneration delivers the number of homes to the decent homes standard that we need, but I also know that regeneration must be delivered in partnership with communities. Good regeneration puts communities in the driving seat. That does not just mean being transparent with decision making; it also means allowing those who live in the community to have a real say in shaping proposals. Decisions on property size, building height, materials, amenities and timelines for delivery are important for getting community buy-in. That approach is not new. Good developers, of which there are many, do that anyway, and the regulatory standards are clear: registered providers must communicate with tenants, provide information to them and take their views into account in decision making. That extends to providers undertaking estate regeneration.

It is difficult to set out realistic timelines, because each estate regeneration is different and unique due to their different sizes and ambitions, and good engagement with existing residents may further change those ambitions. Timelines for estate renewal are also highly dependent on viability, phasing, planning permission conditions, and ground and infrastructure prep, but I accept that families who live on an estate face huge anxiety when they do not know when their home is going to be knocked down. Indeed, there are examples in my constituency of families who have been told their estate has been earmarked for renewal; they can see their community being hollowed out, yet they do not know when they will need to move on. Timelines for estate renewal are complicated, but it is important that engagement takes into account the instability caused by estate renewal.

My hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke asked a valid question about whether the process for decision making should be through a ballot. I led a local authority that had a ballot for an area. It is hard work to say the least, but it is perhaps one of the most important things a local authority can do to secure community buy-in. However, to say that ballots in themselves are what secured that engagement would be to do a disservice to the engagement that the ballot provided.

Ballots in and of themselves do not solve trust issues among residents. They can force developers to do the meaningful engagement that they should be doing anyway, but they do not mean that we will get the outcome that we want. Where providers fall short, there is usually a complaints process and an ombudsman. In addition, the Government have also committed to introducing social tenant access to information requirements from this October, which will make it mandatory for providers to give information about property management in response to information requests.

Luke Murphy: I completely accept that, as the Minister said, residential ballots are not the answer in and of themselves, but they do drive the behaviour that helps to build community consent. Will she extend my request to the Housing Minister, our hon. Friend the Member for Greenwich and Woolwich (Matthew Pennycook), to meet me about this issue following this debate?

Nesil Caliskan: Of course I will. The Department welcomes any engagement about that. I have to emphasise that the engagement process requires more than just a “yes or no” tick box, and the best regeneration and estate renewal programme demonstrate a long-term commitment to engagement with residents and to giving residents the opportunity to shape the outcomes of the programmes. In the best programmes, local leadership also demonstrates political bravery in saying, “We have to have some homes built, so let us go on this journey together.” Too often, we see examples where it has become too easy to say no to everything, and that is how we have ended up with a housing crisis.

A good question was asked about the governance of regeneration schemes. I agree with Members who stated that it is vital that estate regeneration schemes demonstrate transparency, particularly when they involve public land or public money. Estate renewal can actually be quite easy, if all the land is sold off. Particularly in places like London, an estate will not be short of interest from developers. Estate regeneration is much harder if we are committed to delivering affordable homes and ensuring the amenities that make an estate a community. The estate regeneration national strategy guidance helps to set out a framework from Government to achieve what is needed. The Regulator of Social Housing works to improve standards and the ombudsman provides routes for readiness. On more effective statutory routes for better estate regeneration, some important steps have been taken by the Government, but I recognise that we need a longer-term commitment and a culture change, supporting local authorities to develop estate regeneration in a way that works for communities.

Let me address the point about lack of trust on repair issues. Too often, people talk as though estate repairs are a task separate from long-term estate renewal. The truth is that estate regeneration for an existing area is a project that may last decades. Five years is a relatively short period of time in terms of estate renewal, but that is how long a young person spends in secondary school. If, throughout that time, they have a leak in the roof or damp, or if there is antisocial behaviour or basic things just need to be fixed on their estate, that will have an impact not only on their life chances, but on their trust and confidence in the ability of those who are responsible for fixing the basics in their home now to also deliver homes for the future, where they may live for the rest of their lives. I take the point very seriously, and I would welcome any further discussions that Members might want to have with Ministers in MCHLG, so that we can strengthen existing the guidance and build, not erode, trust and confidence to ensure an endorsement for further house building in this country.

Estate renewal programmes are possibly the most difficult thing that local authorities can do. I recognise the important points made about place making. I welcome local authorities being place makers. Where a local authority has decided to be the master developer, it is a tough task. I would welcome more local authorities acting as the master developer, with support from MCHLG. A local authority could perhaps be a developer, but in my view, the master developer bit is what helps to build trusted relationships between communities, ensuring buy-in for long-term housing delivery. More than any housing delivery, estate renewal requires brave local political leadership and a long-term commitment to

engaging and shaping. It also requires money. I am proud that the Government have already allocated almost £40 billion for affordable homes, but none of that matters if we do not have buy-in from the local community.

I welcome the debate secured by my hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke. I pay tribute to his passionate campaigning and advocacy on behalf of his constituents. I recognise the huge amount of casework that he gets on repairs and maintenance, as well as his commitment to see more homes built for his area. He knows, like I do, that home building will change people's life chances in this country.

5.24 pm

Luke Murphy: I thank the Minister for her response. I particularly want to recognise the points she made about repairs and maintenance. I would welcome her passing on my request to the Housing Minister, and I acknowledge what she said about residential ballots. I fully agree that it is just one part of the process, but it would be a useful mechanism to drive some of the engagement she was referring to.

I also thank other Members for their contributions. My hon. Friend the Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper) made a point about the value of estate regeneration to both the economy and pride in place. I fully recognise that community needs to be at the heart of any proposals. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made the point that communities are not just a number on a spreadsheet and spoke about the need for a holistic blueprint for renewal. I think that we all agree that there should be a UK-wide approach on that.

I heard the pride of my hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Fleur Anderson) in the Alton estate, and I share that pride in representing Buckskin and South Ham. She mentioned a number of things that are also really important locally in Buckskin and South Ham, including the need for a permanent community centre as part of the regeneration and the role of co-design. She also mentioned the way that the residential ballot worked—I was very interested to hear that. My hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher) made a powerful argument about pride in place and resident action groups, which I would like to speak to him more about.

I appreciated the response of the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos), and his agreement with the point about minimum standards and what community consent can help to deliver. I thank the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon), for what he said about my speech. However, I am old enough to remember when the Conservative Government cut the budget for affordable housing by two thirds, introduced the unaffordable rent model and decimated the building of social housing, so I might gently disagree with some of the points he made about the Conservatives' record on housing.

I put on record my thanks to the Minister for her response and to all Members for contributing. I am having conversations with the SNG, the Sovereign Hill Partnership and the local council, and I want to work constructively with them. I recognise the need for investment and more homes, and many residents do too, but it has to be done in the right way, with the accountability

needed to build trust. I will always be a strong voice for my constituents and the residents in Buckskin and South Ham. Thank you, Dr Murrison, for presiding over the debate.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered estate regeneration.

5.27 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Wednesday 15 July 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

United Kingdom–India Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement

The Minister for Trade (Chris Bryant): The comprehensive economic and trade agreement between the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the Republic of India will enter into force for the United Kingdom today.

This follows both the United Kingdom and India completing the necessary domestic legal and operational procedures to bring the agreement into force. Article 30.6 of the agreement provides for entry into force on a date agreed by the parties. The Government have worked closely with India to ensure an expedited entry into force, enabling businesses and consumers to benefit from the agreement as quickly as possible. This is the fastest that the UK has brought a new FTA from signature to entry into force.

India is currently the United Kingdom's 11th-largest trading partner and is forecast to become the world's third-largest economy by 2031. As India continues to grow, the agreement positions UK businesses to benefit from new and expanded opportunities in one of the fastest-growing major economies in the world.

The UK-India CETA is a landmark agreement. It is the UK's most economically significant bilateral trade deal since leaving the EU and will support economic growth across every region and nation across the United Kingdom. It will help put money back into working people's pockets and delivers on the Government's plan for change. In the long run, the agreement is expected to increase bilateral trade by £25.5 billion, increase UK GDP by £4.8 billion, and boost wages by £2.2 billion per year. The UK is already seeing anticipatory benefits, with total UK-India trade reaching £47.9 billion last year, an increase of 10% year on year.

From the first day of entry into force, there are significant benefits for the UK. Our exporters will benefit from tariff reductions worth around £400 million per year, rising to approximately £900 million once tariff staging is complete. Average Indian tariffs on UK goods will fall from around 15% to 3%. This includes major cuts for gin and whiskies distillers, with the tariff falling from 150% to 75% at EIF, and down to 40% by year 10; automotive companies, who will benefit from the tariff dropping from up to 110% down to 10% within a quota; and cosmetic companies, with a drop from 22% down to as low as 0%, based on the product line.

The agreement also delivers preferential and unprecedented access to India's federal Government procurement market, guarantees market access for UK services suppliers, and makes trade quicker, cheaper and easier through improved customs procedures and digital trade provisions, which will particularly help small and medium-sized enterprises to break into the market.

The benefits of the agreement will be felt across all nations and regions of the United Kingdom. Every region is expected to see economic gains, including an estimated £190 million boost for both the west midlands and Scotland, and £210 million for the north-west of England. The agreement also supports the Government's industrial strategy by backing high-growth sectors across the UK economy.

This agreement represents more than just an improvement in trading terms. At a time when global economic norms are under pressure, this deal demonstrates the United Kingdom's commitment to open, rules-based trade and to building resilient, long-term partnerships with trusted partners. The UK-India CETA is India's most ambitious trade agreement to date that they have brought into force, including India's first ever chapters on anti-corruption, consumer protection, labour rights, the environment, gender and development, and contains the strongest environmental commitments India has agreed to in any trade agreement. It also provides a strong foundation on which the United Kingdom and India can build an even more ambitious trading partnership in the years ahead.

The Government consider this agreement to be a long-term strategic investment in the United Kingdom's prosperity. To date, we have engaged with more than 9,000 businesses across the United Kingdom and India to help them prepare for entry into force. Going forward, the Government will focus on supporting businesses to make full use of the opportunities provided by the agreement, and on monitoring its implementation closely, including through established agreement governance structures such as the Joint Economic and Trade Committee, to identify and address any issues that may arise. It is now for businesses in India and the UK to exploit the opportunities that the agreement affords.

