

Thursday
16 July 2026

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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**
(HANSARD)

Thursday 16 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

Thursday 16 July 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

E-bikes

1. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Business and Trade on the sale of kits used to convert pedal cycles into e-bikes that do not meet the definition of an electrically assisted pedal cycle. [901043]

12. **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help tackle the use of illegal and non-compliant e-bikes. [901054]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Illegal e-bikes have no place on our roads. My Department has published guidance to make it clear that e-bikes that exceed the legal power and speed limits are treated as motor vehicles and must be registered, taxed and insured. The police have powers to enforce those rules. The same applies to pedal cycles that have been converted using e-bike kits. Consumers should be made aware by those selling such kits that a conversion may mean that a cycle no longer meets the legal definition of an “electrically assisted pedal cycle”.

Ms Minns: I thank the Minister for her response; I know that she shares my concern about the increasing use of illegal e-bikes on our streets. When I visited Palace Cycles in Carlisle, the owner told me that he is increasingly under pressure from people who have illegally modified bikes to do repairs on them. In fact, on one occasion, while he was in discussion with the owner of such a bike, it shot across his shop without anybody being anywhere near it. The bikes are creating risks on our roads and on our high streets. Will the Minister please urge the Department for Business and Trade to use its powers under the Product Regulation and Metrology Act 2025 to ban the sale of these dodgy bike kits?

Lilian Greenwood: My hon. Friend is a great champion of e-bike safety. The Department for Business and Trade has consulted on new product safety regulations

and sought views on the targeted regulation of some products, including e-bike batteries and conversion kits. The consultation closed on 23 June, and DBT expects to respond to it in the autumn.

Mr Speaker: I call Wera Hobhouse—not here.

Transport Connectivity: Runcorn and Helsby

2. **Sarah Pochin** (Runcorn and Helsby) (Reform): What plans her Department has for improving transport connectivity in Runcorn and Helsby constituency. [901044]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): We are empowering local leaders with unprecedented powers and funding to deliver the transport improvements that will best connect their communities. We have allocated £1 billion of local transport funding to the Liverpool city region, and £420 million to Cheshire and Warrington. Thanks to this funding, local leaders can prioritise bus improvements, road repairs, and better cycling and walking routes for their constituents.

Sarah Pochin: It has been a year since I started raising the issue of the Mersey tolls creating barriers to growth and prosperity in Runcorn and Helsby. Despite my asking questions, sending letters, meeting with Ministers and campaigning alongside local residents and businesses, the Government still refuse to consider support for businesses south of the Mersey, which are unfairly penalised simply because of their geography. Will the Minister now reconsider helping those who are affected with subsidies for businesses in Runcorn?

Simon Lightwood: The hon. Lady and I met in October to discuss the tolls on the Mersey Gateway. As she is aware, these charges are the responsibility of Halton borough council. Thanks to funding already provided by the Department, residents of Halton can register a vehicle to use the crossings for personal journeys, free of charge, for an annual fee of £12. Businesses and constituents have benefited greatly from the construction of the Mersey Gateway bridge, which was only made possible thanks to the toll income and our annual grant.

Bus Services

3. **Feryal Clark** (Enfield North) (Lab): What plans she has to work with local leaders on improving bus services. [901045]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): This Government are determined to deliver better bus services. We are working closely with local leaders across England, and have confirmed over £3 billion of funding over the next three years to support and improve services. Alongside the new powers delivered by the Bus Services Act 2025, local authorities now have the multi-year funding that they need to deliver services that meet local needs.

Feryal Clark: I thank the Minister for her response. Our world-class bus drivers are the backbone of London's bus service but have borne the brunt of the extreme heat that the city has been experiencing. The Mayor of

London is working with bus operators and Unite the union to convene a heat taskforce to protect drivers and keep London's bus network running safely. Will the Minister join me in commending this work, and does he agree that we must prioritise tackling the impact of climate change to ensure that our transport system runs smoothly?

Simon Lightwood: I will of course join my hon. Friend in commending the Mayor of London for the work that he is doing to keep the people who power our transport system safe. A well-functioning transport system is integral to growth. While we continue to decarbonise the transport system, we must also ensure that it is resilient to the impacts of climate change. The Government have published our climate adaptation strategy for transport, which sets out our vision for a climate-resilient transport system that underpins growth, keeps people and goods moving, and supports every part of the UK economy.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does the Minister hold any sway with the bus operator Stagecoach? If so, can he convey the concerns of my constituents about the reliability of the X74 service, which operates between Dumfries and Glasgow? Stagecoach has put older buses on this route, leading to poorer reliability and more cancellations. Given that most of the route is along a motorway, I am sure he understands how unsatisfactory breakdowns are.

Simon Lightwood: I of course agree that safe, reliable and affordable bus travel is really important. That is why we passed the Bus Services Act to empower local leaders to take greater control of bus services, and why we are providing £3 billion of extra support over the next couple of years to boost bus numbers. However, reliability is of course key, and I hope that Stagecoach is listening very carefully.

Maritime Sector

4. **Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): What steps she is taking to support the maritime sector.
[901046]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): The Government strongly support the maritime sector. We have made maritime autonomy a flagship case study for the regulating for growth Bill, updated the national policy statement for ports to support port developments, provided £448 million to support maritime decarbonisation and strengthened seafarer protections. We are also developing a maritime growth strategy to boost the sector's economic growth.

Rebecca Smith: I thank the Minister for his answer. He and I have had several interactions over the marine autonomy sector in particular, and I welcome the regulating for growth Bill, as I have said before in this place. However, I am incredibly keen to be reassured that it is coming early in the autumn. Will the Minister help me to meet those drafting the Bill? A request I made to the chief executive officer of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency has not been replied to, and I am very keen to ensure that the businesses working in that sector in my constituency are able to influence the Bill and that we get it through as quickly as possible.

Keir Mather: I thank the hon. Lady for her continued support in promoting the maritime autonomy sector both in her constituency and across the country. She is right to do so. Research from the National Shipbuilding Office shows that there is potential to grow the sector to about £8.3 billion of gross value added by 2050 if we get it right. I will be sure to facilitate a discussion with the relevant officials in the Department for Business and Trade, and I thank her for her continued advocacy on this important matter.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Of vital importance to our maritime sector is our coastguard and our volunteer coastguard officers. I know that the MCA's planned changes to the operating model have been causing serious concern in coastal communities such as mine in Hastings, Rye and the villages. I thank the Minister for really listening to those concerns from our coastal communities. Can I urge him to ensure that these plans are paused and do not go ahead on 1 September, and to really look at the MCA's handling of this situation? Will he also join me in thanking the brilliant coastguard rescue officers and the many people in the Royal National Lifeboat Institution in my constituency and up and down the country?

Keir Mather: I join my hon. Friend in extending my thanks to CROs across the country for the incredible work that they do. We want to ensure that CROs are treated with dignity and respect, and that they are empowered to carry out their incredible duties. Having listened to the views and testimonies of CROs at first hand, I can confirm that the plans to move to the expenses-only volunteer model in September will not go ahead, and that current arrangements will remain in place. I look forward to working with my hon. Friend and Members across the House to make sure that we get this right.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): I thank the Minister for pausing the MCA's brutal decision about coastguard rescue officers, and for convening meetings on cross-Solent ferry transport to the Isle of Wight, which will start next month. It is of some concern, however, that I have received a letter—not from him—telling me certain things that I was not allowed to discuss, including evidence of ticketing and reliability going back more than 10 years. I am sure he understands that the world did not start in 2016, and I will not be told by anyone how to best represent my constituents, or what I can or cannot say.

Keir Mather: The hon. Gentleman of course knows best how to represent his constituents on these important matters. I believe that the dynamic he is pointing to is the dynamic of when dynamic pricing was introduced prior to 2010, and the need to be able to compare and contrast the impact of that on pricing. Evidence about that is of course important, and I hope it is factored into the ongoing work.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Teesside is home to a world-leading maritime industry and an excellent further education landscape. However, one issue that the Tees maritime cluster has identified is a lack of join-up between the two and the fact that there are insufficient qualifications locally for young people to get into the industry. Will the Department

work with the Tees Valley combined authority to address this gap and make sure that more young people can get into the industry locally?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is right to point to the fact that a thriving maritime sector relies not only on technological advancement, but on a growing skill base to make sure that the maritime economy benefits every part of the United Kingdom, including his constituency. I would be very glad to work with the combined authority as we seek to promote maritime skills and draw more young people into this fantastic sector in which to work.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): I am very aware that this may be the last time I face these Ministers across the Dispatch Box, so I just want to say that from my perspective, they are a good bunch. I have really enjoyed it, and I wish each and every one of them the best of luck on Monday or Tuesday.

Turning to the question at hand, I welcome the Minister's statement that he is going to stop the ill-judged decision on CROs, but that does not let the MCA off the hook. At a meeting of MPs recently, the chief executive of the MCA claimed that 93% of coastguard rescue officers supported plans to make them unpaid volunteers. We know from a leaked internal survey that the MCA misrepresented the views of CROs both to Ministers and to Parliament. Up to half of them said that they would quit or reduce their hours if the Government forced through the plans to remove their pay. Given that the Minister has reversed the decision and that he has signally failed to express his support for the chief executive, can he now confirm whether or not he still has confidence in the chief executive of the MCA?

Keir Mather: May I start by extending my thanks to the shadow Minister? Anyone who can endure trading remarks with me on the Railways Bill for as long as we were in Committee together is an absolute stalwart and a credit to the House, so I thank him for working with me on that.

On the broader questions he raises about the MCA, the MCA and His Majesty's Coastguard do vital work. Ministers have full confidence in the service, but when those on the ground raise concerns on the scale we have seen, and when the evidence base proves insufficient, it is absolutely right that we pause and engage again. That is exactly what the decision to not move ahead with the new model in September facilitates. It will ensure that we treat CROs with the dignity and respect they deserve and, most importantly, that we get this system right.

Bus Services: Hampshire

5. **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): What steps she is taking to help improve bus services in Hampshire. [901047]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): We have confirmed £45 million of funding for Hampshire county council to support and improve bus services for the next three years through the local authority bus grant. New powers provided by the Bus Services Act 2025 also give local leaders the

tools and the long-term funding certainty they need to improve services and ensure that they reflect the needs of local communities such as those in Hampshire.

Liz Jarvis: We know that buses are important to the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham). They are also important to my constituents in Eastleigh. The 61 and 46 bus routes were axed after Hampshire county council withdrew subsidies, leaving my constituents struggling to get to work, school and hospital. Will the Minister ask the new Prime Minister to ensure that everyone in Hampshire can access bus routes? Does he agree with me that the hours of local concessionary bus travel should be extended?

Simon Lightwood: The Bus Services Act empowers local leaders to choose the model that works best in their area. Our reforms are focused on giving local authorities the tools they need to deliver better bus services. The Act also has a measure on socially necessary local services. Under that new measure, local transport authorities with an enhanced partnership, such as that mentioned by the hon. Lady, will be required to identify the local services they consider to be socially necessary. They will need to put in place requirements that must be followed before such services can be changed or cancelled. What I would say about the English concessionary scheme is that it already costs £795 million a year. Any changes would need to be carefully considered to ensure its financial sustainability.

Midlands Rail Hub

6. **Chris Bloore** (Redditch) (Lab): What progress she has made on the midlands rail hub. [901048]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): We are progressing the first phase of the midlands rail hub to increase capacity in Birmingham. This will improve reliability and enable additional trains between Birmingham, south Wales and the south-west, and on Birmingham's cross-city line. It will also enable over 25 additional trains a day on the Redditch line. Network Rail has appointed an alliance of industry partners to design the infrastructure, and the alliance is currently consulting on upgrades between Birmingham Moor Street and Bordesley.

Chris Bloore: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer. Rail bottlenecks choke regional trade and hold back Redditch businesses. Delivering the midlands rail hub is fundamentally both pro-business and pro-worker. Will the Secretary of State update me on when she expects critical engineering upgrades to start to ensure that Redditch is fully connected to regional growth?

Heidi Alexander: Following the Government's decision to move forward with the first phase of the midlands rail hub at the spending review last summer, detailed design work has commenced. We are now working hard to deliver benefits to passengers as soon as possible. This is a complex scheme in a dense urban environment. I cannot currently give a specific start date for the physical works, but I can tell my hon. Friend that new train services enabled by the scheme should come on line in the 2030s.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): East Midlands Railway has cut replacement bus services on a stand-by basis when there is not sufficient railway capacity in peak season. I am concerned that that is because it is deliberately cutting any form of expenditure before going over to Great British Railways. Will Ministers work with me to ensure that this is not the case through the busy summer period?