I would like to thank Members of both Houses for their engagement and scrutiny during the ratification of this agreement.

[HCWS262]

CABINET OFFICE

Significant Data Breaches: Model Action Plan

The Minister of State, Cabinet Office (Dame Angela Eagle): Today the Government are publishing their model action plan for responding to significant data breaches.

The model action plan establishes a clear, consistent and co-ordinated approach to managing significant personal data breaches for Government Departments and arm's length bodies while respecting their own accountabilities and their legal position as distinct data controllers. Publishing the MAP forms part of our commitment to raise information security standards. Implementing the MAP is a visible commitment to the public and to Parliament that the Government have a plan in place to minimise harm from future breaches.

I have placed a copy of the model action plan for responding to significant data breaches in the Library of each House. The model action plan will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS250]

TREASURY

His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire & Rescue Services Report

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Dan Tomlinson):

Today, His Majesty's Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services has published its report on how effectively His Majesty's Revenue and Customs prevents and investigates insider risk, following an inspection in January and February 2024. I take the findings of this report extremely seriously and have been clear to HMRC that the findings needed to be acted on.

This independent inspection was commissioned by HMRC in recognition of the importance of security and resilience. The Department has been clear that it has a zero-tolerance approach to insider threat and, where criminal wrongdoing is identified, it takes swift action including dismissal and will pursue criminal prosecutions.

It is important to set out the context for this report: the fieldwork took place in January and February 2024, and the findings reflect the position more than two and a half years ago. All of the case studies referenced by inspectors had already been identified and dealt with by HMRC's internal investigations before being shared with HMICFRS.

Senior officials have assured me that the Department has taken appropriate and proportionate action in all case studies, based on its policies. All of these decisions were taken in 2023.

HMRC is effective at detecting and taking action against internal fraud. Since the period covered by the report, the Department has taken significant steps to strengthen its controls and capability. HMRC has substantially completed 20 of the 22 recommendations, with further work under way on the remaining two.

These improvements include expanding and strengthening its internal investigations function, including increasing staffing and enhancing its ability to identify and respond to risks. The Department has introduced new systems, including a dedicated case management and intelligence platform, to improve the speed and effectiveness of investigations.

HMRC has also implemented a broader programme of reform that goes beyond the report's recommendations. This includes establishing a dedicated insider risk management service to co-ordinate activity across the Department, strengthening governance through senior-level oversight, and enhancing data sharing between security, HR and investigative functions.

In addition, HMRC has placed greater emphasis on prevention and organisational culture. It has introduced mandatory training on internal fraud, bribery and insider risk for all staff and requires managers to actively assess and manage risks within their teams.

The Government have committed significant further investment in the resilience and security of HMRC's systems, including funding announced at the spending review to modernise IT and data infrastructure.

I am happy with HMRC's progress against the report's findings, but I was disappointed that three recommendations made by HMICFRS in 2012 were not acted on at the time. This included assigning a member of HMRC's executive committee to lead this vital work, which has now happened.

While the report highlights areas where improvements were needed, it also demonstrates that HMRC is effective at identifying and addressing insider risk. The Department has already acted on the vast majority of recommendations and has gone further in strengthening its approach.

HMRC employs around 70,000 staff, the vast majority of whom act with integrity and professionalism. The public can be confident that HMRC will continue to take robust action to protect taxpayers' data and ensure that those who abuse their position are held to account.

[HCWS265]

Financial and Professional Services: Mansion House Speech

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves):

Last night I delivered my annual speech at the financial and professional services dinner at Mansion House.

In my speech, I announced a package of further reforms to unlock investment across the country, increase access to finance for growing businesses, and position the UK at the forefront of financial innovation.

The Government welcomed the outcomes of the Financial Policy Committee's bank capital review, including reforms to the leverage framework and capital buffers that support lending while maintaining resilience. It has also published consultations on ringfencing reforms, including a new growth allowance for ringfenced banks that could unlock up to £80 billion of financing for UK businesses, as announced in May. The Government have also welcomed new figures from the Association of British Insurers showing that UK life insurers have invested £16.8 billion in UK productive assets between 2024 and the end of the first half of 2025, putting the sector on track to meet its pledge to invest £100 billion in UK productive assets over 10 years.

The Government have expanded the growth guarantee scheme to facilitate around £3.35 billion of small and medium-sized enterprise lending per year by 2028-29. They also confirm that they will make up to £500 million of British Business Bank ENABLE Guarantee capacity available for lending to innovative and intellectual property-rich firms; and have announced a new UK Export Finance guarantee product, delivered in partnership with the British Business Bank, to support smaller businesses that are exporting or looking to begin exporting. It is also building on nearly £120 million already committed through the British Business Bank's community ENABLE funding programme, with a new ambition to scale the programme to at least £500 million over the next five years.

The wholesale digital markets champion, Chris Woolard CBE, has published his first report on tokenisation, which will help to drive a cross-sectoral approach to digitalising UK markets. The Government have confirmed their intention to issue the first digital gilt instrument no later than the first quarter of 2027, and intend to prepare for potential further issuances, subject to the success of the first transaction. The Bank of England has approved the first firm to undertake live activity in the digital securities sandbox, and the dematerialisation market action taskforce has published its implementation plan for removing paper shares by the end of 2027. The Government have also set out progress on crypto asset and stablecoin regulation, including final rules from the

Bank of England and Financial Conduct Authority, and have published updates to tax rules to facilitate the use of stablecoins and certain crypto asset loans and liquidity pools. The Government have published a consultation on modernising payment services regulation, and welcomed the financial services AI adoption plan, authored by the financial services AI champions—Harriet Rees and Dr Rohit Dhawan—which sets out practical recommendations to accelerate safe and responsible AI adoption across the sector. Finally, the Government have committed to consult on an open finance regulatory framework in 2027, focused on small and medium-sized enterprise lending.

We are building on the UK's global strength through deeper international partnerships and improved market access. This includes increased regulatory co-operation with the European Union on financial services, focused on improving oversight and reducing burdens for firms in areas such as transaction reporting, and working together on emerging challenges such as the green and digital transitions. The joint UK and United States transatlantic taskforce for markets of the future has committed to publishing its report, which sets out recommendations to advance UK-US financial services collaboration, focusing on digital assets and capital markets. This sits alongside wider progress on financial services agreements and engagement with partners including Switzerland, India, the Republic of Korea, the Gulf Co-operation Council and China.

The Government have published “One Year On: Delivering the Financial Services Growth and Competitiveness Strategy”, which draws together progress in the last year across all six themes of the strategy, and demonstrates the impact those reforms are having.

Together, these reforms will unlock more investment, improve access to finance for growing businesses, support innovation and strengthen the UK's position as a leading global financial centre.

The full list of the measures launched at Mansion House, along with supporting technical documents, can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/mansion-house-2026>

[HCWS257]

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Radio Selection Services Consultation

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): Radio continues to be a strong and highly valued medium in the UK, with 87% of the population tuning in every week. However, the means by which listeners tune into radio has undergone a significant shift in recent years. In particular, there has been sustained growth in listeners' use of voice-activated devices (such as smart speakers) to access online streams of live broadcast radio. The use of these kinds of devices by radio listeners has grown strongly. According to the most recent figures from RAJAR, 18% of total radio listening is via a voice-assisted device.

In response to these changes, the Media Act 2024 amended the Communications Act 2003 to introduce new powers to protect the availability and carriage of

online streams of UK broadcast radio on such voice-activated services (defined as radio selection services or RSS.) These protections were put in place to ensure that listeners using these services as designated by the Secretary of State are able to continue to access live radio. Before making any such designation the Secretary of State must first receive a report from Ofcom, which the Secretary of State received on 19 March 2026.

Having taken into account Ofcom's advice and recommendations, the Secretary of State agrees with Ofcom's conclusion that 700,000 users is the appropriate threshold for designation. Consequently, the Secretary of State is minded to agree that Amazon's Alexa, Google Assistant, and Apple's Siri should all be designated radio selection services.

Before making regulations to designate these services, and having already received Ofcom's report, the Secretary of State is now required by section 362BB of the Communications Act 2003 to consult persons who appear to represent providers of radio selection services and providers of internet radio services, and other appropriate persons.

This consultation launches today and responses can be submitted by the closing date of 9 September 2026.

[HCWS271]

Newspaper Direct Holdings: Acquisitions by State-owned Investors

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): The Enterprise Act 2002 (Mergers Involving Newspaper Enterprises and Foreign Powers) (No. 2) Regulations 2025, which can be found at www.legislation.gov.uk/ukxi/2025/1351/made, were debated and approved by Parliament in December 2025, and came into force on 31 January 2026.

They amended the exceptions for state-owned investors in the foreign state influence regime in the Enterprise Act 2002 to provide that, if a state-owned investor acquires a direct holding of more than 5% of the shares or voting rights in a newspaper—up to a maximum of 15%—they must notify the Secretary of State and publish certain details on a website before the end of a period of 14 days beginning with the date of the relevant acquisition in order to qualify for the exception.

When the regulations were laid before Parliament, I made a written statement, which can be found at <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-10-30/hcws1009> that set out the Secretary of State's commitment to sharing a statement every six months on the details that state-owned investors have published about their investments pursuant to the regulations.

Since 31 January 2026, the Secretary of State has received no notifications of acquisitions resulting in a state-owned investor holding more than 5% in a UK newspaper directly.

The Department for Culture, Media and Sport will continue to publish statements every six months to maintain transparency around state-owned investment in newspapers, and to build public and parliamentary confidence in this regime. The next statement is due in January 2027.

[HCWS252]

Unlicensed Gambling Sponsorship Consultation

The Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Arts (Ian Murray): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by my noble Friend, the Minister for Museums, Heritage and Gambling and Department for Culture, Media and Sport Lords Minister, Baroness Twycross:

I am pleased to inform the House that we have today published a consultation on banning unlicensed gambling sponsorship and advertising in sport and all other sectors. This follows our announcement in February of our intention to consult on banning such sponsorship in the sport sector.

Under current legislation, businesses are able to enter into advertising and sponsorship arrangements with gambling operators that are not licensed by the Gambling Commission, so long as those operators' services cannot be accessed by consumers in Great Britain. Unlicensed operators achieve this by geo-blocking their websites. However, this can be circumvented by consumers using a virtual private network. This has become a particular issue over the past year in the sporting sector, particularly football, as the result of changes in the advertising landscape.