Heidi Alexander: It is obviously the case that adequate replacement bus services should be available to rail travellers if there is disruption on the line—for example, if engineering works are taking place. I would be happy to follow up if the hon. Gentleman writes to me and provides more detail on the specific experience that he has had. East Midlands Railway is responding to the Bedford train crash that happened a number of weeks ago, and I thank the leadership of that organisation for all the work that they are doing in response.

Mass Transit Systems

8. **Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the delivery of mass transit systems. [901050]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Mass transit systems can radically improve local transport in towns and cities across the UK, but plans can often be slowed down by fragmented funding arrangements, difficulties acquiring land, and planning delays. The Government's new mass transit taskforce will seek to remove those blockers, and our call for evidence on how that might work is now open. We are also devolving powers to local leaders so that they can deliver schemes faster, unlock growth, support new homes and better connect communities.

Lillian Jones: Scotland's new Transport Secretary has criticised the UK Government's transport policy on High Speed 2 for being dysfunctional, yet after two decades in government, the SNP have failed to deliver a rail link to Glasgow airport. That is a vital infrastructure project that would boost economic growth, improve connectivity and create the integrated transport network that Scotland needs. Does the Secretary of State agree that rather than seeking to distract from their own abysmal record in government, the SNP should focus on delivering that major infrastructure investment, which is within their power and would bring lasting benefits to the people of Scotland?

Heidi Alexander: I agree with my hon. Friend, and I suspect the people of Glasgow are at their wits' end with the approach to that project, having seen it repeatedly promised and deprioritised over the course of two decades. I assure her that my Department remains committed to working constructively with the Scottish Government on this, and I urge them to support my hon. Friend's work to get the project delivered.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): My understanding is that Tracy Brabin, the Mayor of West Yorkshire, is bringing into force the Weaver Network, but in York and North Yorkshire we do not yet have an equivalent. One of the challenges that people face is

that they often connect over the boundary of those two counties. I used to live in West Yorkshire but go to college in North Yorkshire, and countless people make that journey each day. Does the Secretary of State agree that mass transit needs to work across those county divides? Would it not be better if we had something like a Transport for Yorkshire to make it easier for everyone to get around our great county?

Heidi Alexander: I know that the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, and the Mayor of York and North Yorkshire, David Skaith, work closely together. The hon. Gentleman is right that transport crosses administrative boundaries, and that this needs to work for people. That was at the heart of the "Better Connected" strategy that we published earlier this year. I am sure that all elected representatives in the great county of Yorkshire will be working together to ensure that they have the best possible service.

EU Entry-Exit System: Transport Delays

9. **Mr Joshua Reynolds** (Maidenhead) (LD): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on transport delays caused by the EU entry-exit system. [901051]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): The Transport Secretary and I have held regular discussions about preparations for the EU entry-exit system, and its potential impacts on passenger flows. The Secretary of State has engaged directly with counterparts in France and the European Union, stressing the need for appropriate border staffing levels to support smooth journeys for British travellers on their well-earned holidays this summer.

Mr Reynolds: The European Commission has confirmed that member states may partially suspend EES checks for up to 90 days at peak times, extendable for a further 60 days. Can the Minister confirm whether there have been conversations with European counterparts about applying that flexibility at Dover, Folkestone and St Pancras this summer?

Keir Mather: I thank the hon. Member for raising the important issue of passenger flows relating to EES through the juxtaposed controls. I confirm that the Secretary of State has met her French counterpart and the relevant commissioner at the European Union to discuss a range of issues relating to EES. As part of that, we continually discuss what easements or adjustments are necessary to ensure that flows are appropriately managed.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): Road haulage companies in my constituency have reported huge delays as a result of the introduction of the EU entry-exit system—delays that are costing them time and money. Will the Minister meet me and those in the freight and logistics sector to find solutions?

Keir Mather: I would be glad to meet my hon. Friend and representatives from the freight sector. It is crucial that the sector is empowered to carry out its vital work, especially in the short straits, through which approximately 60% of UK-EU trade passes. She is an advocate for the

freight sector in her constituency and across the United Kingdom. We want to ensure that we get this right, so I would be glad to meet her to discuss this subject.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): What a weekend, Mr Speaker! Ministers will be hovering by the phone on Monday or Tuesday. What a visual display of success or failure there will be, as the number of holidaymakers heading to the continent ramps up for the summer season. The Government have had two years on this. Multiple Select Committees in the previous Parliament warned that the technology would not be ready, and that the introduction of the system would be a disaster. How on earth have we got to a situation where the Secretary of State is making last-minute dashes to the European Commission and the French Government to try to get a few extra kiosks—for which the technology does not even work—as holidaymakers face chaos this weekend?

Keir Mather: That is a very theatrical question from the shadow Minister on the scale of the challenge that we face. I can confirm that the meetings that we are having on EES, both in Government and with our counterparts, are to ensure that we get this right, ahead of the peak period. We have supported the port of Dover and Eurotunnel with £3.5 million each in preparation for EES, and earlier this week, we announced £20 million in funding, subject to the completion of relevant checks, to further support border infrastructure at the port of Dover. We are taking a sober, sensible and non-theatrical approach to getting this right.

Greg Smith: I have always enjoyed my exchanges with the Minister. As the nation learned devastatingly last night, trying to defend a single position for a prolonged period does not always have a happy ending. If we get the chaos that is predicted for holidaymakers and freight operators this weekend, will the Government go to the European Union and the French Government and demand that the system be shut down and paused until the technology can be got right?

Keir Mather: I thank the shadow Minister for his question. I can confirm that I have been clear with Ministers in Government, and that Ministers have been clear with French and EU counterparts, that they should do all they can to avoid disruption, including using the existing flexibilities in EES regulations. We are not being complacent and asking for things retrospectively; we are taking the right steps now to ensure that our juxtaposed controls are prepared. There is £3.5 million to prepare for EES operations, both for the port of Dover, and for Eurotunnel and St Pancras.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I apologise in advance for a lack of theatre or football analogies, Mr Speaker. The Secretary of State's announcement on Tuesday went into some detail on the arrangements for the UK and French borders, but it was somewhat lighter on the detail of the outcome of her discussions with the European Commission on how to achieve reliable flow through EU member country airports using the

new entry-exit system this summer. What tangible and specific outcomes resulted from those discussions, and which of them will take effect in time for the imminent start of the school holidays?

Keir Mather: I thank the Lib Dem spokesperson for his question. I can confirm that we have discussed the flow of passengers through member state airports with our relevant partners in the European Commission, and with member states. That is certainly something I have been doing over the past 10 months. We know that there are outstanding issues with particular airports, which we continue to raise, both through our in-country posts and at ministerial level, to ensure that European partners are fully aware of just how seriously we take British passengers being able to travel with ease to their summer holiday.

Bus Travel Affordability: Children and Young People

10. **Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase the affordability of bus travel for children and young people. [901052]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Government know how important affordable bus travel is for helping children and young people to access opportunities. That is why we are funding free bus travel for kids across England this August; it will help families to get out and about for less during the summer holidays. That builds on local initiatives from Labour Mayors in the west and north-east of England that allow children to travel by bus for free.

Amanda Martin: Last week, the all-party parliamentary group for tradespeople hosted a roundtable to discuss the barriers to young people taking up a career in the trades. Travel was raised as a particular issue. While I welcome the Government's roll-out of new technical colleges, they are simply inaccessible to many young people, especially those in coastal communities, where transport links are poor. Once they qualify, tradespeople rely on their cars and vans to build their businesses and get to their place of work. What steps is the Minister taking, in conjunction with colleagues in the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions, to break down the barriers to opportunity for young people considering these skilled, well-paid careers, and will the Government consider offering driving lessons through apprenticeships?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend is right that transport has a vital role to play in unlocking opportunities for young people, as I know from growing up in a coastal community. Through the Bus Services Act 2025, we are giving local leaders greater power to shape bus services around their local needs, including in coastal and rural communities. We have confirmed over £3 billion for buses from 2026-27, which will help to improve connections to education, training and employment. I am sure that my colleagues in the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions will have heard her call for driving lessons in apprenticeships.

Mr Speaker: I am not sure that fits in with buses, but not to worry. I call Clive Jones.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): If this summer's free bus travel scheme for under-15s proves successful, will the Minister look to extend it for the future? It would help hard-working families in Wokingham make the most of their holiday period.

Simon Lightwood: The Labour party is keeping bus fares low. We introduced the £3 bus fare cap, after the previous Government failed to fund any support when the previous cap expired. Beyond March next year, we will continue to keep our options open, in order to make sure that bus travel is safe, accessible and affordable for everyone.

Bus Manufacturing: Scotland

11. **Euan Stainbank** (Falkirk) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support bus manufacturing in Scotland. [901053]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Government want a vibrant and competitive UK bus manufacturing sector, including in Scotland. That is why we are providing £73.2 million to support the purchase of a further 484 zero emission vehicles, and working with the industry and local leaders to provide greater certainty through our long-term order pipeline.

Euan Stainbank: As legal action is taken against the SNP Scottish Government for the ScotZEB3 grant scheme, which inexplicably saw more expensive orders go to Chinese manufacturers and cheaper ones to Falkirk—no wonder SNP Members have not showed up this morning—the Government and mayoral combined authorities must take heed of the exponentially rising Chinese market share, which has destroyed 115 Scottish jobs in my constituency off the back of the grant scheme. What more will Transport Ministers do, alongside their colleagues in the Cabinet Office and the Department for Business and Trade, to send an explicit message to those who are purchasing buses with taxpayer cash that they should be buying British?

Simon Lightwood: I share my hon. Friend's commitment to UK bus manufacturing. I am delighted that through the UK bus manufacturing expert panel, mayoral combined authorities have agreed to a commitment that 10% of social value criteria will apply in all future bus procurement exercises. That means that when procuring buses, the positive impact that a manufacturer has on society, the environment and/or communities will be taken into account. We will continue to work with the bus sector to promote UK bus manufacturing.

Road Repairs: New Technology

13. **Dr Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): What support she plans to provide to local authorities to help them adopt new technologies for tackling potholes and road defects. [901055]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): The Government are providing local authorities with a record £7.3 billion investment in local road maintenance, giving councils the long-term certainty that they need to fix potholes, repair road defects and

adopt a more preventive approach to maintenance. Some of the funding is being used to incentivise best practice and innovation. In addition, the Government have funded £30 million for Live Labs 2 programming, which is testing innovative materials, new technologies and maintenance techniques to help authorities improve road conditions while reducing costs and disruption.

Dr Chowns: Potholes are the bane of all our lives, including for my constituents, but I have a cunning plan: we could fix potholes much faster by tapping into the superpowers of bin men and women. Bin lorries travel every road every week. Why not equip them with cameras and AI-enabled technology, so that they can spot, map and log potholes immediately, as soon as they appear? That would significantly speed up the process of fixing them. This has been done very successfully in Australia. Will the Department for Transport work closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that local authorities have the funding and co-ordination needed to adopt this fantastic technology nationwide?

Simon Lightwood: That is exactly why the Government have funded the £30 million for Live Labs 2. We want councils to have access to the best available evidence on the condition of their roads. We have introduced a new road conditioning monitoring standard that enables local authorities to use a range of approved technologies, including innovative AI-based systems, to collect consistent and reliable data.

Sarah Russell (Congleton) (Lab): In my area, the improvement on potholes is noticeable, and I thank the Government for the additional funding, which is being used for large patching work; no longer is there just shovelling into endless holes. I am concerned, however, about road safety in my constituency. Understandably, the money has been prioritised for addressing the enormous backlog of roadworks that developed under the last Government. What more can we do to ensure safety, as well as good road conditions?

Simon Lightwood: My hon. Friend will be aware that this Government brought forward, for the first time in over a decade, a road safety strategy. In addition, we have introduced a red, amber and green rating of local authorities, to identify where extra support is necessary in order to improve systems and practices, so that we can banish the potholes once and for all.

Transport Decarbonisation

14. **Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help decarbonise the transport sector. [901056]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): Decarbonising transport is vital for our energy security and to make the transport network fit for the future. We are driving zero emission vehicle uptake and charging infrastructure roll-out; putting record investment into active travel; overhauling public transport; supporting low-carbon fuel uptake across multiple modes, including in aviation; and funding technology innovation for maritime through the multimillion-pound UK Shipping Office for Reducing Emissions research programme.

Perran Moon: Meur ras ha myttin da, Mr Speaker. A key aspect of transport decarbonisation is attracting more people from cars to trains. As train journeys are generally longer, it is vital that journey time is productive, yet train wi-fi services are often hopeless. As the Secretary of State knows, Great Western Railway has been successfully trialling superfast wi-fi. Will superfast wi-fi be rolled out across all GWR trains by the end of this year, to align with public ownership?

Mr Speaker: Does wi-fi decarbonise a train? No, I do not think it does. Secretary of State, do you think it does? Because the question was about decarbonisation. You must speak to the question you were asked.

Heidi Alexander: Mr Speaker, I think the point my hon. Friend is making is that if we want a sustainable transport network, the more people we can attract from their cars on to trains, the better. I appreciate how important good connectivity is for all those using our train network. I can tell my hon. Friend that procurement for enhanced wi-fi on all GWR long-distance services will start in the second half of this year.

Mr Speaker: We have to watch out: we are tabling questions but then trying to shoehorn in others. We have seen that with the last two questions. We have to stick to the original question, to help me, because then the follow-up questions take us even further away from where we started. I call Jim Shannon, who will set a good example by bringing us back to the question.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will focus on the decarbonisation of the transport sector. I thank the Secretary of State for that answer. She will know that we in Northern Ireland want to be part of decarbonisation; Wrightbus in Ballymena is an example of that. What has been done to ensure that we can be part of that future?

Heidi Alexander: I am delighted to hear of the hon. Gentleman's enthusiasm for decarbonisation. He is right to support the excellent Wrightbus, which manufactures electric buses in Northern Ireland. Through the bus expert manufacturing panel, which is chaired by the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), who has responsibility for roads and buses, we are working with mayors to find ways of supporting the UK manufacture of electric vehicles, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman and Wrightbus on that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Opposition Members genuinely wish the whole Transport team well ahead of the weekend and next week—although if they are moved up, along or down, at least they will not have to answer the many written parliamentary questions that we have put to them over the last few months.

One of the Government's flagship policies remains, despite consistent urging from both manufacturers and the Opposition. We have asked the Government to change tack, but the ZEV mandate remains. Despite ploughing in billions of pounds of taxpayers' cash, last

year's target was met only because manufacturers could rely on compliance credits bought from Tesla and BYD, instead of on consumer demand. Does the Secretary of State seriously believe that year-on-year percentage increases to 80% of zero emission vehicles by 2030 or 100% by 2035 are achievable, or that buying compliance credits from China is a sustainable model for the British car industry?

Heidi Alexander: I look repeatedly at data produced by both the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders and the Department for Transport about purchases of new vehicles. In June, nearly 30% of vehicle sales were electric—a significant increase on the year before. We are rolling out new charging infrastructure, with new charge points going in at a rate of one every 30 minutes. The future is electric, and the time to buy electric is now. We see the impact of the conflict in the middle east on petrol and diesel prices, and although we will always keep the ZEV mandate under review and stay in close contact with car manufacturers, it is important that we back the EV transition in this country.

Mr Holden: British vehicle manufacturers are expressing the view, with increasing urgency, that the ZEV mandate has simply become an ideological shibboleth of the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. Will the Secretary of State finally listen to the industry, work across Government to sideline the Energy Secretary, listen to the millions of motorists who simply want the freedom to choose the right van or car for them, adopt the Conservatives' "plan for drivers" policy, outlined last year by the Leader of the Opposition and me, and scrap the disastrous ZEV mandate before it kills off the British car sector and more than 100,000 good jobs across the UK?

Heidi Alexander: What we will not do is make the same mistakes as the right hon. Gentleman's party made in government. When the former Prime Minister cancelled the 2030 phase-out date for the sale of new pure diesel and petrol vehicles, demand plummeted. We will not change the 2030 phase-out date for pure internal combustion engine vehicles, and we will not change the 2035 phase-out date for hybrids. In this role, I have worked closely with car manufacturers. We introduced new flexibilities last year, and we are talking to them again about a review, which will be completed in the next six months. If I have the pleasure of sparring with the right hon. Gentleman over the Dispatch Box in the coming months, I will be happy to provide him with a further update on that, as soon as the work is completed.

Road Congestion

15. **Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab):** What support her Department provides to areas with high levels of road congestion. [901057]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): Congestion can cause real problems, and although local councils are responsible for managing their road networks, the Department has been focused on enabling them to minimise disruption. We have legislated to introduce numerous lane rental schemes

and are devolving powers to establish future schemes to mayors. That will enable local decision making to target congestion.

Mr Alaba: My constituents regularly find themselves stuck in standstill traffic as a result of Rochford's struggling road network. I have also heard from Baltic Wharf, a key port on the estuary, and from my farming community, who all report supply chain issues due to the refusal of delivery drivers to navigate Rochford district's outdated highways. For an area with significant housing targets, strong local businesses and huge potential for growth, that is a real issue. What support can the Minister provide to rural and coastal constituencies, like mine, that want to enhance and modernise highway connectivity?

Lilian Greenwood: I am sorry to hear about the issues facing my hon. Friend's constituents; I know how much he does to promote their interests. This Government are investing record sums in road maintenance, and we have strengthened the rules on disruptive street works by extending overrun charges to weekends and bank holidays and doubling fines. I encourage him to continue to make the case to Essex county council, which really must do something about disruption on its roads.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): The A244 has always had too much traffic and too many heavy goods vehicles on it. It goes through Oxshott in my constituency, and following the roadworks on the M25 and A3, increasing numbers of cars and large vehicles are using it as a shortcut between the A3 and the M25. We need that to stop. Will the Secretary of State meet me and work with our local community to improve and reduce traffic on the A244?

Lilian Greenwood: I have met the hon. Gentleman in the past to talk about some of the disruptions caused by improvements to the road network in his constituency. I am sure that the Roads and Buses Minister would be happy to continue those discussions.

Aviation Sector

16. **James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support the aviation sector. [901058]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): The Government are committed to supporting the aviation sector. We are unlocking growth by progressing planning decisions and consulting on the framework for future decisions on Heathrow's third runway. We are modernising our airspace through the new UK airspace design service and support fund, and are driving decarbonisation, backing sustainable aviation fuel and providing funding for new low and zero emission technologies. We will publish an updated jet zero strategy in early 2027.

James Asser: I recently visited the British Airline Pilots' Association training facility and flight simulator with the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero. I confess, Mr Speaker, that the results were mixed: if you are flying on your holidays next week, you would not want to fly with either of us! But if I had wanted to fly, I would face training costs in excess of £100,000,

with very few funding packages to provide support. That means that kids in my constituency can watch the planes take off at London City airport but stand very little chance of actually joining that industry. Does the Minister agree that we need accessible pathways to pilot training in order to drag the system into the 21st century and to remove it from a position where only a small minority with the financial means to do so can access the industry?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is right that the barriers to a career in aviation are too high, and this Government are committed to supporting recruitment from as diverse a range of backgrounds as possible. Our Generation Aviation programme promotes aviation careers through outreach and apprenticeships to help build a future-ready workforce, and has reached over 1 million young people since it began.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Ollie Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): The Civil Aviation Authority has reported that in 2024-25, 81% of passenger complaints that were initially rejected by airlines were upheld when independently reviewed, leading to £11 million of delayed compensation payments. Does the Minister support the idea of an air passengers' charter, backed by independent regulation, to support airlines in providing improved customer service and consumer confidence?

Keir Mather: I am glad that the Lib Dem spokesperson shares our concern about consumer rights. Disruption and cancellations—but also disruptive passengers, unfortunately—can ruin the holidays of British holiday-makers who save so much to facilitate those experiences. The new Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill, which has just come out of the other place, will hopefully re-emerge in the House of Commons on the other side of the summer. It includes a suite of measures to strengthen consumer rights, and I look forward to working with the hon. Gentleman on exactly the sort of issues that he raises as the Bill makes its way through this House.

Topical Questions

T1. [901068] **Patrick Hurley** (Southport) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I would like to remind the House of how we are improving everyday journeys across the country, starting with our railways. Last month, the new Cambridge South station opened to passengers following £250 million of Government funding to better connect Europe's largest biomedical campus. Publicly owned services are now on average more punctual than services not yet in public ownership, with fewer cancellations. This week, I announced measures to crack down on fare dodgers thanks to new ticket gates being rolled out across the network. On our buses, we are helping families with the cost of living with free travel for all children aged five to 15 in England throughout August.

Finally, the third cycling and walking investment strategy will give people healthier choices to get around. Last month, it set a 2035 target for over half of short

journeys in towns and cities to be walked and cycled. Whether it is a trip to the shop or the school run, we will help more people in more places to get around their neighbourhoods safely and sustainably.

Better, more reliable transport drives good growth, spreads opportunities and makes lives easier. That is our mission, and we are getting on with the job.

Patrick Hurley: Given the creation of “No. 10 North”, much of Westminster and Whitehall may soon be experiencing the delights of the west coast main line for themselves, so I expect further public scrutiny of its service levels. Does the Secretary of State agree that passengers travelling between Euston and the north-west of England deserve better than the current delays and uncertainty, and what assurances can she give me on service improvements?

Heidi Alexander: I do agree with my hon. Friend. Performance on Avanti West Coast has not been good enough, and I am acutely aware that this part of the network—still privately run—has seen reliability below the industry average, with cancellations going in the wrong direction, too. I am pleased to advise my hon. Friend that these services will come into public ownership next year, and I know that the eyes of No. 10, as well as the eyes of my hon. Friend and, indeed, the travelling press pack, will be on them in a new and welcome way.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): In London boroughs and cities across the country, council-wide 20 mph speed limits are causing havoc. In Wales, councils are desperately trying to unpick the last Welsh Labour Government’s blanket 20 mph speed limits. Why on earth are Labour Ministers trying to repeat that clear failure of policy, dreamed up by Labour, Green and Lib Dem councils in England and a failed Welsh Labour Government obsessed with a war on motorists, and impose it on rural communities in England?

Heidi Alexander: We are not imposing anything on anyone, as the right hon. Gentleman well knows. He says that the introduction of 20 mph zones is causing havoc. I would point out that, in many areas, they save lives. We know that somebody who is hit by a car travelling at 30 mph is five times more likely to die than someone who is hit by a car travelling at 20 mph. If that is the sort of policy that he wants to defend, all power to him. It is for local authorities and local councillors to take decisions that suit their local areas best.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): May I refer the Secretary of State to Question 20 on the Order Paper? Can she explain when the A120 to Harwich will finally be upgraded? Is she aware that a community of some 20,000 people is served by this dreadful road, and that we dread another winter of subsidence and potholes as the existing road collapses, which is long past its renewal date? Given that this road is vital for growth in the east of England, as it serves the Harwich port and the freeport as well as this deprived community, when will we see some plans to upgrade it?

Mr Speaker: Sir Bernard, we are on topical questions. You cannot just transfer your existing question to topicals. Shorten it, please, to help me get other people in. I am sure you want to hear others as well as yourself.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): We are investing over £7 billion to banish the potholes from UK roads. I would be delighted to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss his specific circumstances.

Mr Speaker: That was a great answer.

T2. [901069] **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): No matter where they are from or where they started out, every child should at least have the chance of fulfilling their dream career, but research by the British Airline Pilots’ Association has found that right now, one in seven students are paying for their training by remortgaging property—often their parents’ home. How is the Secretary of State working with the aviation sector to bring those financial barriers down?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): My hon. Friend raises an important issue. This Government are committed to enabling aviation employers to recruit and train pilots from a broader and more diverse talent pool in Doncaster East and across the United Kingdom, supporting growth by removing regulatory barriers and promoting aviation opportunities.