We therefore intend to introduce a ban on unlicensed gambling sponsorship and advertising that will target any physical forms or manifestations of advertising or sponsorship. Within a sporting context, this will include kit and equipment sponsorships, pitchside billboards, tournament programmes, venue infrastructure, and the naming of events, leagues and venues. This will make it a criminal offence for any club, league, event, venue, individual or related assets to advertise or be sponsored by a gambling operator not licensed by the Gambling Commission when operating in Great Britain. We also intend to apply this ban to all sectors, to avoid other sectors replacing sport as an alternative vehicle for unlicensed sponsorship.

Our rationale for change is driven by three core objectives:

- to protect consumers, especially young people and those who are vulnerable, from unregulated platforms that may not offer adequate player protections or fraud recourse;

- to defend the integrity of our domestic market by ensuring that advertising footprints are exclusive to operators who are required to adhere to the Gambling Commission's licence conditions and codes of practice; and

- in the sport sector, to eliminate severe money-laundering vulnerabilities within football clubs and agents that have been explicitly flagged within our national risk assessment.

We believe that although most sectors and sports will be unaffected, some sports or clubs will be impacted. For example, a number of football clubs have or have had sponsorship deals with gambling operators that do not hold a licence to operate in Great Britain. Nevertheless, we want to introduce this ban as quickly as possible. In recognition that football is the primary source of unlicensed gambling sponsorships and advertising, our preferred option is to implement this ban from a fixed date in August 2027, ahead of the 2027-28 football season. This should minimise commercial disruption and allow time to secure legitimate replacements.

I would encourage those in this House who are interested in gambling and sport policy, as well as relevant stakeholders, to share their views through this consultation. I will deposit a copy of the consultation in the Library of each House.

[HCWS255]

DEFENCE

Nuclear Test Veterans Report

The Minister for Veterans and People (Mr Calvin Bailey): As we approach the 75th anniversary of the UK becoming a nuclear power, the contribution of over 22,000 UK

service personnel, as well as scientists and civilians, in developing our nuclear deterrent must never be forgotten. I would like to place on record how grateful this Government are to those individuals for the critical role they played in the security of our nation.

Today I am updating the House on the findings of a major records exercise undertaken by the Ministry of Defence. This work has sought to address concerns raised by some in the nuclear test veteran community on gaps in their medical records.

I would first like to thank the community for their patience while this records exercise has been undertaken. The publication of its findings reflects this Government's clear commitment to transparency and follows regular ministerial engagement with nuclear test veterans and the organisations that represent them. We have been keen to ensure that the exercise was conducted with thoroughness and care, and that its findings are as comprehensive as possible. This has required considerable work and therefore taken time to complete.

Records have been reviewed across the Department, including those held by the single services historical branches and AWE Nuclear Security Technologies. This has been a complex undertaking, noting the passage of time and cohering information, from a myriad of different departments and departmental reorganisations, since nuclear testing took place. The modern Ministry of Defence was established in 1964, some 12 years after testing began, which I appreciate has caused issues of trust in historical information storage. I know that we have lost veterans since its commissioning, and I would like to take this opportunity to pay my respects to them.

This significant exercise examined: the policy of blood and urine testing between 1952 and 1967; information captured about the blood and urine testing; and if the records did exist, to determine what happened to them.

Evidence indicates medical examinations or blood testing were required for the majority, if not all, of the nuclear testing period and applied to all three services. I refer to both, as when medical examinations are mentioned, it is not always explicit whether this included blood testing, or more specifically blood counts, but for the most part blood tests or blood counts are mentioned when the details of medical examinations are outlined. Evidence indicates blood testing was used pre-deployment to assess fitness to work and to establish a baseline for future comparison in the event of suspected radiation exposure. No evidence was found to suggest an overall policy for urine testing.

Compliance with policies on blood testing is evident in some surviving documentation in veterans' records. However, the exercise confirmed that some blood testing records are indeed absent. This is likely to be due to historical policy and practices and is consistent with the condition of other personnel and medical records from the time of those not involved in nuclear tests.

It is important to state that the exercise identified some cases where testing should have taken place but did not, or where records were destroyed through administrative error. I acknowledge that, for veterans and their descendants seeking and viewing medical records, the picture therefore appears complex and inconsistent and that the content of their records will vary depending on the individual, their service and their deployment history. The exercise found no evidence of intentional concealment of medical records.

I am placing a copy of the following documents in the Library of the House and publishing them on www.gov.uk:

Records exercise into blood and urine testing of UK service personnel during the UK's nuclear testing programme, 1952 to 1967;

Army historical branch report on nuclear testing medical policy;

Navy historical branch report on nuclear testing medical policy;

Air historical branch report on nuclear testing medical policy;

AWE Nuclear Security Technologies report on nuclear testing medical policy.

My predecessor promised on 25 March 2026 to update the House in response to questions raised about a draft document released under an environmental information regulations request, entitled "Review of environmental monitoring data for Christmas Island (CI) 1957-1958 (AWE 1)".

Officials were asked to investigate the circumstances of the drafting of AWE 1 and the actions that were taken at the time. An extensive search of systems was undertaken. This work has established the facts around the document. It has been identified that AWE 1 was self-initiated by two AWE employees. They discovered some additional contemporaneous data that did not appear to have been included in the 1993 Clare report, which summarised the environmental monitoring programme for the nuclear tests on Christmas Island. AWE 1 was never finalised and remains a draft document.

Within Government, the release of draft documents will always create a challenge. We strive to maintain rigorous standards in the work which the Department publishes and acknowledge that the release of incomplete or draft documents without appropriate context, as in this case, may cause unnecessary confusion in relation to an already complex topic. We will learn from this.

AWE 1 was developed in isolation and without the rigorous checking required for a scientific report. It suggested that the data recordings on the island showed a minor increase in levels of radiation, but that it could not be determined at the time whether the increase was due to a natural anomaly or the result of the nuclear tests. The Clare report had already found there had been

"very localised and just measurable, but radiologically insignificant, fall-out activity"

and the authors of AWE 1 acknowledged that the fallout they identified was still too low to have caused health impacts.

AWE 1 was developed without the knowledge of MOD officials, who became aware of it in late 2014. We have found no evidence of Ministers being made aware of AWE 1 until December 2025. In January 2015, MOD officials requested to see the document and the Treasury Solicitor's Department commissioned an expert technical review—peer review 1—which was received on 2 March 2015. It identified shortcomings with the analysis of the evidence, and completely rejected the contention and conclusions in AWE 1 that there had been material fallout on Christmas Island as a result of Grapple X. Separately, it came to light that AWE 1 had been reviewed by another AWE employee in early 2015, at the request of a local manager; that document is referred to as AWE 2.

In the 2016 final war pension litigation, new evidence—MOD report 1—was submitted that negated the exclusive reliance on measurements-based reports, such as the Clare report, and the relevance of AWE 1 and AWE 2. The tribunal considered the new evidence which took into account the nature of the war pension scheme's standard of proof, and which assumed that, for the sake of argument, fallout had occurred at Christmas Island after every detonation. The MOD report 1 data modelled hypothetical individualised dose assessments calculated for each claimant on this basis. It is important to note that the tribunal also considered expert medical evidence and concluded in all but one case that either the level of radiation exposure was not sufficient to have caused the claimed condition, or that they were not caused by radiation at all. After the hearings before the 2016 tribunal, the author of MOD report 1 updated the report's findings in MOD report 2 and submitted this report to the tribunal, which it took into account before coming to its final decision.

Today in the spirit of transparency, I am placing in the Library of the House a copy of AWE 1 and the five additional documents that were identified during the recent programme of work, which provide context around AWE 1. I am also placing in the Library of the House a copy of a narrative report on these documents, which provides further context.

AWE 1 document—Ionising Radiation Appeals—Review of environmental Review of environmental monitoring data for Christmas Island (CI) 1957-1958.

AWE 2 document—Review of SDTN No. 16/93: Environmental Monitoring Data for Christmas Island 1957-58.

Peer review 1—Ionising Radiation Appeals: Review of environmental monitoring data for Christmas Island 1957-58—Undated and un-reference draft AWE report. Review and Comments by K. Johnston.

Peer review 2—Review of SDTN No 16/93—Note by K Johnston.

MOD report 1—Reconstruction of doses received by Veterans of the UK Atmospheric Nuclear Weapons Tests at Kiritimati—Christmas Island.

MOD report 2—Supplementary Report: Revision of Estimates of Dose to Include Additional Nuclides, Uranium 240, Neptunium 240 and Plutonium 240.

Narrative report on documents relating to environmental monitoring data at Christmas Island during the UK nuclear testing programme.

I once again offer my personal gratitude to nuclear test veterans, their families and the organisations that represent them for their patience and engagement throughout this work. I hope that the documents released today provide the clarity they have been seeking for so long, and I am committed to continuing to operate under the principle of transparency in the future.

[HCWS263]

Finnart Oil Terminal Purchase

The Minister for Defence Readiness and Industry (Luke Pollard): I am today announcing that the Ministry of Defence has completed the purchase of Finnart oil terminal, representing a multimillion-pound investment in the west of Scotland.

This is a strategically important investment that strengthens the United Kingdom's national security, reinforces our energy resilience, and underpins the operational effectiveness of the Royal Navy.

At a time of heightened global uncertainty—including instability in the middle east and increasing Russian aggression—this acquisition ensures that the Royal Navy can sustain operations in the north Atlantic and remain ready to respond to current and future threats. It increases the Royal Navy’s operational reach and secures a reliable fuel supply.

Crucially, this investment strengthens sovereign control over critical energy infrastructure while expanding the UK’s defence footprint in the region—directly supporting our NATO-first approach and our commitment to collective defence.

Finnart will play a vital role in ensuring that the United Kingdom is warfighting-ready. By expanding our fuel storage capacity, we are enhancing the resilience and endurance of our naval forces, in line with the First Sea Lord’s warfighting readiness plan.

The investment also delivers tangible benefits for the west of Scotland. As activity increases, the Finnart oil terminal will support a broader ecosystem of employment and skills development in local communities, while strengthening supply chains.