T3. [901070] **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): Residents have long called for the A69 through Warwick Bridge to be detrunked. Given that the A689 provides an alternative route from the M6 to the east of the village, can the Minister confirm that detrunking this section of the A69 would not be a major change to the strategic road network?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I share my hon. Friend’s concerns regarding recent safety incidents on the A69 at Warwick Bridge. National Highways is considering in detail with local partners the case for detrunking the A69 and trunking the A689. That is a complex process, and I will ask National Highways to update her when more information is available.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The Secretary of State appears to think it is scaremongering to suggest that, with effect from this weekend, passenger and freight traffic using the channel tunnel and the port of Dover will be disrupted as a result of the European entry and exit system. I do not want the grievance; I want the solution, and I want it before the event, not after it. What is the Secretary of State going to do to achieve an agreement with the European Commission and the French to suspend this ridiculous system until it works properly?

Keir Mather: With enormous respect to the right hon. Gentleman, we are taking proactive action to prepare for any potential EES disruption. We have spoken with our French and European counterparts about using the full range of easements, but most importantly, we have provided funding to the juxtaposed controls so that they can prepare for any disruption before it occurs.

T5. [901072] **Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): This Government have promised to deliver new homes, and I want Erewash to be at the forefront of that delivery, but our road network is overloaded. My constituents are particularly concerned about growing strain on junction 25 of the M1, as I know National Highways is. Can the Minister explain how National Highways and local authorities can work better together to listen to and respond to concerns, and to ensure that new homes come alongside proper upgrades to infrastructure?

Simon Lightwood: National Highways and local authorities are working together through initiatives, such as the £165 million growth and housing accelerator fund, to unlock housing sites where transport infrastructure is a barrier. I will ask National Highways to reach out to my hon. Friend.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): At a recent packed talk with my Highfields residents, they told me the same thing that all my residents tell me about: the scourge of potholes. We know that councils are facing a backlog of £17 billion in road repairs, but new technology exists that can detect early cracks and seal them before they become potholes. Will the Secretary of State commit to funding the roll-out of that preventive AI-based road technology, instead of constantly chasing the problem?

Simon Lightwood: We have invested over £7 billion precisely so that we can turn the corner on constantly having to react to potholes and go back to the same one time and again. We are investing £30 million on Live Labs 2, so that we can use new innovative technologies to finally turn the tide.

T8. [901075] **Jenny Riddell-Carpenter** (Suffolk Coastal) (Lab): Roads in my constituency, including the B1125, are becoming rat runs because of the increase in traffic on the A12. Does the Secretary of State agree that we need a full multi-agency approach to ensure better road safety? Does she also agree that Suffolk county council and Suffolk Highways should convene a meeting with me to discuss how we can deliver better, safer roads?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to ask the Minister for Road Safety to discuss this matter further with my hon. Friend and ensure appropriate meetings take place.

Alicia Kearns (Rutland and Stamford) (Con): I am grateful to the Government for considering improvements to the A605 and Tinwell junctions on the A1, but the current plan is to put traffic lights in place and National Highways agrees that that is not the right approach. Will the Government put the funding, which is welcome, into widening the slip roads, which are far substandard and below the national requirements?

Simon Lightwood: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss this further.

T9. [901076] **Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): On buses, on transport and train connectivity, and on our roads, Newcastle-under-Lyme was let down and left behind by the previous Government. Will the Minister set out what we are doing to get a grip, and can we meet to discuss the transport priorities of my constituents?

Lilian Greenwood: The Government are committed to improving transport connectivity across the country. Through the £2.3 billion local transport grant, Staffordshire will receive more than £96 million by 2030, providing the certainty and flexibility to deliver better connections, support economic growth and improve outcomes for communities. I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend, as, I am sure, would my colleagues.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Seventeen-year-old Oakley Meer lost his life in a collision on Beachy Head Road in Eastbourne. Will the Minister meet me and Oakley's family to discuss how we can improve road safety on that treacherous road?

Lilian Greenwood: I extend my sympathies to the family, who are the hon. Member's constituents. I would, of course, be very happy to meet them to talk about what we can do to improve safety on that road, as we are doing across the country.

T10. [901077] **Emma Lewell** (South Shields) (Lab): Heugh Street bridge has been closed since November. The council only applied to the structures fund after I raised the matter here, and despite pleas, it has still not implemented proper diversions. The bridge is absolutely vital on Great North Run day in September. Can the Minister suggest what else we can do next?

Simon Lightwood: As somebody who is running the Great North Run this year, I hope that the local highways authority will grip this issue and ensure it is dealt with. The structures fund is open for applications until 3 August.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The Under-Secretary of State for Transport will be visiting Immingham this afternoon. Does he agree that his journey would be much more convenient if there were a direct train service from King's Cross to my constituency, and will he join my campaign to ensure that happens?

Keir Mather: The hon. Gentleman is a dogged campaigner for providing that rail link and I will report back to him about the quality of my journey. I am excited for the steel signing ceremony ahead of the opening of the new eastern roll-on roll-off terminal at the port of Immingham, which I understand the hon. Gentleman has been a passionate champion of.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Would the Minister encourage the Government's traffic commissioner for Scotland to build on the remarkable success of bus franchising in Manchester, and work with the Scottish Government to emulate the success of Manchester's Bee Network in my constituency of Paisley and Renfrewshire North?

Simon Lightwood: As reporting from Greater Manchester's Bee Network shows, bus franchising can deliver improved services for passengers, and the Government are taking steps to support the roll-out of bus franchising in England. Obviously, transport is a devolved matter, but I encourage Ministers in Scotland to learn from the success of Labour mayors in England.

Robert Jenrick (Newark) (Reform): The Government have cancelled the two main road projects in the east midlands—the A38 in Derby and the A46 in Newark. The Government did not inform anyone. The Labour mayor found out through the trade press that the Government had cancelled the contract, just as I did. What does the Secretary of State have against the east midlands? Will the incoming Prime Minister, who claims to want to see devolution and the empowerment of mayors, do something to fix this mess?

Simon Lightwood: Let me be clear that these proposals will be consulted on. The A38 Derby junctions and the A46 Newark bypass schemes are not in contract and are not scheduled to start main construction until the second half of the third road investment strategy. They are not as far progressed as RIS3 enhancement schemes elsewhere, meaning that the implications of potentially cancelling them would have a less significant impact compared with schemes that are further progressed.

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab): Reform-led Kent county council wrote to Transport for London asking it to consider a number of options for bus route 96, with its preferred option being that it should terminate in Dartford town centre from now on. I will continue to fight for my constituents in Bexleyheath and Crayford to ensure that the route can serve Dartford, Bluewater shopping centre and Darent Valley hospital. Does my right hon. Friend agree that section 173(1) of the Greater London Authority Act 1999 is worded so that cross-boundary routes can operate in that way?

Heidi Alexander: I agree. While I do not expect much from Reform-led administrations, I would at least expect them not to work squarely against the interests of local people in the way that my hon. Friend describes. I urge the county council to see sense and support his campaign to deliver for his constituents and the council's own residents.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): As this could conceivably be the right hon. Lady's last appearance at the Dispatch Box as Transport Secretary, will she respond to my one last ask? Will she leave a note for her successor, asking them to look again at Aldridge railway station? Will she perhaps remind Mayor Parker to put back the funding that he took away?

Heidi Alexander: I am not sure that notes from sitting Secretaries of State to their successors necessarily work out all that well, as the Prime Minister said from this Dispatch Box yesterday. Let me finish where I started with the right hon. Lady's questions to me on this matter and advise that this is a decision for the Mayor of the West Midlands. I am sure that she will continue to campaign on this issue and make the case for her constituents.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the potential impact of HS2 on west coast main line services between Glasgow and London?

Heidi Alexander: HS2 will deliver significant benefits for Scotland. Subject to future timetable and operational development, HS2 will aim to maintain the frequency

of services to Scotland, increase the number of available seats for Anglo-Scot journeys and deliver an end-to-end journey experience that is an estimated 20 minutes faster.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): In Manchester, London and now Wales, side road zebra crossings without Belisha beacons are allowed, yet in the rest of England they are not currently available. The Secretary of State mentioned the new cycling and walking strategy. Dunyeats Road in my constituency is suffering from multiple issues that are causing people and traffic to collide. Will she consider allowing councils to bring forward those crossings?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Lady probably knows that the active travel commissioner, Chris Boardman, is a huge fan of side road zebra crossings and the potential they have. That is why we have said in the cycling and walking investment strategy that we intend to legislate for them in future.

Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): By making accessibility one of GBR's core priorities, this Labour Government are finally putting the improvement of accessibility at the heart of the rail network. How will stations such as Northwich railway station be able to access accessibility improvement funding to deliver the accessible station that my constituents deserve?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend will know that we are spending £280 million on improving station accessibility during this spending review. I will seek to find new opportunities to fund further work on stations as part of future spending discussions, and I expect the new integrated leadership of GBR to work closely with local councils, mayors and parliamentarians to maximise future opportunities.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): The Secretary of State will know that e-bikes do not require insurance, but we are seeing some pedestrians suffer catastrophic injuries due to the additional weight of these bikes compared with a normal bike. Is she giving any consideration to reviewing the rules on this issue?

Lilian Greenwood: The hon. Lady is right to raise concerns about the use of illegal e-bikes and the danger they cause on our roads. New powers in the Crime and Policing Act 2026 mean that the police can seize e-bikes classed as motor vehicles when they are being used antisocially without the need to give a warning.

Brian Leishman (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): Fuel is being transported hundreds of miles from Stanlow in Cheshire to Scottish airports, increasing emissions and undermining our local fuel distribution industry. What will the Department do, alongside the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, the Department for Business and Trade and the Scotland Office, to protect fuel security and Scottish jobs, including those of tanker drivers?

Keir Mather: Fuel security and the Scottish jobs that it underpins are of incredible importance to this Government. We remain in regular contact with both the Scottish Government and other devolved Governments

to ensure that we are ready to respond in a co-ordinated manner should any disruption to our fuel and refining capabilities arise.

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): If a person has a pram, heavy luggage or a bike, or is disabled, it is difficult to use the railway if there is no step-free access. Further to the Secretary of State's answer to the hon. Member for Mid Cheshire (Andrew Cooper), can she outline whether rural areas will be prioritised for step-free access in the future? For many of those people, there are no alternative forms of transport.

Heidi Alexander: When we are investing in the accessibility of stations in the future, we need to get maximum benefit for the travelling public. I hope to have future discussions about future rounds of the Access for All scheme—improvements are being rolled out at 31 stations under that scheme, as a result of the £280 million I mentioned earlier.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I am sure that you and all Members of this House are hoping to get a holiday in at some point during this recess, so I wish you a hassle-free journey out and back home.

My Committee is today launching an inquiry on safer journeys for women and girls. The Minister for local transport, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), has set out the Department's actions contributing to the Government's goal of halving violence against women and girls within 10 years. What will the Transport Secretary be doing to monitor and measure the effectiveness of those actions?

Heidi Alexander: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend and her Committee for their interest in personal safety on the transport network, especially that of women and girls. We have an ambitious, evidence-based programme to tackle VAWG on the transport network, and we are delivering nine commitments under the "Freedom from violence and abuse" strategy, including funding to improve CCTV connectivity between stations and the British Transport police. We are also launching mandatory crime and antisocial behaviour training for bus industry staff.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Baddington bridge has been under a 7.5 tonne weight restriction since September 2025, with an hour-long diversion, leading to significant additional costs for local businesses and farms. Without a workable alternative, some drivers are ignoring the restriction, causing damage and disruption to country roads and nearby bridges. Will the Minister work with me and urgently review Cheshire East council's application to the structures fund, so that we can reopen the bridge as soon as possible?

Simon Lightwood: I will of course meet the hon. Lady. Applications for the structures fund are still open, and we will make a decision in due course on any applications made.

Marsha De Cordova (Battersea) (Lab): In February this year, the Albert bridge in my constituency was closed. This, coupled with changes to Battersea Bridge Road and the surrounding roads implemented by Transport for London, is causing significant delays, disruption and congestion. Despite my painstaking attempts to engage with TfL over the past five months, it is proving quite difficult. TfL is not engaging with the lived experience of my constituents and myself, so will the Secretary of State engage with TfL on my behalf, to ensure that it engages and works with the constituency MP?

Simon Lightwood: Ministers are in close contact with TfL on a range of issues, including this one, and obviously the structures fund is open for applications, should the parties involved wish to pursue that route.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Earlier this year the Minister for roads, the hon. Member for Wakefield and Rothwell (Simon Lightwood), wrote to me to say that Hammersmith bridge in my constituency would be a suitable candidate for the structures fund, but Hammersmith and Fulham council has just decided not to make an application on the basis that the structures fund is not suitable for repairs. Will the Minister please meet me as a matter of urgency to determine whether the structures fund remains a suitable way of funding repairs to Hammersmith bridge?