The Finnart oil terminal will be owned by the Ministry of Defence and managed by the Oil and Pipelines Agency, which has a strong track record of operating fuel infrastructure safely and securely across the defence estate. The site will continue to meet the highest regulatory and safety standards, ensuring reliable, robust support to the Royal Navy’s operational requirements.

This investment in the Finnart site will form part of the Clyde transformation programme—a multi-decade, multibillion-pound programme to regenerate HM Naval Base Clyde. Together with our broader investments in Scotland, including Project Royal Oak and the defence growth deal, this demonstrates the Government’s commitment to strengthening national security, supporting defence as an engine for growth, and investing in communities across the United Kingdom.

[HCWS247]

EDUCATION

Protecting All Vulnerable Babies Better: Government Response to Safeguarding Review

The Minister for Women and Equalities (Bridget Phillipson): Victoria Marten’s death was tragic and the direct result of the actions of her parents, who are now serving sentences for her negligent manslaughter. Victoria’s death prompted a wider national review and in February 2026, the Child Safeguarding Practice Review Panel published its national review, “Protecting all vulnerable babies better”. This examined the safeguarding issues raised by the death of Victoria and a further 41 serious cases of harm and death involving babies.

At the time of publication, I committed to providing a full Government response to the panel’s eight national recommendations by summer 2026. Today, I am laying before the House, “Protecting all vulnerable babies better: a Government response” which sets out how the Government are strengthening the protection of babies where there are safeguarding concerns, and responding to issues identified by the panel.

Babies are among the most vulnerable members of our society, reliant on their caregivers, fragile, unable to talk and often unknown to many services. The panel’s review reinforced the importance of earlier identification of risk, effective information sharing, professional curiosity, and sustained multi-agency engagement with families, particularly during pregnancy and the first years of life. It also highlighted the need for greater national consistency in safeguarding practice and stronger support for families where risks are complex and cumulative.

The Government’s response brings together action across adult and children’s social care, health, policing, justice, housing and wider public services. It builds on the most significant reform to children’s social care in a generation through the Children’s Wellbeing and Schools Act 2026 and delivers against this Government’s commitment to keep families together and children safe, to intervene earlier where children are at risk, and to strengthen child protection so that vulnerable children do not fall through the cracks.

Since the publication of the panel’s review, the appalling death of Preston Davey has been a further reminder that we can never be complacent in our efforts to protect babies. An independent local child safeguarding practice review is under way, and it would be inappropriate to pre-empt its findings. We will consider the findings carefully and incorporate any relevant lessons into the delivery of this response and wider safeguarding reforms.

The response is structured around four objectives:

- Preventing babies dying by identifying and responding earlier to risk;

- Reducing the number of babies entering care by preventing repeat removals and strengthening family support;

- Building the evidence base on effective and promising practice; and

- Facilitating consistency in national guidance on babies and pre-birth support for pregnant women in safeguarding and child protection.

The death of Victoria Marten remains a stark reminder of what is at stake. This response reflects extensive Government collaboration and demonstrates our collective commitment to learning from the panel’s review, and turning that learning into meaningful and lasting change. Delivery will be overseen through ongoing cross-Government arrangements, including the Keeping Children Safe ministerial board, to ensure accountability and sustained progress.

I will deposit a copy of “Protecting all vulnerable babies better: a Government response” in the Library of each House.

[HCWS253]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

Sizewell C: Annual Update

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): My noble Friend Lord Vallance of Balham, Minister of State for Science, Research and Innovation, has today made the following statement:

The final investment decision (FID) for Sizewell C, announced on 22 July 2025 stands as the UK’s most significant public investment in clean, homegrown energy this century. The deal represented the best outcome for consumers and for taxpayers, combining lower-cost Government finance with investment from third parties, each with valuable experience in delivering and managing complex infrastructure projects.

In the summary business case for the project, which is available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sizewell-c-project-summary-business-case> the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero committed to providing Parliament with an annual update on the project's progress. Alongside this, in line with reporting obligations under Managing Public Money, I am also notifying the House of the publication of Sizewell C Ltd's annual report and accounts (ARA) for the 2025-26 financial year.

The Government welcome the progress Sizewell C Ltd has made in the last year.

There are now over 2,000 people on the Sizewell C construction site each day. Sizewell C Ltd also reports that the project has spent £4.89 billion with more than 1,000 UK suppliers, including £1.35 billion across the east of England alone, demonstrating the benefits of the project to both national and local economies. The project has also created 120 apprenticeships to date, with 80 of these for people from Suffolk. With plans to create 1,500 apprenticeships across the construction period, the project will be invaluable to ensuring the UK has the skills and capabilities needed to support future projects, as part of the Government's vision for a new golden age of nuclear power.

Departmental annual update

Since FID and reaching financial close, the Department's priority has been supporting successful delivery of the project across the Government's roles as shareholder, policy sponsor and provider of the Government support package (GSP), and debt provider (with the Government's debt finance to the project managed and administered by the National Wealth Fund).

As shareholder, the Department has been working alongside private sector investors to help ensure the project remains on track while maintaining effective governance and oversight.

As policy sponsor, the Department has supported Sizewell C's engagement with other Government Departments and bodies, for instance with Defra and the Environment Agency on the launch of a lead environmental regulator pilot programme, which is being tested on a variety of major infrastructure projects including Sizewell C. Encouraging collaboration between developers, regulators and other partners is a key part of delivering the Government's agenda for growth, by helping to streamline construction and keeping major projects on track.

Looking ahead, following the identification of Sizewell C as a megaproject by the Office for Value for Money, in the coming months the Department will lay a strategy and delivery plan (SDP) for Sizewell C as a Command Paper and publish it on gov.uk.

Sizewell C Ltd annual report and accounts

On 6 July 2026, Sizewell C Ltd published its ARA (which is available here: <https://www.sizewellc.com/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/Annual-Report-2025-26.pdf>). The ARA provides a comprehensive account of the company's activities during 2025-26, recording a year of major milestones for the project, including the expansion of construction activity on site, growth in the workforce, and continued development of the project's delivery arrangements. It also provides updates on the project's strategic priorities looking ahead, project finances, governance arrangements, and its approach to managing delivery risks and opportunities.

The project has already completed important local road and rail upgrades, and is delivering on its construction milestones, including first aggregate deliveries by train, progress on the beach landing facility, work on the temporary sea defence and cut-off wall to enable bulk excavation for the power station's foundations.

The Department will continue to publish annual updates on the project in conjunction with Sizewell C Ltd's annual report and accounts.

[HCWS258]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Illegal Tree Felling: Restocking Notice Appeals Backlog

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I wish to update the House on the action I have taken with the support of the Forestry Commission and DEFRA officials to cut the backlog of restocking notice appeals and to build a faster appeals process that protects nature and growth.

This Government are committed to expanding, protecting and improving England's trees, woodlands and forests. We are investing more than £1 billion in trees over this Parliament to support nature recovery, climate resilience, local communities and economic growth. This includes creating three new national forests. To support this effort, it is vital that our existing trees are looked after.

In instances of unauthorised tree felling, the Forestry Commission issues restocking notices, which require trees to be replaced. This gives local communities confidence that illegal felling will not go unchecked.

In 2024, when I took on responsibility for restocking notice appeals, I inherited a backlog dating back as far as 2018. When appeals are delayed, this affects nature restoration, can lead to costly appeals and impacts growth where development is inhibited.

I have taken steps to eliminate the backlog while improving the appeals process so it never happens again. I am taking action across three fronts: cutting the backlog, reducing the number of new appeals, and streamlining the process to avoid the risk of a backlog.

Cutting the backlog

We are doubling the number of appeal hearings held each month by booking hearings in blocks by geographical location and introducing hybrid—in-person and remote—attendance—hearings. The first month of block-booked hearings has been a success. I am almost doubling the pool of independent panellists hearing appeals to support this increased capacity.

Reducing the number of appeals

I am working across Government to increase public awareness of tree felling legislation. Local authorities and local partners play a key role in giving early advice to developers and landowners, making clear that trees should not be felled without a felling licence, if required. I have used established planning and local government channels to reinforce this message. This will help prevent unlawful felling, reduce avoidable appeals and support responsible development.

The Forestry Commission is now undertaking stronger engagement with landowners before a restocking notice is served. This helps deliver a more proportionate approach and ensures that much earlier resolution is achieved where possible—before a restocking notice is issued.

Streamlining the process

I am streamlining the process by increasing automation of administrative processes, making better use of digital resources and speeding up decision making. I will issue new public guidance this summer to explain how individuals or organisations can appeal a restocking notice and what they can expect at the appeal hearing. This will provide much needed clarity for potential appellants.

Together, these changes are moving us from a slow, reactive approach prone to legal challenge to a more proactive and efficient one, with greater certainty for appellants. This will mean more is done to resolve cases before proceeding to restocking notices, and that where restocking notices are issued and appealed, appeals are resolved quickly.

The appeals process is now in a much better state. These changes have resolved long-running cases and gripped an overburdened process, with the time taken falling from six years to under two years. These improvements are delivering for both nature and growth.

[HCWS259]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Gibraltar: UK-EU Treaty

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): The Government are pleased to provide an update to the House on the UK-EU treaty in respect of Gibraltar. The treaty was signed in Brussels yesterday, 14 July, and laid before Parliament for scrutiny under the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010. I signed on behalf of the UK, and Maroš Šefčovič, Commissioner for Trade and Economic Security, signed on behalf of the EU. The ceremony was also attended by the Spanish Foreign Minister, José Manuel Albares, and the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, Fabian Picardo.

This treaty resolves one of the last outstanding issues from Brexit, by creating a framework for Gibraltar's relationship with the EU. It establishes a fluid border between Gibraltar and Spain, providing the people of Gibraltar and the region with much-needed legal certainty and stability, and securing their prosperity. It safeguards the operational autonomy of our military facilities, ensuring that they can continue their vital contribution to regional security without interference or interruption. And it protects UK sovereignty over Gibraltar, with a clause which makes explicitly clear that nothing in the treaty can be used to challenge our sovereignty position.

The Treaty is being provisionally applied from 15 July, providing certainty for the people and economy of Gibraltar. His Majesty's Government of Gibraltar has prepared the necessary legislative, operational and infrastructure changes to enable the new arrangements to begin on 15 July.

The scrutiny process will be led by the European Affairs Committee.

[HCWS260]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Fuller Inquiry Phase 2 Report: Government Update on Progress

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): I am today updating the House on the Government's progress in responding to the recommendations of the independent inquiry into the serious issues arising from the appalling actions of David Fuller. The inquiry's final report, published on

15 July 2025, made 75 recommendations to strengthen the security and dignity of people after death across a wide range of settings. As the House will recall, it found that arrangements for the care of the deceased were partial, piecemeal and not universally mandated.

To mark one year since publication, I am providing a further update on progress since the Government's interim update of 16 December 2025. The Government have worked with NHS England, the Human Tissue Authority, the Local Government Association and other partners, through a dedicated cross-Government programme board, to consider each recommendation and determine the action required.

At this time, the Government have accepted in full the majority of Sir Jonathan Michael's recommendations and are already taking forward a substantial programme of work to address the issues raised.

Significant progress has been made to address the recommendations for NHS Hospitals. NHS England has worked to agree actions at NHS board level to strengthen mortuary security across the NHS estate, alongside wider work to strengthen governance, accountability and safeguarding arrangements. NHS England has also issued a national system letter setting out the actions expected of each NHS trust and providers to ensure that improvements are delivered consistently.

There are a further group of recommendations where the Government agree with the intent and direction of travel, but where further consideration is needed before implementation can proceed as stated in the inquiry's report. These recommendations affect a range of organisations and settings, each with different operational requirements and regulatory arrangements. We are therefore undertaking further work to understand the practical implications, costs and benefits, and to ensure that any changes are proportionate, effective and deliverable. This includes working with local authorities to support closer alignment with Human Tissue Authority standards on security, governance and audit.

Some of these recommendations relate to the wider regulation of sectors involved in caring for the deceased outside the NHS, including the funeral sector. These raise broader questions about the most appropriate regulatory framework and the potential impact on businesses, local authorities and others providing these important services. The Government are carefully considering these issues to ensure that any future changes improve standards and oversight while remaining proportionate and sustainable. We recognise the significance of these issues and will update the House as soon as practicably possible on how we intend to take these recommendations forward.

Throughout this work, the Government remain committed to improving standards and oversight of care for the deceased and ensuring that bereaved families can have confidence that their loved ones will be treated with dignity, respect and compassion, regardless of the setting in which care is provided. This work also sits alongside action being taken in response to the horrific, recent findings from the independent review of maternity services at Nottingham University Hospitals NHS Trust, which have further highlighted the importance of robust governance, oversight and respectful care for the deceased. Immediate action has been taken by the Human Tissue Authority who has instructed all mortuaries to review internal records over the last 10 years to ensure all

incidents have been logged and reported. The findings of this exercise will be reported to Ministers by 16 October 2026.

The Government remain committed to providing a full response to Sir Jonathan Michael's report once the leadership election period for Prime Minister has concluded. None the less, it is important that the House is updated on the progress made to date while further work continues across Government and with delivery partners.

Progress will continue to be monitored, where possible, through the Cabinet Office's www.gov.uk record of recommendations made by public inquiries since 2024. The Public Inquiries: Recommendations and Government Response dashboard can be accessed at: <https://finquiry.dac.grid.civilservice.gov.uk>

I thank all those who contributed evidence to the inquiry, and in particular the families whose experiences informed this work. The Government remain committed to learning the lessons of these events and ensuring that care for the deceased is consistent across all settings.

[HCWS261]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Unauthorised Fraud and Misuse of Telephone Numbers: Calls for Evidence

The Minister for Security (Dame Angela Eagle): My noble Friend the Minister of State at the Home Office, Lord Hanson of Flint, has today made the following written ministerial statement:

Today the Government are launching two calls for evidence to strengthen the evidence base on two key and evolving fraud threats: unauthorised fraud and misuse of telephone numbers.

Fraud is now the most commonly experienced crime in England and Wales, accounting for around 46% of offences against individuals and costing an estimated £14.4 billion each year. It funds organised crime, erodes trust and harms millions.

That is why in March the Government published a new fraud strategy, which sets out a comprehensive approach to prevent fraud, protect the public and pursue offenders.

The strategy committed to improving the evidence base in relation to unauthorised fraud and anonymous access in the telecoms sector by launching calls for evidence. Strengthening the evidence base on key and evolving threats is key to ensuring that our response continues to evolve and is targeted, proportionate and effective.

That is why today the Home Office is launching two calls for evidence.

First, we are launching a call for evidence on unauthorised fraud. This form of fraud, where criminals act without a victim's knowledge or consent, is increasing in scale and sophistication, driven by rapid technological change and the growth of the digital economy. This call for evidence will gather data and insight on the scale, drivers and enablers of unauthorised fraud to inform future policy and ensure our response keeps pace with emerging threats.

Secondly, we are launching a call for evidence on anonymous access to phone numbers and call routing for fraud. Telecommunications is a key vector exploited by fraudsters, and the strategy therefore commits us to several actions to identify and address vulnerabilities across the telecoms ecosystem. This exercise will help us better understand risks in the numbering system and consider whether targeted and proportionate interventions are needed.

We are calling on industry, law enforcement, regulators and the public to contribute. The evidence gathered will shape the next phase of our work to disrupt criminals, protect the public and strengthen the UK's resilience to fraud.

Both calls for evidence have been published today on gov.uk and will be open for responses for 12 weeks.

[HCWS251]

National Crime Agency Workforce: Pay and Allowances

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): The 12th report of the National Crime Agency Remuneration Review Body is being laid before Parliament and published today. The NCARRB report advises the Government on the pay and allowances for National Crime Agency officers with operational powers and considers the whole NCA workforce.

I would like to thank the Chair and members of the review body for their work on gathering evidence from the NCA, the Home Office, His Majesty's Treasury and the trade unions, resulting in their detailed, comprehensive report. The Government value the independent expertise and insight of NCARRB and take on board the useful advice and principles set out in response to our remit letter of 27 October 2025.

The NCA is a leader in the fight against serious and organised crime, supporting law enforcement partners with its specialist capabilities and focusing on the highest harm offenders, groups and networks which pose the greatest threat to our society. It is a key operational partner in delivering our priorities for organised immigration crime, working in support of the Border Security Command. It is providing national leadership in tackling grooming gangs, making our streets safer and protecting the economy by tackling money laundering and fraud.

The Government are committed to ensuring that the NCA continues to develop and evolve in response to the rapidly evolving and complex nature of serious and organised crime. Part of this transformation includes empowering the agency's ability to attract, recruit and retain the skilled workforce it needs.

The NCARRB's 12th report made the following recommendations:

A consolidated pay award of 4.7% for all NCA officers within our remit group. The spot rates for grades 1 to 5 and the minima and maxima of the standard pay ranges for grades 1 to 6 should be raised by 4.7%.

An increase of 4.7%, in line with the pay award, to the London Weighting Allowance and South-East Allowance for all NCA officers within our remit group.

The NCA undertakes a review of the purpose, design and uprating mechanisms of the London Weighting Allowance and the South-East Allowance. In parallel, the NCA should work with policing partners and trade unions to consider the long-term future of these allowances in the light of the wider reforms set out in the Police Reform White Paper and the NCA's transition to the National Police Service.

An increase of 4.7%, in line with the pay award, to the International Liaison Officer Allowance and the Diplomatic Compensation Allowance for officers in our remit group.

After careful consideration, I have decided to take the following approach:

Fully accept recommendation 3, which will deliver increases to NCA allowances.

An increase of 3.8%, in line with the proposed pay award for the NCA, to the London Weighting Allowance and South-East Allowance for all NCA officers within our remit group.

An increase of 3.8%, in line with the proposed pay award for the NCA, to the International Liaison Officer Allowance and Diplomatic Compensation Allowance for officers in our remit group.

A pay award of 3.8% is proposed for the NCA. This baseline award will be complemented with the approval of pay and contract reforms that the NCA will be able to take forward, including pay progression for its officers. Taken together this is an excellent outcome for the agency and is consistent with the NCARRB's report. In particular, this step supports progressing the NCA's transition to the future National Police Service as announced in the Government's White Paper "From local to national: a new model for policing".

In reaching these decisions, I have given due consideration to a number of factors including the value NCA officers give to the public by protecting them against the threat of serious and organised crime, affordability, and delivering value for the tax-paying public.

This award represents a significant increase, with this year's 3.8% award building on last year's increase of 4.5%. The award will be funded within the NCA's existing budget, and I am confident it will greatly support the agency's efforts to eradicate the most dangerous organised crime groups operating within and against the UK.

Alongside the pay award, the Government are approving the NCA's pay and contract reform package. This will support the NCA's transition towards the National Police Service by introducing conditional pay progression, further helping to narrow differences with policing.

[HCWS266]

Police Workforce Pay and Conditions

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): The 12th report of the Police Remuneration Review Body is being laid before Parliament and published today. The body considered the pay and allowances for police officers in the federated and superintending ranks in England and Wales. The supplement to the 48th annual report of the Senior Salaries Review Body, which made recommendations on the pay and allowances for the chief police officer ranks in England and Wales, is also being laid before Parliament and published. I would like to thank the chairs and members for their reports and detailed considerations.

Police officers perform one of the most challenging and important roles in public service. Every day, they put themselves in harm's way to keep our communities safe, protect vulnerable people, and uphold the rule of law. Through our police reform programme, we are committed to ensuring that officers have the support they need to carry out this vital role and to meet the demands of modern policing.

The PRRB recommended a consolidated increase of 3.9% for all ranks and pay points, up to and including chief superintendent. The SSRB recommended a consolidated increase of 3.7% for the chief officer ranks. The Government have given very careful consideration to the recommendations and have decided to award a consolidated increase of 3.5% to all ranks and pay points. This is the highest award that is manageable within existing police force and Home Office budgets,

while enabling the continued delivery of the Government's crime and policing priorities, and considering the evidence and findings of the PRRB and SSRB. This increase will take effect from 1 September 2026.

To support forces with the additional costs of the award, the Home Office will provide additional funding of £84 million in 2026-27; £144 million in 2027-28; and £145 million in 2028-29. I have always been clear that I will prioritise crucial frontline services and this funding has been made available through contingency budgets created by rigorous reprioritisation, difficult decisions and savings exercises undertaken during and after the spending review 2025. The funding will be allocated using police funding formula shares.