Simon Lightwood: I would be happy to meet the hon. Lady, but I will say once again that we would welcome an application from Hammersmith and Fulham council for the bridge in question.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Longton station in my constituency was allocated money from the transforming cities fund to have a lift installed. Unfortunately, that money was reallocated by the city council towards some paving slabs. Can I have a meeting with the Department to look at how we can get funding back for lifts at Longton station and then protect that money so that it cannot be reallocated to other projects?

Heidi Alexander: I would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue. One of the key things that we are trying to do is improve public transport nodes, so I would be interested to discuss this matter with him further.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): Haslingden Old Road in my constituency has been shut for two years due to a landslip. Will the Minister support me in urging Reform-led Lancashire county council to get this road reopened, as it is such a vital backbone going through my constituency?

Simon Lightwood: I encourage the local authority to get a grip of this issue. Of course, Reform-led councils do not have a great record. It is the party with the most councils that are red-rated on potholes and so on, and I encourage it to take action on this issue.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Passengers on the Fen line from King's Lynn are suffering repeated cancellations and an unacceptably poor level of service. Now that the Government control both the

track and the trains, will the Transport Secretary intervene and demand a robust action plan to sort out this poor performance?

Heidi Alexander: As I said earlier, publicly owned operators are performing better, on average, when it comes to reliability and cancellations. On the particular issue with the Fen line that the hon. Gentleman raises on behalf of his constituents, I will seek more information about what is causing the problems there and what plans the local operators have to improve the situation for him and his constituents.

Dame Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Businesses and individuals are increasingly discovering the advantages of living and working in the north-east—and no doubt the north-west, too—but unreliable train wi-fi means that journeys to the regions are too often dead time. I know that the Government are investing in technology to improve wi-fi services, but can the Minister tell me when we will see reliable wi-fi on LNER services, so that the whole nation's productivity can be improved?

Heidi Alexander: As I said in answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon), we are planning to begin procurement for enhanced wi-fi across the rail network later this year. That will include LNER, because in the spending review the Chancellor allocated £57 million to deploy low earth orbit satellite technology on our mainline trains. We need to get that procurement done, and then it can be rolled out from there.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): For many, rural bus services are the only way to buy food, to get to work, school or medical appointments, or to access services. A shuttle bus is meant to replace the 173 First Bus service during six months of roadworks on rural roads, but would-be passengers could not find any details or get through to the operator, and they were left standing in extreme heat at the roadside. Will the Minister ensure that when routes are disrupted, operators and local transport authorities provide clear, accessible and timely information so that passengers are not left stranded?

Simon Lightwood: It is important that when bus services are disrupted, people are given timely information to ensure that they can undertake their journey. I will reiterate that all local authorities and bus operators should do just that.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): I am delighted that the midlands metro tram line will connect Dudley with the rest of the west midlands. However, the construction has caused disruption to local businesses such as the Dubliner's, and repeated delays have exacerbated that. What support can the Minister provide to businesses that are being impacted by the repeated delays to the tram?

Heidi Alexander: I am obviously sorry to hear about the disruption to businesses in my hon. Friend's constituency. Let me take this issue away for her and talk to the Mayor of the West Midlands and all relevant parties to ascertain whether anything can be done to mitigate the impact on her constituents.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): All my residents in Spelthorne and I are desperate to get Spelthorne's five stations into the travelcard zone. The Secretary of State has looked at this in the past, but will she look again, with South Western Railway, at the financial modelling being used to say that it is not possible? I think a load more people would use that trainline if it were in the travelcard zone.

Heidi Alexander: I appreciate the importance of affordability to the travelling public, and I understand the desire of the hon. Gentleman's constituents to see lower fares. We are rolling out pay-as-you-go ticketing to make journeys frictionless in the south-east, but there are currently no plans to expand that London-wide fare payment zone.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): Whenever the Secretary of State reviews the ZEV mandate, will she confirm that she will consider the entire electric vehicle supply chain, including the billions invested in domestic lithium mining, battery production and charge point operators, and not just the views of ICE-based legacy car manufacturers?

Keir Mather: My hon. Friend is right to point to the fact that the EV industry depends on not only automotive manufacturers but the billions of pounds in the charge point sector and the workers who underpin it. Throughout our consideration of the ZEV mandate, we will ensure that our environmental obligations are met alongside making good business sense for all relevant partners in the sector.

Dr Danny Chambers (Winchester) (LD): We very much welcome the Government's initiative to give children free bus travel throughout the summer—it is a great idea. The only problem is that in Winchester and its surrounding area, Hampshire county council keeps cutting funding for bus services. Will the Minister explain what the Department is doing to encourage councils and operators to increase rather than decrease bus services?

Simon Lightwood: In addition to delivering £3 billion across the country—we have a new, formula-led way of doing that, rather than the competitive allocations of the previous Government—we have given local transport authorities increased powers to take back control of bus services, be that through enhanced partnerships, franchising or local authority-led bus companies.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Some 40% of roads in Cambridgeshire take up roughly 80% of the highways budget. With the forthcoming announcement about local government reorganisation in Cambridgeshire, what assessment has the Department made of the feasibility of that being deliverable given that most of those roads will end up in the same, much smaller unitary authority?

Simon Lightwood: We continue to liaise closely with other Government Departments during the reorganisation. I am obviously happy to enter into further conversations with the hon. Member on his specifics.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Cheltenham train passengers have a continual frustration with the turnaround time at Gloucester. There is also a new frustration:

I wonder whether the Secretary of State or a Minister can tell me why so many trains due to terminate at Cheltenham unexpectedly terminate at Gloucester?

Heidi Alexander: The Rail Minister often tells me that the art of answering questions on transport is to have all the detail at your fingertips. I must disappoint the hon. Gentleman, as I do not have the specific answer he seeks, but I promise him that I will go away, find out and come back to him.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): One of my constituents was nearly knocked over on a dedicated cycle path by an illegal e-bike. Riders in the gig economy in particular ride fast and dangerously. What steps are being taken to tackle the demands of illegal bikes in the gig economy?

Lilian Greenwood: Dangerous behaviour by any road user is, of course, completely unacceptable. We are aware of the concerns raised about the use of illegal e-bikes, particularly in relation to the gig economy. My Department has commissioned specific research into those issues so that we can better plan action to tackle that.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): In my capacity as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on cabin air quality, I recently met pilots and cabin crew about the impact of fume events and the lifelong consequences that they can have for them. What steps are the Government taking to investigate, research, regulate and mitigate those issues?

Keir Mather: Let me thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Air quality in relation to both pilot and passenger safety is of real concern to the Department for Transport. We undertake work constantly to monitor the impact of cabin air quality on those affected groups, and I would be glad to have a further conversation with him to take that work further.

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the urgent question on British Steel, can I say that I am amazed that a statement was not brought to the House on this very important matter that affects different constituencies? Nothing ever seems to change, but can the message go back that just telling me is not an answer? This is a big issue for MPs who serve constituencies with steel jobs; it is not one that should have to be brought to the House under an urgent question.

British Steel

10.49 am

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade if he will make a statement on the nationalisation of British Steel.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Blair McDougall): I express regret and apologies, Mr Speaker, not only for the issue you just raised, but that we were not able to lay the regulations before Parliament before they came into force. After very careful consideration informed by the significant commercial and diplomatic sensitivities involved in the transfer, and to ensure operational continuity, the Government decided that it was necessary for the acquisition to take place outside of working hours.

Following Royal Assent of the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Act 2026, the Secretary of State has taken the decision that it is necessary, in the public interest, to exercise the powers in the Act to transfer British Steel into public ownership. We have not taken the decision lightly, but we consider that it is the only viable route forward in the circumstances. British Steel is among the UK's largest steel producers and has an important capability in the production of several essential steel products that are integral to the construction and maintenance of our critical national infrastructure.

I reiterate the Government's thanks to parliamentarians on all sides for their constructive approach during passage of the Act. Today's decisive action secures British Steel's immediate future, secures steelmaking in support of our steel strategy, and supports the jobs and steelmaking communities that have underpinned the business for decades.

Mr Reynolds: We have a duty to stand by our steel sector, especially as it navigates unprecedented challenges such as President Trump's unfair steel tariffs, China's anti-competitive state aid practices, and the transition to environmentally sustainable production methods. If we are to foster a thriving steel economy, we cannot allow more producers to collapse, we cannot allow more jobs to be lost and we cannot risk our last blast furnaces going cold. That is why the Liberal Democrats welcomed the steel industry legislation as a temporary, emergency and targeted step specifically aimed at turning around British Steel before it can be returned to the private sector.

I am particularly glad that the Government accepted many Liberal Democrat amendments to the steel industry Bill, even if they did not accept them in this place and they had to be tabled in the other place instead. Our amendments require the Secretary of State to have regard to the costs of nationalisation and to come back to this House for approval before tabling regulations. Furthermore, our amendments require the consideration of environmental liabilities in any valuation because, as we all know, public ownership without public accountability is not a plan. The changes we secured strengthened the legislation and direct the Act and the Government's broader steel strategy towards a truly sustainable footing in the long term, while giving taxpayers true value for money.

The Act is now law and the House has still not been told how any of this is going to end, so I have three questions for the Minister. First, Jingye has said it has started the process to seek compensation from the Government for nationalisation; will the Minister confirm what compensation Jingye is asking for, the Government's assessment of the amount, and how the House will be able to scrutinise any compensation paid?

Secondly, precision-engineering firms throughout the country have confirmed that they cannot buy the specialist grades of steel they need from the approved domestic supply list because they are not manufactured in the UK. Owning a steel company is not the same as having steel capability. What plan is there to widen the range of grades that British Steel can produce to support British industry?

Finally, what process has been arranged for new private co-investors to come in to help to modernise the sites? Without them, the taxpayer is not the rescuer of British Steel but ends up being its permanent owner.

Blair McDougall: British Steel is now owned by the people. We will appoint non-executive directors and a board to take forward the transformation of the company so that it becomes productive, profitable and resilient. Part of the conversation will, of course, be about how the company can act in support of the wider objectives of the steel strategy, including the issues the hon. Gentleman raised in respect of the availability of specialist grades of steel.

The hon. Gentleman asked what compensation Jingye is asking for. We have been in discussions with the company, as we were looking for a commercial solution, but we did not feel we were going to get value for the taxpayer. The company has been running at a loss for some time. That said, in the autumn we will, through regulations, appoint an independent valuer to make a judgment on any compensation that is due, and that could be nil.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Teessiders know what it looks like when Governments stand back and fail to protect steel jobs, so on behalf of the British steelworkers in my constituency who work at Special Profiles in Skinningrove and Teesside Beam Mill at Lackenby, I thank the Government for their decision to step in and protect primary steelmaking in this country. They have preserved jobs and preserved our industry, and the decision will allow British Steel to modernise and prepare for the future, but one of the critical challenges in doing so will be addressing industrial energy costs. I am aware of the decisions that the Government have taken on energy to support industry. What more decisions will they take to bring down costs and make sure that there is a competitive environment for British Steel going forward?

Blair McDougall: My hon. Friend is quite right to say that steelmaking communities have been impacted by previous Governments standing by rather than intervening—we have seen it in community after community over decades. As a Community trade union member, I am very aware of that. On energy costs, he will be aware of the various interventions that we are making through the supercharger and the uplift in network charging compensation, and we also have the British industrial

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competitiveness scheme. A key priority for the new board will be looking at ways to reduce costs, and a huge part of that will be investing to help with energy costs.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): Britain's steel industry is not competitive, because of high energy costs and excessive red tape, but instead of addressing the root causes, this Labour Government revert back to their default solution of nationalisation. Why are this Government so keen to take us back to the 1970s? If we cannot bring our ruinous energy costs under control, Britain's steel industry will never be profitable and the UK taxpayer will be left footing the bill.

Can the Minister confirm how much working capital has been provided and the forecast cost to the taxpayer? Will it be more than the £2.5 billion that has been set aside in this Parliament for steel, and if so, where will the money come from? Will the Government provide compensation to Jingye, and what assessment have they made of the threat of legal action from China over nationalisation? The previous Secretary of State, the right hon. Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), said that the Government would seek to find a buyer for British Steel, and several parties have expressed interest. Are discussions ongoing with those parties, and if not, why not?