London weighting will be increased by 3.5% in line with the pay award. The maximum rates of London allowance and the south-east allowance will also be increased by 3.5%. All protection allowance rates will be increased by £8. These increases will take effect from 1 September 2026.

The PRRB recommended that the 10-day qualifying period for acting up allowance should be abolished from 1 September 2026. This recommendation has been accepted but will instead be implemented following consultation on amendments to determinations made under the Police Regulations 2003.

The PRRB further recommended that maternity support leave entitlements should be increased to two weeks with full pay from 1 September 2026. The second week of full pay will be available to those officers meeting the current service requirements to receive statutory paternity pay, as set out in determinations made under the Police Regulations 2003. The recommendation will also be applied to adoption support leave entitlements. Both changes will be implemented following consultation on amendments to the determinations.

The PRRB recommended that rate three of the protection allowance should be applied for each day an officer is deployed to a qualifying country. This recommendation will be subject to further discussion with all relevant stakeholders to fully understand the impact.

Further recommendations were also made on how statutory employment rights should be applied in the Police Regulations 2003. The Government note these recommendations but emphasise that the PRRB and SSRB will continue to have a role in advising on any enhancements beyond statutory minimum employment rights. In addition, the PRRB made recommendations on timescales for implementing outstanding changes required to the Police Regulations 2003 and determinations made under them. The Home Office will work with policing stakeholders to develop a realistic timetable for progressing these amendments.

The SSRB recommended that the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council work with policing stakeholders to develop a solution at pace to address chief officer retention through all stages of policing reform. The Home Office will consider how best to take this forward with the NPCC.

[HCWS264]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024: Implementation

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): The leasehold system is blighting millions of lives. The leasehold system is a barrier to a fair and efficient modern residential property market. The leasehold system is an anachronism in the 21st century. That is why this Government made a clear and unambiguous commitment in their manifesto to act where previous Governments had failed and finally bring it to an end.

To bring the feudal leasehold system to an orderly end in this Parliament, we must stop it perpetuating itself. To do so, we will legislate through our forthcoming commonhold and leasehold reform Bill to reinvent the commonhold through the introduction of a comprehensive new legal framework and make it the default tenure by banning the use of leasehold for new flats—complementing the ban on new leasehold houses already on the statute book.

In the commonhold future that is on the horizon, existing leaseholders will not be left behind. We will put in place measures that enable more existing leaseholders to take control of their buildings and more easily convert to commonhold as and when they judge the time is right for them. And we will continue to strengthen protections for existing leaseholders in the here and now.

Implementation of the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024 is an integral part of the Government's ambitious leasehold and commonhold reform agenda. Bringing the various provisions of the Act into force is essential both to providing immediate relief to existing leaseholders currently suffering as a result of unfair and unreasonable practices and to facilitating a rapid reduction in the prevalence of existing leasehold by enabling leaseholders to convert to commonhold in practice.

The Government have already made significant progress when it comes to commencing provisions in the 2024 Act. On 24 July 2024, we brought into force provisions relating to rent charge arrears, building safety legal costs and the work of professional insolvency practitioners. On 31 October 2024, we brought into force further building safety measures. On 31 January 2025, we commenced provisions to remove the two-year qualifying rule in relation to enfranchisement and lease extensions. And on 3 March 2025, right to manage provisions (expanding access, reforming its costs, and voting rights) came into force.

Today, I am setting out details of the next phase of the 2024 Act's implementation.

Leasehold enfranchisement: valuation rates and non-litigation (process) costs

Our forthcoming commonhold and leasehold reform Bill will include a new and improved process for commonhold conversion, one which brings it into line with wider enfranchisement processes and will make conversion possible if at least 50% of qualifying leaseholders agree.

However, to ensure more leaseholders are able to convert in practice, we need to implement measures in the 2024 Act that will make it easier and cheaper for

leaseholders to extend their lease or buy their freehold (known as "enfranchisement"), as well as implement mandatory leasebacks, address development value as a barrier to enfranchisement, and legislate to cap ground rent at £250 which will further reduce the cost of enfranchisement for many leaseholders with ground rent.

We have been constrained from implementing the 2024 Act's enfranchisement measures to date by the fact that legislation contains a small number of specific flaws. These include a loophole in the new valuation process which means that some people could avoid paying the correct price for their lease extension or freehold acquisition, thereby compromising the integrity of the amended method, and an omission that would deny tens of thousands of shared ownership leaseholders the right to extend their lease with their direct landlord, given that the providers in question do not have sufficiently long leases to grant 990-year extensions. The King's Speech 2026 confirmed that fixes to these flaws will be included in the forthcoming commonhold and leasehold reform Bill.

To ensure that we can commence the 2024 Act's enfranchisement provisions as soon as possible following Royal Assent of the commonhold and leasehold reform Bill, the Government need to have determined the prescribed rates that will be used to calculate the enfranchisement premium and to have confirmed their approach to the recovery of non-litigation (process) costs. To inform final decisions in respect of both matters, we are today launching two technical consultations.

The first consultation, which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/leasehold-enfranchisement-valuation-rates>, concerns valuation rates. The new method for calculating the price of a statutory lease extension or freehold acquisition provided for by the 2024 Act removes the requirement for marriage value to be paid, caps the treatment of ground rents in the valuation calculation at 0.1% of the freehold value, and allows Government to prescribe through secondary legislation the two rates used to calculate the enfranchisement premium.

Within the parameters defined by the 2024 Act, the consultation seeks evidence and views to inform the setting of both the deferment and the capitalisation rates. Our aim is to set rates that reasonably find the present value of the "reversion" and "term" elements of the premium while providing simplicity, certainty and stability for those involved in enfranchisement claims.

The second consultation, which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/leasehold-enfranchisement-process-costs>, concerns non-litigation (process) costs. At present, leaseholders are forced to pay their landlords' process costs when extending their lease or buying their freehold. The 2024 Act ends the recovery of non-litigation costs by landlords with a small number of exceptions, as recommended by the Law Commission, to account for low-value claims, failed claims and where there are leaseback arrangements in place.

The consultation seeks evidence and views on the amount of the landlords' process costs that should be payable by leaseholders where one of the exceptions in the 2024 Act applies and also on the merits of a new exemption (subject to future legislation) designed to support resident-led management organisations, and

possibly some other organisations, which might otherwise be unable to fund the costs associated with an enfranchisement claim.

Both consultations will run for 10 weeks. While each is technically complex and demands a degree of specialist knowledge, we strongly encourage input from all parties affected, including individual leaseholders and freeholders, so that the Government's final decisions on valuation rates and non-litigation (process) costs are informed by views beyond simply enfranchisement professionals.

I want to reiterate that no amount of litigation will deter the Government from progressing their ambitious leasehold and commonhold reform agenda. We robustly defended the challenges brought to the enfranchisement provisions of the 2024 Act last year and warmly welcomed the High Court's judgment which comprehensively dismissed them. We will defend any appeals just as tenaciously.

Regulation of leasehold: service charges, litigation costs and insurance costs

The forthcoming commonhold and leasehold reform Bill will contain a number of provisions that provide existing leaseholders with greater rights, powers and protections over their homes, not least the abolition of leasehold forfeiture and its replacement with a modern, proportionate lease enforcement system that addresses breaches fairly, with appropriate safeguards and judicial oversight. However, providing urgent relief to existing leaseholders struggling with the cost of living requires us to switch on a number of remaining measures from the 2024 Act.

The "Strengthening leaseholder protections over charges and services" consultation undertaken last year sought views on measures contained in the 2024 Act to drive up the transparency of service charges and reform the litigation costs regime, as well as a number of further reforms outside the scope of that Act including mandating reserve funds, introducing mandatory qualifications for managing agents and improving the section 20 major works regime. We received a very large number of thoughtful and detailed responses to it from leaseholders, landlords, managing agents and representative organisations. The insight provided has been invaluable in shaping our approach.

Having considered carefully the feedback received to this consultation, as well as the separate consultation undertaken in respect of permitted insurance fees, we are today publishing a Government response to those proposals in the consultation relating to part 4 of the 2024 Act, which can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/strengthening-leaseholder-protections-over-charges-and-services-consultation>.

That response confirms that the Government will now proceed to implement measures to drive up the transparency of service charges, including standardised service charge demand forms, an annual report and enhanced leaseholder rights to obtain information on request, and reform the litigation costs regime by requiring court or tribunal approval for the recovery of litigation costs through the service charge and giving leaseholders a new right to enable them to recover landlord costs in certain circumstances. We will also look to introduce a transparent and fair permitted building insurance payment. These measures will work in tandem to help leaseholders

better understand what they are paying for and empower them to challenge charges where they believe them to be unreasonable.

This impactful package of reforms will be laid in Parliament later this year through a minimum of five complementary statutory instruments, at least two of which will be made under the affirmative procedure. We will provide a separate response in due course in relation to the further reforms consulted upon that are outside the scope of the 2024 Act, including those that concern the regulation of managing agents.

[HCWS270]

Internal Drainage Board Levy Support Grant

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): At the local government finance settlement on 9 February 2026, the Government confirmed the £5 million internal drainage board levy support grant for the financial year 2026-27. This is a continuation of the grant from 2025-26, reflecting the Government's recognition of the continued financial pressures special levies place on local authorities.

Today, I am confirming the allocation of this funding to the 17 local authorities most severely impacted by internal drainage board special levies. Councils and internal drainage boards are encouraged to continue working together to deliver services efficiently and ensure good value for money for the public.

Allocations of the £5 million Internal Drainage Board Levy Support Grant for 2026-27

<i>Local Authority</i>	<i>Allocation of Internal Drainage Board Levy Support Grant 2026-27</i>
Bassetlaw	£176,000
Boston	£690,000
Broadland	£23,000
City of Lincoln	£303,000
East Cambridgeshire	£175,000
East Lindsey	£1,074,000
Fenland	£357,000
Great Yarmouth	£207,000
King's Lynn and West Norfolk	£537,000
Newark and Sherwood	£162,000
North Kesteven	£314,000
North Norfolk	£75,000
Rushcliffe	£39,000
South Holland	£628,000
South Kesteven	£117,000
Swale	£43,000
West Lindsey	£71,000

[HCWS266]

Local Government Best Value

The Minister for Local Government and Homelessness (Alison McGovern): This Government are committed to taking the action necessary to fix the foundations of local government. Today, I am updating the House on the Government's action to update the best value guidance, to set clear expectations of the standards local authorities need to meet for their residents. I am also updating the House on the steps we are taking to support individual councils at risk to recover and reform.