In March 2025, the Government received advice on the state of the blast furnaces in Scunthorpe, the cost of decommissioning and land remediation. Can the Minister tell the House the state of the blast furnaces, how long their lifespan is, and the expected cost of remediating the site? We cannot allow British Steel to become a multibillion-pound liability for the taxpayer without any scrutiny, so when will the Minister next provide an update on British Steel to the House?

Blair McDougall: Let me begin with the hon. Lady's question about relations with China. We have been very clear that this decision was made in the national interest, not because of the national identity of those who previously owned the site. We have been very clear in the steel strategy that we think the future of UK steel will be determined in partnership with the private sector and will require co-investment. That was the approach that we took with Tata and have taken elsewhere in the sector, and we have made significant resources available to encourage new private entrants into the sector.

I slightly take issue with the hon. Lady's "year zero" approach, which suggests that British steelmaking was in a fantastic state under her Government. Crude production has fallen by 50% over the last 10 years, and we have seen community after community abandoned. I simply do not accept the idea that we will all be wearing flares and kipper ties and going back to the 1970s because we have a Government who are willing to intervene, rather than standing by and letting people and communities fall on to the scrapheap.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I say to the Minister that we should never apologise for taking bold action that protects well-paid, unionised jobs in this country and is crucial to the reindustrialisation of our nation, which we know is the future policy agenda.

Further to the point made by the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), I have companies in my own constituency such as Langley Alloys, Hallmark Fabrication, Don-Bur, Brown McFarlane and Glebe Engineering that are all going to be impacted by the quotas and tariffs, because the grades of steel they need are not made in the UK. Now that we have this capability in public hands, do the Government intend to extend the range of steel that we make domestically, so that we can feed our domestic manufacturers and producers with the grades of steel they need?

Blair McDougall: As my hon. Friend will be aware, the point of the steel strategy is to do exactly what he describes, which is to ensure that a far greater proportion of UK demand, including for specialist steels, is produced in the UK. That demand will increase significantly in the coming years, not least because of the industrial strategy. We have owned British Steel for all of 11 hours, and the board is being appointed, but it is fair to say that the issues he raises will be among those that the new board will want to address.

Mr Speaker: I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): What concerns me is the jobs of my constituents who work at Scunthorpe. That is all I am worried about; I have no ideological objection. If it is what is needed now, fair enough. As long as the blast furnaces are totally uneconomic because of high energy costs, however, it can only be a sticking plaster. I was struck by the question put to the Minister by his own Back Bencher, the hon. Member for Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland (Luke Myer)—there is no point my demanding that we scrap green energy and all that sort of stuff—so will he take that away and do more with grants to ensure Scunthorpe's blast furnaces are competitive on world markets?

Blair McDougall: I thank the Father of the House for the spirit in which he asks that question. The key moment for jobs was the intervention last year, which resulted in the cancellation of the consultation on about 2,700 redundancies. The blast furnaces on the site will continue for some time to come. We have said in our steel strategy that we believe the future of the industry is in modernised, cleaner technologies. I am sure that will be at the forefront of the minds of the new board members as they look to transform and modernise the site.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds) on securing this urgent question, and the Minister on his answer and on the Government's bold action. Redditch manufacturers rely on British Steel, and to be frank, want more and different grades of it to expand their own production. I fully support the measure taken today—or, rather, last night—but can the Minister explain to us what engagement is happening on the ground to reassure workers?

Blair McDougall: This decision is of critical importance to the entire economy, our national security and our national infrastructure. However, as the Father of the House has said, it is also a matter of getting to the end of the month for thousands of people. This morning, the workers on the site have been briefed on the decision.

We would expect the new board to remain deeply engaged with the workforce, who will be central to ensuring a revitalised and resilient future for British Steel.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for your earlier comment. It is surprising that the Secretary of State is not here to make a statement before he visits Scunthorpe, which I understand he is doing today.

Like the Father of House, I have no objections to—and have supported the Government on—saving the steelworks by nationalisation, but it can only be a short to medium-term solution. The challenges—most notably, energy costs—remain. If, as the steel Minister has previously said to me, the Government are looking to attract private investment into the industry, will he acknowledge that energy costs must be dealt with before that investment will follow?

Blair McDougall: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman on that point. The Government are very clear today that we are seeking that partnership with the private sector across the steel industry. From our side, the partnership comes with significant resources on the table, through the National Wealth Fund, to help the steel industry become more competitive, particularly on energy efficiency.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Our energy, defence and railway sectors depend on steel. Does my hon. Friend agree that steel made by British workers, in Britain, and owned by the British people, is not only in our infrastructure interest but in our national interest?

Blair McDougall: I could not agree more. On a day when many of us will be thinking about travelling back to our constituencies by rail for the summer, it is worth noting that 80% of the rails we will be travelling on are made by British Steel. My hon. Friend raises an important point about taking more steps to ensure, as taxpayers would expect, that when we engage in public procurement British Steel is firmly in the mix.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Congratulations to the Government on doing what I have been urging for seven years, which is to take this strategic national asset into public ownership. What is needed now is a comprehensive, bold vision for the blast furnaces. I am concerned about the talk about more electric arc furnaces. We already have them at Rotherham, and others are being built down in Port Talbot. We need a comprehensive vision to invest in blast furnace plate mills, so we have a real job-creating, world-class industry based around Scunthorpe in the great county of Lincolnshire. How long will it take to get that vision, so that we know which way we are going?

Blair McDougall: As the steel strategy set out, we believe the most sustainable and competitive future across the industry in general is through technologies such as electric arc. The blast furnaces at Scunthorpe will be operational for the immediate term. We are now 11 hours and five minutes into the ownership of the site. The issues that the hon. Gentleman raises will be high on the to-do list of the new board, as we appoint them shortly.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Many manufacturing businesses in Keighley and Ilkley, including GESIPA, Airedale Springs and Olicana Products, are deeply concerned about the tariffs and quotas associated with the national steel strategy. They have said to me that the measures will result in increased costs, reduced supply and weakening competitiveness, and will directly threaten jobs in Keighley. Can the Minister outline a response to the managing directors of those businesses on the concerns that they have raised directly with me about the steel strategy that the Government are adopting?

Blair McDougall: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the measures we took were necessary because of the ending of the steel safeguards. Without the measures we took, there was a real prospect of our becoming the global dumping ground for uncompetitively subsidised over-production. That being said, the Minister for Industry, the Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), has been meeting manufacturers and listening to those concerns. That is why we have the transitional arrangements and have ensured that they will be reviewed after 12 months. It is also, frankly, why we are working so hard with the EU to ensure we get mutual arrangements there as well.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): The Liberal Democrats supported the passage of the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Bill, but we tabled amendments, in my name and in those of my hon. Friends, to increase the provision of scrutiny and transparency under the Bill. The Government voted those amendments down in this place, but then had a change of heart and supported them in the other place. Given that, it is extremely disappointing that a move of this magnitude has been made and no statement has been made to the House. On the change of heart in the Lords, was that merely a sticking plaster, or is there a genuine commitment to give parliamentarians scrutiny of the important decisions being made about the future of our steel industry?

Blair McDougall: As the Minister for Industry has set out, on the issue of cost, it is our intention to continue with the practice under the previous Act of coming to Parliament on a quarterly basis with a written ministerial statement to set out the costs. As we appoint the new board, we will also be keen for the owners and operators of British Steel to be accountable to Select Committees.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Steelmaking is clearly important for our national security. Some of the issues for British Steel are the costs that it has and the full orderbook that it needs to remain sustainable. What will the Government do to ensure that British Steel turns out steel at a competitive rate, and that it gets the orders that it needs?

Blair McDougall: On the point about a competitive rate, I refer the hon. Gentleman to an answer I gave a moment ago on the investment the Government are putting in across the steel industry to ensure costs are reduced. On the orderbook, through the work we are doing on public procurement, we are ensuring that there is a clearer line of sight for British steel producers—both publicly owned British Steel and others—on all

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the coming work linked to investment in national infrastructure or the industrial strategy, so that they get a fair shake at those contracts.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I welcome the nationalisation of British Steel, not least because it protects critical infrastructure needs, as well as local jobs and neighbourhoods. On procurement and competition rules, what assessment have the Government made to ensure British Steel does not fall foul of regulations on supplying steel within the United Kingdom?

Blair McDougall: As Minister with responsibility for regulations, if there are any particular regulatory issues that the hon. Gentleman has in mind, I encourage him to bring them to me and I will pursue them across the system. In addition to the reviewed guidance that we have given to ensure British Steel is in the mix for procurement, the clean industry bonus scheme—for offshore wind, for example—will incentivise its use.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I appreciate the point that the Minister made about the taxpayer having only owned British Steel for a matter of hours, and how the board is still being appointed. It is, however, imperative that the Government are clear, once the board is appointed, what the strategic priorities are for the board—as opposed to British Steel at large. Top of those priorities must be a timescale to get to profitability. Can the Minister—or his successor—commit to ensuring that the red lines set for the board are made clear to this House as soon as it returns in September, when the board will have been functional for five or six weeks?

Blair McDougall: I am disappointed in the hon. Gentleman's lack of faith in my career prospects. I am sure that the Minister for Industry, who has deep expertise in steel and is an excellent Minister, intends to update the House on the strategic objectives of the new board.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): The Minister failed to respond to any of the questions asked by the shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul), so I will try again: some companies have expressed an interest in the business, so what discussions is the Minister, or his colleagues, having with potential buyers?

Blair McDougall: We did not take the decision lightly, and we would have preferred commercial options. We are now 11 hours and 12 minutes into ownership of the company. We are deeply committed and open to private sector partnerships to ensure the future of British Steel, and that is an essential and early part of the conversation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): As always, the Minister is positive and giving us encouragement. I welcome the steps that have been taken to secure the wider British steel industry, but I will press the Minister on the critical issue facing manufacturing in Northern Ireland. As the Minister will know, under the Windsor framework, businesses in Northern Ireland are being hit by a double whammy of 50% tariffs on imports exceeding the slashed quotas. That is catastrophic for our engineering firms, so will the Minister commit to urgent discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive and local businesses to resolve the tariff anomaly, protect internal UK trade, and ensure that Northern Ireland's manufacturing backbone is not broken by an unintended own goal?

Blair McDougall: Having got through this urgent question without making any commitments on behalf of my hon. Friend the Minister for Industry, I will give one now and say that I am sure he would agree to the meetings the hon. Gentleman suggests. There are specific arrangements within the trade measures we have taken that are intended to ensure the flow of steel into Northern Ireland, and there is advice for GB companies taking steel products into Northern Ireland. The hon. Gentleman's question again highlights the importance of having that ongoing conversation with the EU, because we are not the EU's problem when it comes to steel, and it is not ours.

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Before we come to business questions, I wish everybody a pleasant recess. I hope we get some downtime; it seems to have been a very heavy Session so far. To the staff of the House, thank you for all that you do—to all our Doorkeepers, security and everybody who works here, but none more so than those who work in the Tea Room and the Dining Rooms. To those who are leaving the House, I wish you well for the future.

Business of the House

11.16 am

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 31 August will include:

TUESDAY 1 SEPTEMBER—Debate on a motion relating to sovereign grants, following the message from His Majesty the King, followed by a debate on a motion on the impact of strategic lawsuits against public participation. The subject for this debate was determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

WEDNESDAY 2 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Representation of the People Bill.

THURSDAY 3 SEPTEMBER—Second Reading of the Sporting Events Bill [*Lords*].

FRIDAY 4 SEPTEMBER—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 7 September includes:

MONDAY 7 SEPTEMBER—Remaining stages of the Health Bill—day one.

TUESDAY 8 SEPTEMBER—Conclusion of remaining stages of the Health Bill.

Jesse Norman: I thank the Leader of the House for the business.

This seems a moment for the words of Philip Larkin:

“What will survive of us is love.”

It is a day of sadness and departings. I know that the whole House will want to join me in saluting the England football team. I simply say this to them: you went out to a foreign field, you fought like true lions, and you did us proud. Thank you.

Let us also pay tribute to Ann Widdecombe for her bravery, spirit and independence of mind. There is a book of condolence in the Members' Library, which I know many Members will wish to sign.