Best Value Duty

In March, we published an independent evaluation of our best value interventions, and committed to updating the best value statutory guidance, previously issued in 2024. We are now publishing, for consultation, revised draft guidance that sets out what constitutes best value, the standards expected by Government, and the Government's approach to supporting local government in delivering real prosperity for their residents and local area.

To achieve best value and meet the standard residents expect, we need strong local institutions that are well led, focused on the long term and committed to a culture of continuous improvement.

The revised guidance sets out this Government's intention of supporting authorities to secure their own compliance with best value, prevent them from slipping into crisis, and take action to address risks before they escalate. It lays out a new focus on the high standards expected in local government. Where authorities are in crisis, the guidance explains how Government may intervene to get them back on their feet.

Following the closure of the consultation on 7 October 2026, Ministers will update the House when the Government publish the final statutory guidance.

Best Value Notices

I am also updating the House on the use of best value notices as a lever to secure improvement in several councils. Best value notices are not a form of statutory intervention, but provide a formal notification that Ministers have concerns about risks to compliance with the best value duty. They request that each council engages with the Department to provide assurance of improvement at pace against a set of expectations to avoid future failure.

Three councils had notices issued in 2025 that are due for review. Following significant improvements in Dudley metropolitan council, the notice there will be lifted on 16 July. The Department will continue to work with the council and its partners to ensure improvement is sustained and cultural change is embedded. Progress has also been made at the London borough of Newham. However, there is further work for the changing political and officer leadership team to deliver and embed planned improvements, and the Department has issued a revised notice, to be reviewed after six months. I remain very concerned about the scale of challenge at Cheshire East council, and the Department has issued a revised notice, to be reviewed after six months. I expect the council to significantly increase the pace of improvement, driven by a stable leadership team and supported by the Department and the Local Government Association.

The Department has also issued four new best value notices. In the London borough of Hillingdon, Shropshire council and Somerset council, my concerns relate to financial sustainability, as evidenced by prolonged and forecasted reliance on exceptional financial support, alongside broader issues including with financial management, governance and capacity. In Basildon borough council, my concerns relate to serious cultural and governance issues. To build the evidence base for improvement, I will also commission an independent external assurance review into Basildon, which will report its findings by the end of October 2026.

Woking and Spelthorne

Following consideration of local representations, I have established a single commissioner team to operate across both Woking and Spelthorne borough councils. This creates a single, cross-cutting team that will focus on embedding council improvements and strengthening the grip on the complex challenges that remain as the councils approach West Surrey's vesting day in April 2027. The team is led by Lesley Seary, supported by Barry Scarr, Deborah McLaughlin and Mervyn Greer.

As part of these changes, Sir Tony Redmond and Peter Robinson have stepped down from their commissioner roles. Richard Carr will also transition from his managing director commissioner role, and will continue playing an important part in supporting Woking borough council's improvement and transition towards local government reorganisation as its interim chief executive. I would like to place on record my sincere thanks to all three commissioners for their significant contributions.

I have also received the latest commissioner reports for both councils and published them, together with my formal responses, on gov.uk.

Thurrock

On 27 January 2026, I announced that I was content for Thurrock council to initiate a recruitment process for a chief executive. I understand that the recruitment process is on schedule, with an appointment due to be recommended to full council later this month. As Parliament will be in recess at that time, and having considered local representations, I am announcing today that if the council successfully appoints a chief executive, and the managing director commissioner subsequently steps away from their role, I will appoint a commissioner with responsibility for transformation in due course. This will ensure that there continues to be three commissioners in place in Thurrock to provide the necessary oversight, challenge and support as the council moves into the next phase of its intervention and recovery.

Slough

Following the managing director commissioner setting out his plans to step down at Slough borough council over the summer period, and having considered local representations, I am today announcing that I will appoint a replacement managing director commissioner with the expertise and leadership needed to address the scale of its ongoing challenges. Given that Dr Dave Smith's role will end at Thurrock with the appointment of a chief executive, I am announcing that he will be appointed as managing director commissioner at Slough borough council.

I would like to take this opportunity extend my sincere thanks for all the work Will Tuckley has done as managing director commissioner for the intervention at Slough borough council.

Nottingham

In March, I announced the de-escalation of the statutory intervention at Nottingham city council and committed to appointing a second ministerial envoy. I am today appointing Sir Stephen Houghton CBE as political envoy in Nottingham to provide support and guidance to the council leadership to help build further on the improvements already under way.

Conclusion

I am committed to ensuring that the standards expected of local government are clear, and to working with these councils to ensure their compliance with the best value duty. I will deposit in the Library of the House copies of the documents referred to, which are being published on gov.uk today. Ministers will update the House in due course.

[HCWS267]

JUSTICE

Court Transparency Measures

The Minister for Courts and Legal Services (Sarah Sackman): Open justice relies on court proceedings being transparent and accessible. This Government are committed to ensuring that appropriate court and tribunal information is available to the public, legal professionals, journalists, and researchers in a way that is both meaningful and secure. I am today updating the House on two actions towards that commitment: the expansion of His Majesty's Courts and Tribunals Service's court and tribunal hearings service to include criminal court hearing lists, and the launch of a new data-sharing licence for organisations that successfully apply to analyse court data at scale.

On 10 February 2026, I updated Parliament on our intention to establish court and tribunal data-sharing arrangements, which would support the publication of hearing information while maintaining essential data protection safeguards. I am pleased today to report on the delivery of that commitment.

Court and tribunal hearings service expansion

CaTH is a secure online portal on gov.uk that publishes court hearing lists in an accessible format.

It makes court listing information freely and publicly accessible in one place, replacing fragmented and inconsistent local arrangements in local courts.

CaTH already published hearing lists for the civil and family courts, excluding the Court of Protection; for the first-tier and upper tribunals, excluding employment tribunals; for the Royal Courts of Justice and for single justice procedure cases. Since 1 April 2026, Crown court and magistrates court hearing lists have been added, meaning that all criminal court hearing lists are now available too.

The public can view all these court and tribunal hearing lists free of charge without registering. Authenticated users—such as journalists and legal professionals who are entitled to additional information—can access and receive notifications of enhanced court hearing lists, which include greater detail about cases, also free of charge. During a transitional phase, manual emails from local magistrates courts will continue.

Third-party courts and tribunals data licence

Supported by the recent CaTH service expansion, HMCTS has today launched a new non-exclusive third-party courts and tribunals data licence.

This enables organisations that successfully apply to conduct approved computational analysis of court and tribunal data, including court hearing lists, at scale. While it will be for successful applicants to determine, they might use the data to help journalists track cases

and identify hearings of interest, or enable researchers and charities to analyse trends across the courts and tribunals system. This supports innovation, research, and wider public understanding of the justice system, in keeping with the principle of open justice.

Any organisation with a legitimate case for its use may apply for a licence, and multiple licences may be granted, enabling broad access to court and tribunal data while ensuring appropriate oversight.

The data-sharing licence includes robust safeguards. Applicants must satisfy a panel chaired by a member of the judiciary, that their proposed use is lawful and consistent with open justice principles, judicial independence, data protection rules, anti-bias, and computer-generated transparency. They must meet security standards, and access to restricted data is limited to those with an existing entitlement. The licence requires that information must not appear on search engines—and strictly prohibits sharing data into public large language models.

The panel will assess each application, including requested data retention periods that seek to maximise the benefits of open justice while balancing privacy, commercial value and data protection requirements, and the needs of specific user groups including researchers, academics, journalists, legal professionals, or charities.

The licence is launching free of charge, realising immediate benefits for open justice and transparency. The application form and guidance are now available on gov.uk, and I encourage interested organisations to apply.

[HCWS256]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Children's Wellbeing and Safety Online

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Liz Kendall): Last month I announced a landmark package of measures to better protect children online. We announced that social media companies will no longer be able to offer their services to under-16s, introduced new restrictions on livestreaming and communications with strangers, and became the first country in the world to ban chatbots that offer sexualised content to children. We took these steps for a simple reason—to give children the best start in life, ensure their safety and wellbeing, and put power back in parents hands.

Today, we are publishing the second part of our response to the “Growing up in the online world” consultation, which had more than 116,000 responses from children, parents, teachers, industry, and civil society. Together with the measures announced last month, today marks the next step in our commitment to fundamentally reset expectations of what is safe and suitable for children online while ensuring young people are equipped to thrive in the digital world.

Default overnight and persuasive design restrictions

We know that online risks do not end when a child turns 16 years old, and our consultation results showed that nearly one in three children want help managing their screentime. We have heard clearly that we must support older teenagers to make safe, informed choices about their experiences online. We must also ensure that older teenagers are afforded appropriate levels of

responsibility and agency as they approach adulthood. We will therefore require social media services to apply sensible default protections for 16 and 17-year-olds. These will include default overnight restrictions, with alerts and push notifications muted during a curfew period of midnight to 6 am, and default restrictions at all times on persuasive features such as autoplay and personalised recommender feeds to reduce infinite scrolling and make it easier for teenagers to log off.

This is about giving these older children more choice and control over the feeds and reducing that sense that they can never switch off being online. This will allow them to develop healthier online habits and focus on the development of their futures.

Artificial intelligence chatbots

The Government are also taking further action on AI chatbots and their impact on children and young people. We heard through the consultation of the benefits chatbots can offer children, particularly around education and creativity. But we also heard concerns about the novel risk emotional dependency can pose. We will therefore require mandatory breaks for under-18s using chatbots and will work with experts on how frequently, and for how long, these should happen.

I have said previously that there are serious concerns with other chatbots, including therapy chatbots. We will work with Department for Health and Social Care and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency to take stronger action on chatbots that may pose risks to children, through harmful, inaccurate or unverified mental health advice. We can commit today to consider a full range of options, including, if necessary, banning certain services that present a threat to children where other regulatory and safety mechanisms are insufficient. We will ensure the regulatory system for AI medical devices supports children to access trusted, evidence-based support. This will ensure that, where children seek medical advice, children and their parents can be sure that it meets certain standards and is safe.

We have always been clear that children should be able to benefit from the opportunities AI offers while being protected from harm and threats to wellbeing. We recognise that there is public appetite to do more on AI chatbots and how children use these, and the Government reserve the right to take further action in this area.

Risks of circumvention

We have always been clear that some children will try to get around the new social media requirements. They may use someone else's account, enter a false age, borrow another device or use tools such as virtual private networks. While it is not possible to entirely eliminate this, requiring the use of highly effective age assurance is one of the best ways to make a meaningful difference and build on the Australian experience.

VPNs have legitimate privacy and security uses and we will therefore not age-gate or ban them. Instead, we will put an onus on platforms in scope of the new restrictions to take robust steps to detect and prevent attempts by underage users to circumvent age assurance measures.

I have already asked Ofcom to report by October on what highly effective age assurance looks like for determining whether someone is over 16. Today, I have also asked them, with input from the Information Commissioner's Office as necessary, to conduct research

into what more services can do to detect and prevent VPN use on their platforms. We will also engage with VPN providers on voluntary action and strengthen guidance and support for parents.

We will keep this area under close review and reserve the right to take further action on this, should evidence show that it is needed.

Support for children

Alongside regulation, it is critical that children are equipped with the skills they need to navigate online life safely and confidently, reflecting the different services and experiences that they will have access to as they grow older. Online safety is a critical component of relationships, sex and health education where the curriculum has already been strengthened for the next school year.

Together with the Department for Education, we will further strengthen children's online safety and digital resilience, supporting children and young people beyond the classroom through youth organisations, libraries, community groups and civil society partners.

A safer online world must not only reduce harms but also help children access positive educational and age-appropriate content.

We will bring forward new, clear proposals alongside the new rules for online services. These could include:

- age-appropriate guidance for parents and children on recognising positive content, using trusted sources and navigating online spaces safely;

- best practice principles for industry on the availability, discovery and visibility of high-quality content for children;

- reviews of international approaches and existing best practice to identify effective interventions and build the evidence base; and

- voluntary commitments to increase the prominence of trusted, educational, developmental and wellbeing-focused content for young people

Support for parents

Parents and carers remain central to keeping children safe online. We will further develop the kids online safety hub as the Government's principal source of trusted guidance and practical support, building on existing initiatives such as the You Won't Know Until You Ask campaign. The hub will provide further advice on subjects including AI, healthy screen use, parental controls and emerging online risks. We will also work closely with the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care as they develop guidance on the safe and positive use of devices for parents of children aged five to 16.

Conclusion

We are now moving at pace to implement our proposals, with the first regulations on the ban to be laid before the end of the year and coming into effect in early 2027.

The Government are clear that this is not the end of the story, and that we will not hesitate to take further measures where needed to ensure children's safety and wellbeing, while enabling them to benefit from the opportunities that digital technologies provide, so that every child gets the best start in life.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Office for Nuclear Regulation: Corporate Plan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Andrew Western): The Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) corporate plan 2026-27 is being laid today. This document will also be published on the ONR website: <https://www.onr.org.uk/>

I can confirm, in accordance with paragraph 25(3) of schedule 7 to the Energy Act 2013, that there have been no exclusions to the published document on the grounds of national security.

[HCWS249]

British Sign Language Report 2025-26

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): This ministerial statement is also available in British Sign Language here at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NUrDclFi9M01>

This Government recognise the need for continuous improvement in the accessibility of Government communications for everyone, including the deaf community and BSL users. The British Sign Language (BSL) Act 2022 supports this by creating a greater recognition and understanding of BSL, and requires the Government to report on what Departments listed in the Act have done to promote or facilitate the use of British Sign Language in their communications with the public.

The first report <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/the-british-sign-language-bsl-report-2022/the-british-sign-language-bsl-report-2022> was published on 31 July 2023, the second report <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-sign-language-bsl-second-report-2023-to-2024/the-british-sign-language-bsl-report-2023-to-2024> on 17 December 2024—delayed due to the UK general election—and the third report <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-sign-language-bsl-third-report-may-2024-to-april-2025> on 21 July 2025

The fourth BSL report, covering the period from 1 May 2025 to 30 April 2026, has now been published. A copy of this fourth report <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/british-sign-language-bsl-fourth-report-may-2025-to-april-2026> will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk, including in BSL.

The Government are committed to ensuring that Government communications are as inclusive and accessible as possible. For this reason, although the BSL Act

requires only that a report will be published every three years, the Government committed to increase the frequency of reporting to an annual basis for the five years up to 2027.

This is also why, last year, to accompany the publication of the third BSL report, each ministerial Department was asked to produce a five year BSL plan <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/british-sign-language-reports-and-action-plans> setting out how they plan to improve the use of BSL within their Departments. An update on those plans is published alongside this report.

This fourth report demonstrates an increase in the usage of BSL by Government Departments in public-facing communications since last year, reaching the highest number recorded since reporting started in 2023. The overall number of new BSL communications produced by Government Departments has increased by 41%—from 140 to 198—since the last reporting period and by 161% since the first reporting period, when overall numbers were 76.

This Government want to ensure disabled people's views and voices are at the heart of all we do. Government communications being accessible to deaf and disabled people is essential in supporting us to achieve this goal. This is why it is particularly encouraging to see that there has been an uplift in the amount of Government publications that have been translated into BSL. This includes plans, strategies, consultation documents or consultation responses. There has been an increase in the total number of these types of communications produced since the last reporting period, from 26 in 2025 to 87 in 2026.

By providing deaf BSL users with direct access to Government plans and consultations, this increase in accessible communication supports the Government commitment to ensure that everyone has the opportunity to engage with the Government on issues that will affect them.

However, we know there is still more to do and this Government are committed to going further. We will continue to work alongside the BSL Advisory Board <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/british-sign-language-bsl-advisory-board> deaf people and their representative organisations, and Ministers across Government, including our lead Ministers for disability <https://www.gov.uk/government/groups/lead-ministers-for-disability> to continue to make tangible improvements for the deaf community.

We will continue to publish a report every year up to 2027, going further than the frequency required by the Act. The next report will be published in July 2027.

[HCWS248]

Petition

Wednesday 15 July 2026

OBSERVATIONS

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Britain's role in African chattel enslavement and colonialism

The petition of residents of the United Kingdom

Declares that the Houses of Parliament and the UK government have not yet apologised for Britain's role in African chattel enslavement and colonialism; further declares that the "deep sorrow and regret for our nation's role in the slave trade" as has been previously expressed by former Prime Minister Tony Blair, does not constitute a meaningful apology for the enslavement, trafficking, genocide and extensive colonial crimes that our country engaged in; further declares that an official apology in our country's name and the establishment of an All-Party Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry for Truth & Reparatory Justice can be the beginning of action to address its legacy; and further declares that once an apology has been offered, the UK can begin to engage with those nations and communities affected on discussions of reparatory justice, which can extend beyond monetary payment.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Government to issue a full and meaningful apology, on behalf of the UK government, for Britain's role in African chattel enslavement and colonialism, and establish an All-Party Parliamentary Commission of Inquiry for Truth & Reparatory Justice.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Bell Ribeiro-Addy, *Official Report*, 25 March 2026; Vol. 783, c. 366.]

[P003179]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore):

The UK Government are grateful to all those who have taken the time to sign this petition, and we acknowledge the gravity of the issues raised.

We fully recognise the abhorrent nature of slavery and the transatlantic slave trade, which inflicted untold harm and misery on millions of people over many decades. Its horrors were profound and its legacy continues to leave deep scars today.

We look back on the statement made 20 years ago by Tony Blair, expressing deep sorrow and regret for Britain's role in the slave trade, as an important moment for our nation, but we will reflect carefully on the views submitted by the petitioners on the former Prime Minister's statement, and take those views into account when addressing these issues in the future.

In our many discussions on these issues with our counterparts in the CARICOM group, and with other stakeholders, the UK Government have repeatedly set out our belief that it is only by acknowledging and openly discussing the most painful elements of the history that we share with other nations, including the transatlantic slave trade, that we can also come together in a spirit of solidarity and mutual respect to respond to the challenges that we all face today, and that we want to work on together for the future.

But that said, we have consistently made clear that we will not pay financial reparations, and that—in legal terms—there is no duty to provide reparation for historical acts that were not, at the time those acts were committed, violations of international law.

While that will remain our position, we advise the petitioners that the establishment of an all-party parliamentary commission of inquiry for truth and reparatory justice to explore these issues further would be a matter for the UK Parliament to consider, not for the UK Government. Nevertheless, we again thank the petitioners for their representations, all of which have been carefully considered.

Written Correction

Wednesday 15 July 2026

Ministerial Correction

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Digital Safety: Children

The following extract is from the urgent question on Digital Safety: Children on 8 June 2026.

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): I welcome the Minister's announcement about blocking explicit images on children's phones, but this should really have come much sooner. I totally agree with the hon. Member for Twickenham (Munira Wilson) that action needs to be taken now, not in three months' time. What exactly will be measured at the end of that period, and what counts as failure? Are we really relying on the good will of tech companies, bearing in mind their inactivity so far?

Kanishka Narayan: I thank the hon. Member for her question. Let me give a very clear sense of that outcome and how we will measure it. Currently, 91% of the

images used in child sexual abuse interactions are self-generated. To me, that is the central focus for what this Government are doing. We have already made a significant difference, as I have said, in ensuring that our robust engagement delivered a pioneering change to a major operating system. If this change is not delivered within weeks, we will ensure that the full force of the law delivers such an outcome.

[*Official Report*, 8 June 2026; Vol. 787, c. 42.]

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: I thank the hon. Member for her question. Let me give a very clear sense of that outcome and how we will measure it. **More than 90%** of child sexual abuse **webpages taken down from the internet now include** self-generated images. To me, that is the central focus for what this Government are doing. We have already made a significant difference, as I have said, in ensuring that our robust engagement delivered a pioneering change to a major operating system. If this change is not delivered within weeks, we will ensure that the full force of the law delivers such an outcome.

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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 22 July 2026**

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