Ann's politics were not especially my politics, Mr Speaker, but let me tell you a story that illustrates my personal experience of her a little. We were at a dinner of the Holborn and St Pancras Conservatives—a vibrant local organisation—in the time of the late Frank Dobson, where Ann was the guest speaker. At the end of the evening, a bottle signed by her was thrust into my hands and I was asked to invite her to auction it. You will recall, Mr Speaker, that she had just had a bit of a dust-up with the noble Lord Howard on the subject of which she had said that he had “something of the night” about him. Quick as a flash, holding this bottle of whisky, she said, “Ladies and gentlemen, what will you give me for something of the nightcap?” I thought that pretty game, under the circumstances.

This week has featured a certain amount of rancour, as the late Roy Jenkins might have put it. The Government found themselves changing the business twice and cancelling an Opposition day debate they themselves had scheduled and reaffirmed only the previous day on the entirely bogus excuse that they wanted an urgent debate on Iran. That debate was so urgent and important that it

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was opened by the most junior Minister in Government, finished two hours early and featured precisely three—count them: three—speeches from Labour Back Benchers. I think we can all agree that it will be a tragedy if we lose the Leader of the House from business questions, but if he is not promoted after the embarrassing heroics he has performed this week on behalf of the new Prime Minister, it will be a huge injustice.

But we are not going to cast nasturtiums, in the words of a friend of mine, on any of this nonsense—not even on Baroness Lloyd and the hopeless Building Digital UK, who have entirely failed to address the issue of fibre broadband in neglected parts of my constituency and simply repeated the same language of incompetence and failure to me for more than a year now. I hope that the Leader of the House will pick that up.

No, we will cast no nasturtiums. There will be no rancour from this side of the House. I come to praise the outgoing Prime Minister, not to bury him. He is a transparently decent and honourable man who is dedicated to public service. He rescued the Labour party, and he worked with great diligence to lead this country. No one who has not been close to leadership of that kind can have any idea of how hard it is. We all owe him a great debt of gratitude.

As for the incoming Prime Minister, my advice is simply this: be careful what you wish for. He has had a coronation and an election hustings with just one candidate—a single name on the ballot paper—but on Monday afternoon, he will start to learn the true difficulty of the decisions that face him. There will be hard trade-offs that cannot be abolished by tinkering with the fiscal rules or still more tax and spend. Vibes will not be a solution to these problems. Eyelashes will not suffice. He will have to stand up and say, or perhaps decide, what it is he believes in. We can only hope that he will bring energy, frugality, a long-term focus, and a talented team adequate to the tasks ahead. We wish him very well.

I wish you, Mr Speaker, the Leader of the House and all the staff and Members of the House a summer break full of rest and happiness.

Sir Alan Campbell: Before I get on to the comments of the shadow Leader of the House, let me join him in paying tribute to Ann Widdecombe. Ann dedicated her life to public service and the causes that she believed in. The circumstances of her death are extremely distressing, and my thoughts and, I am sure, those of the whole House are with Ann's family and loved ones.

I cannot claim to have known Ann well. We did not agree on many issues, but we agreed very strongly on the issue of foxhunting, on which she was extraordinarily brave in the stand that she took. We shared a belief in public service and that politics matters to people. I smiled at the anecdote that the shadow Leader of the House told and the reference to the nightcap. I suspect we will read about that in one of his books in the future.

I also pay tribute to Lord Christopher, who passed away this week. He had an incredible career in public service. He was the oldest serving British parliamentarian and the last Member of Parliament to have served in world war two. My thoughts and, I am sure, those of the whole House are with his friends and family.

On House matters, this morning the Modernisation Committee published a report on a formal scheme for acting Select Committee Chairs. Select Committees perform a vital role in scrutinising the Government. The recommendations will ensure that Committees can continue their critical work, even if their Chairs need to take a period of absence. It sets out a new framework for the appointment, status and remuneration of acting Select Committee Chairs. I thank the Liaison and Procedure Committees for their work in this regard, and I will put the matter before the House in due course.

I join the right hon. Gentleman in thanking the England football team. It was not the result that the nation had hoped for, but the team showed passion and energy, certainly in the previous rounds, and we should be proud of them.

On the Iran debate, I thought the right hon. Gentleman was uncharacteristically churlish. I watched much of the debate, and what I did not watch I read in *Hansard*. I have to say—maybe after my remarks on Tuesday I need to build some bridges—that the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) made a really good speech on Iran and set out her party's position. Crucially, she set out the need for this House to show that we have a bipartisan approach to this issue. I would not want to undermine in any way—I am sure he was not trying to do so—the powerful speeches that were made by Members on both sides of the House. I felt that it was important before the recess to set out very clearly what this House thinks. I fervently hope that we will not need to recall the House over the recess, but if we need to on this or any other matter, we stand ready to do so.

I will take up the point that the right hon. Gentleman made about broadband with the relevant Minister.

I will close by thanking the shadow Leader of the House for his remarks about the Prime Minister, to whom I pay tribute. He has made this country stronger and fairer. The duty of a Prime Minister is to leave the country in a better place than they found it. Without question, the Prime Minister has done that. He leaves a lasting legacy. Just this week, he fulfilled his commitment to the Hillsborough families and secured the future of British Steel. I wish him well, and I wish his family well, for the future.

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): They say that good things come to those who wait. After years of campaigning for new noise limits on fireworks by a number of organisations, from veterans' charities to animal charities, and even by Deputy Speakers, we should all thank the Government for hearing all our constituents—especially those in Luton North who are kept awake night after night by nuisance fireworks—and for taking action. Will the Leader of the House make time in this Chamber for us to discuss what a difference that action will make to the lives of thousands of residents in all our constituencies?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend talks of a matter that I know has been raised in sessions such as this and by many others across the House. It matters to constituents. I am sure that my hon. Friend realises that there is a written statement today that announces that we are launching a consultation on firework legislation. It is an important matter. Once that consultation is under way

and the findings are decided on, I am sure the appropriate Minister will want to come to the House to make a statement, or we may indeed have a debate on the matter because it is of such importance.

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

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I join the Leader of the House in his comments about Ann Widdecombe. She was a conviction politician and she was respected for that. I join Mr Speaker, and I am sure Madam Deputy Speaker as well, in thanking the staff for all their service over the course of the term.

I had hoped to start by triumphantly demanding the confirmation of a bank holiday, but I will have to change tack slightly and desperately plea with the Government to give us a day off anyway so that we can get over the trauma of last night.

More importantly, I raise something that I do not think our nation talks about enough, which is the weather and, more specifically, the relationship between the weather and climate change. A study that came out this week said that of the 2,500 articles about extreme weather over the last few weeks, 72%—the vast majority—made no mention at all of climate change. That is despite the fact that scientists tell us that the link between the two is indisputable. The idea that this is a freak, one-off event is, frankly, for the birds, and the Met Office has confirmed this week that

“the climate of the 20th century has now gone.”

The number of days at over 30° in London has quadrupled and the warm weather is even moving further north.

The impact is pretty serious, and we have seen it on our schools, our hospitals, our workplaces and public transport, which have all ground to a halt at times. More seriously, 2,700 deaths in May and June have been linked to heat-related causes. Will the Leader of the House organise for the relevant Minister to come to this place and explain the link between extreme heat and climate change, and lay out what the Government are set to do to mitigate the effects?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Gentleman says, climate change is already making heatwaves more frequent, longer lasting and more severe. We are absolutely committed to making sure that we are able to deal with our changing climate. We are transitioning to renewable energy, reducing greenhouse gas emissions to achieve net zero and adopting infrastructure for extreme weather. I note that there was a well-attended Westminster Hall debate this week on preparedness for extreme heat. When we return after the summer, there may be a strong case for either a statement or a debate to reflect on what has happened and what lessons we can learn.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): While visiting St Peter's collegiate academy in my constituency, I spoke with Moses and Nana, pupils at the school. I was struck by how engaged they were with their schooling, and by their inquisitive nature, ambition, and desire to learn and succeed. Will the Leader of the House join me in commending St Peter's school on the support that it gives to pupils? Will he also reassure all the schools in my constituency that this Government will ensure that funding for schools keeps pace with

rising costs, so that schools can maintain high standards and meet increased expectations around inclusion, pastoral support and enrichment?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join my hon. Friend in congratulating St Peter's school on the support that it provides for students. I am delighted to hear that Moses and Nana are so eager to learn; that is a true testament to their hard work, as well as to the support of their families and the school staff. I reassure my hon. Friend that school funding is increasing by £1.7 billion in 2026-27, meaning that core school budgets will total £67 billion.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I trust that the Leader of the House will inform the Backbench Business Committee of any extra time we will get in September—or will prevail on his successor to do so—so that we can plan accordingly. The business in Westminster Hall in September will be as follows: on the day we come back, 1 September, there will be a debate on face-to-face banking in rural areas; on Thursday 3 September, there will be a debate on vaccination rates in England, followed by a debate on the security assessment on global diversity, ecosystem collapse and national security; on Tuesday 8 September, there will be a debate on the safety of the Jewish community; on Thursday 10 September, there will be a debate on the reform of the vascular care sector, followed by a debate on the contribution of fathers and positive male role models to families and society; and on Tuesday 15 September, there will be a debate on residential building safety remediation.

The incoming Prime Minister has announced that he wants the housing subsidy money available from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to be spent on social rent. I agree with that proposal. However, the London plan, which is out today, has dramatically reduced the amount of affordable housing that will be built—if it even gets to be built. That seems to be in direct contrast to what is needed in London. I hope that the Leader of the House will prevail on whoever will be the Secretary of State in the new Government to come to this House in early September and set out how the Government plan to ensure that we build the affordable housing that people in this country desperately need.

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his work and the work of his Committee. On the time available for Backbench Business debates, he will know, because I just read out the business, that at the end of the day on which we return, we have found guaranteed time for the debate on SLAPPs that unfortunately could not take place last week. I anticipate that it will be a busy two weeks and two days, but I will certainly look for the time that he requests during that period; he would not expect me to do anything other than that. I will not make promises that I cannot keep—people want to prepare for debates, so I will not commit yet—but I am looking at that.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said about the next Prime Minister's comments on social housing. If there are new Secretaries of State, I am sure that when we return they will want to come and set out what

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changes—or, indeed, continuities—there will be in their Departments' policies, because the House will want to know that.

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): Fulwell community library, which is run by a fantastic team of volunteers led by Richard Beck, provides a welcoming space for people to enjoy books and a cuppa, as I did there the other week. In the centre of Sunderland, Culture House, the new home of our city library, will be opening soon, providing access to books and learning seven days a week, thanks to the investment and decisions of the previous council administration. Will the Leader of the House celebrate the National Year of Reading, and consider giving time for a debate on the importance of library facilities? Does he agree that they are not vanity projects, but core facilities for our community?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to support Fulwell community library and the National Year of Reading, and I pay tribute to Richard Beck and all the others who are helping to make these things possible. Public libraries open up opportunities for everyone to access information and knowledge, and provide vital community spaces. We are investing £1.5 billion to save more than 1,000 local museums, art venues, libraries and heritage sites, ensuring access to culture for everyone. This is a particularly exciting time for my hon. Friend's city, not least because we will be enjoying European football next season.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): The midland main line is in crisis. More than a quarter of our trains are being cancelled or are crazily late, and we find that even if people can get on, they will have to stand because so many are short form. The trains are falling apart; the air conditioning, toilets and doors do not work, and the windows are blown. We need a debate on this, because this happened because Department for Transport officials allowed our trains to be sent somewhere else in the country, even though they knew that our new trains were not going to arrive on time. My constituents want to know when the compensation will come, and whether they will get trains over the summer to stop this crisis getting worse, because at the moment, the Department is in denial. We need some proper answers.

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sorry to hear of the situation that the hon. Gentleman raises. I will take that back to ministerial colleagues and see if we can get an update. Should he seek a meeting with Ministers, I would be happy to arrange it.

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): Two pupils from Trinity high school in Renfrew in my constituency recently won a public speaking competition run by the Crown Office and Procurator Fiscal Service. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating the winners, Navya Joshi and Clara Boyd, and the school on their fantastic success?

Sir Alan Campbell: Of course I congratulate everybody involved. Public speaking is a fantastic way of not just, obviously, developing the ability to speak in public, but giving young people confidence. It is important that we literally give a voice to young people.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): Nearly a thousand families of children with special educational needs and disabilities are supported by Camp Mohawk and its fantastic daycare centre in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House join me in recognising the invaluable support that charities such as Camp Mohawk provide to families in encouraging children with SEND to thrive and their families to relax?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the work of Camp Mohawk and, indeed, other organisations around our country. It is important not just for young people to get to spend time at camp, but that families get an opportunity to get some downtime. I certainly join him in welcoming Camp Mohawk and thanking it for everything it does.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): This week, I attended an informative roundtable discussion with experts, including from the Alzheimer's Society, Alzheimer's Research UK and Dementia UK. I spoke about my dad, who is living with late-stage dementia. This is a pivotal moment for action on dementia, particularly given the advances in research in this field. I am hosting a constituency event to mark World Alzheimer's Day in September. What steps are the Government taking to strengthen dementia care for those living with dementia and their loved ones?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her tireless campaigning on this important matter. Across the last five financial years, we have spent more than £555 million on dementia research, including dementia diagnostics and trials of potential treatments. We are working to be at the front of transforming treatments and to be a world leader in dementia trial expertise. I will take back her comments to the relevant Minister and ensure that she gets an update, not just on what we are doing, but on our plans for the future.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Greatworth in my constituency is a beautiful village, yet it is beset with problems. Not only is peak High Speed 2 construction going on, causing road closures, but the village is having inordinate issues with Anglian Water. Residents face a hosepipe ban and a lack of water pressure, while a standing pipe is flooding, pouring out water constantly. I will raise that with Anglian Water, but after the recess, could we have a debate in Government time about the interaction of construction projects and water services, and ensuring that they all work for rural communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady raises a very important point. I hope that Anglian Water has heard her comments and takes action, because these issues sound very serious indeed at any time of year, but particularly this time of year. We will have a debate on the clean water Bill. It will be about not just how the situation is fixed, but how we improve water services for the future.

Martin Rhodes (Glasgow North) (Lab): The Commonwealth games festival fund will support a wide range of community events across my constituency, including Canal Quest on 1 August, Bike for Good taster sessions, the cultural programme at SWG3, and

activities delivered by the Maryhill Integration Network and many other local organisations. Will the Leader of the House allow for a debate in Government time on the importance of ensuring that communities directly benefit from major events?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a true champion for his constituency, and for community events and local organisations. Events such as Canal Quest and Bike for Good taster sessions are important for bringing communities together. If he is not able to catch your eye in the pre-recess Adjournment debate this afternoon, Mr Speaker, I encourage him to seek a Westminster Hall, when we return in September, on how major events can deliver even more for local communities.

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): Over the last year, Royal Mail delivered just 75% of first-class post the next day, against a target of 93%. Ofcom has fined it nearly £40 million across three years and has opened a fourth investigation. Constituents in Maidenhead are still missing hospital appointments and other important business because letters do not arrive. The posties are doing their best, but the system is set up to fail. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate on Royal Mail's performance, so that the new Prime Minister's Government can tell all our constituents when their post will actually get delivered?

Sir Alan Campbell: We have been very clear that Royal Mail's service is unacceptable, and we will continue to say that as long as it is unacceptable. The public expect a well-run postal service, with letters arriving on time across the country. The Royal Mail has already been fined by Ofcom three times, and Ofcom continues to monitor its performance. As the hon. Gentleman may well know, the Business and Trade Committee has called Royal Mail into Parliament to hold it to account. I hope that Royal Mail listens to what he says this morning and reflects on what Parliament has done so far, because it is time that it provided his constituents, and all our constituents, with the service that it ought to.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With a birthday business question, I call Claire Hazelgrove.

Claire Hazelgrove (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Lab): Thank you very much, Madam Deputy Speaker. The summer is a great time for families to create lasting memories, but it can also be an expensive time. Locally, I am hosting a free community advice drop-in event, bringing together local advice organisations. Fellow residents can come by to find out more about support that they may be entitled to around energy and water costs, debt advice and more. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging anyone who may need support across the Filton and Bradley Stoke constituency to come by, and in thanking everybody involved in providing local support?

Sir Alan Campbell: Madam Deputy Speaker, let me join you in saying happy birthday to my hon. Friend. I join her in thanking those providing important services and advice in our local communities. We recognise that summer can be a challenging time, not just because of

the heat but because of increased costs. I wish her well with the event she is organising. We have introduced the Great British summer savings scheme to help people enjoy a day out for less. Families will be able to enjoy discounted attractions and meals out this summer.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this week, the green flag awards were announced, and two parks in my constituency were successful: Baysgarth and Bridge View in Barton-upon-Humber. I congratulate the community groups that helped with that, but as well as support from community groups, parks need support from our local authorities, and it is important that sufficient resources are made available. Could the Leader of the House arrange for a statement when we return on local government finance for providing such facilities?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise the issue of the importance of parks. I am certain that Baysgarth and Bridge View parks are lovely places, and that their awards are well deserved. He talks about resources. Our flagship Pride in Place programme is giving up to £5.8 billion over 10 years to support 284 towns, and I hope we will be able to look at further ways to help. Pride in Place empowers local people to decide how best to look after their areas, and that includes deciding on what happens to their local parks.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Back in April, I joined residents for a walk around the Mitchell Gardens estate in Kidsgrove, where Taylor Wimpey and its estate management company Trinity Estates are letting residents down by failing to maintain the estate, despite residents paying a significant amount in fees. Neither Taylor Wimpey nor Trinity Estates has responded to my requests for a meeting, some three months on. Does the Leader of the House agree that is completely unacceptable?

Sir Alan Campbell: I do agree. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that ignoring requests for meetings is simply unacceptable. I hope that Trinity Estates has heard his representations today and that it will engage with him in good faith to resolve this important matter for my hon. Friend, acting on behalf of his constituents, and for his constituents themselves.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): This summer brings good news in the Big Space Cancer Appeal, which Health Ministers are right behind. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the brilliant doctors behind the appeal, Charles Candish and Sam Guglani, and the many donors who are helping to pay for the £17.5 million new cancer centre at Cheltenham hospital? It would be a real boost for the campaign if the Leader of the House could get behind it and give a message to the council to get on with giving the centre planning permission.

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to everybody involved, including the medical staff. I hope that this will be the great step forward for Cheltenham that he is talking about. I hope that the council has heard his remarks. Of course, to some extent planning takes a little time, but we should be getting on with the project, because acting and doing

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more to tackle cancer, which this Government are absolutely committed to doing, is of such importance to local people and communities.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): As the summer holidays approach and with all the lovely sunny weather, I really hope that children across my constituency take the chance to spend plenty of time playing outside. I know how important it is for their wellbeing and it is a priority for a number of my “Pride In” events across my constituency, in particular to improve play parks in Dragon park in Wharnccliffe Side, Mortomley park in High Green and Coronation field in Dodworth. I am thrilled that our Labour Government have already put £18 million into creating and refurbishing playgrounds across England. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how I can access that funding for local playgrounds to ensure that children and young people growing up in my constituency can have better places to play?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for her local community. I will ensure that the Minister overseeing the scheme hears what she has said, and we will get her an update on how she can access the scheme to ensure that the success in her constituency continues and grows.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Bertie, April, Oliver, Rhys and Isaac from Wrenbury primary school, who have successfully completed the horticulture, food and futures project run in partnership with Reaseheath college? This fantastic pilot has transformed these pupils’ enthusiasm for education by giving them practical skills and introducing them to careers they had never imagined. Given the importance of inspiring the next generation into agriculture, horticulture and technical careers, will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the role of specialist colleges, such as Reaseheath, in supporting young people and tackling future skills shortages?

Sir Alan Campbell: Absolutely. I invite the hon. Lady to seek a debate when we return after the summer recess, so that she can make the case for her constituency and for this issue. It is vital that young people learn about where their food comes from. Last Friday, I was at Southridge primary school in my constituency, where outdoor education is transforming the lives of young people: not only are they growing their own food, while the importance of that is explained to them, but they have the opportunity to learn and to play. I thank her for raising this matter.

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): In my constituency surgeries and on the doorsteps in Erewash, I keep hearing how my constituents have been experiencing significant delays with the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency, particularly in processing driving licences—very specifically, medical driving licences. At one recent surgery I spoke to Connie Frisby, who had some excellent ideas about how the DVLA service could be modernised and digitised. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on the delays at the DVLA and how we might make it better?

Sir Alan Campbell: The DVLA has recruited more staff to the drivers medical casework team and its contact centre to deal with the sustained increase in the volume and complexity of applications, but I understand the frustration of my hon. Friend and his constituents—and of many people across the country, probably. I recommend that he seeks a Westminster Hall debate on this matter when we return in September so that he can make that case and hear from a Minister how the issue will be resolved.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Scores of local people in Northchurch have rallied around a local Sri Lankan family. The father, a social care worker, had his visa renewed, but his wife—a teaching assistant—and three kids were originally given 14 days to leave the country. One 16-year-old was appalled and disgusted, and said:

“As a child of the future, I am disheartened that the Home Office has allowed this to go ahead.”

To add insult to injury to the family, who are living in limbo, the Home Office press office has interfered by essentially stopping a press story and adding uncertainty. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a completely unacceptable situation? Will he help me to get a substantive response from Ministers and, importantly, to secure this family’s place in their community?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that this causes distress not just to the family, but to the community supporting them. It is important that we get a fair system, but it is also important that we have an effective and efficient system that puts people at the centre. If the hon. Lady gives me details of the case, I will take it up with the Home Office and see if we can get the reassurance that she seeks.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I have been approached by many of my constituents, who are concerned about the impact of the operations of a local recycling company. Residents are complaining about dust covering their homes and poor air quality. We should all be able to enjoy our homes in peace. That is why I have taken the appropriate steps of contacting the company, Slough borough council, the Environment Agency and the Government, but sadly the matter persists. Residents feel that their voices are being ignored. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is an entirely unacceptable situation? What can he do through his esteemed office to help my constituents, so that I can ensure that residents are heard?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this matter. The Government have been working hard to improve air quality, and we have provided £582 million to support local authorities. It is very disappointing to hear of the case in his constituency. I hope that the company, Simpson, as well as his local council and the Environment Agency have heard his words, and that they will take action to remedy this issue, because I can give them one guarantee: if they do not, my hon. Friend will continue to raise the issue until they do.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Churches are important historical buildings and are often at the heart of our local communities. Labour stopped the last Conservative Government’s VAT scheme,

which helped to maintain places of worship across the UK, but the new, more restricted places of worship renewal fund applies only to England. Thanks to Coldingham & St Abbs parish church, it has come to light that the Scottish Government are not passing on extra funds to churches and places of worship in Scotland. Will the Leader of the House encourage his ministerial colleagues to contact the Scottish Government to ensure that this money is passed on to places of worship in Scotland?

Sir Alan Campbell: The new places of worship renewal fund is open for applications, but, as the hon. Gentleman knows, it is an England-only fund administered by Historic England. It is for the Scottish Government to consider whether to set up new arrangements in Scotland, and it is disappointing, to say the least, that they have not done so. I am going to say this again, because it might be the last time that I say it: the Scottish Government have had the biggest settlement since devolution. It is important that they get on and spend it on behalf of constituents, who the settlement was put there for.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): May I invite the Leader of the House to join me in praising the Carlisle band Hardwicke Circus—the only UK band to have toured war-torn Ukraine? Despite its talent being recognised by Sir Paul McCartney, it has previously been suggested to the band that its success will be limited unless it relocates to a large city, like Manchester. Does the Leader of the House agree that success in the music industry should depend on talent, not postcode?

Sir Alan Campbell: I do indeed, and I join my hon. Friend in praising Hardwicke Circus on their success. I agree that the success of any artist should not be determined by postcode. That is why this week we have brought forward our plan for music, detailing our ambition to provide people in every corner of the country with the opportunity to start and build a career in music.

Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests: I am a practising optometrist. Children across England are living in a postcode lottery when it comes to vision screening. Only 50% of local authorities provide vision screening in our schools, which means that conditions such as amblyopia—lazy eye—get missed before the age of five. If we miss these conditions, children's educational abilities and employment opportunities can be reduced. May we have a debate in the Chamber about this cost-efficient, proficient method of screening in all our schools?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises an important matter, behind which is the importance of prevention rather than trying to put things right after they have happened, which is far more costly. There should not be a postcode lottery in this area, or indeed in any other area. I invite the hon. Gentleman to apply for a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate, so that he can make his case and hear from the relevant Minister how we are going to put this right.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I regularly hear from people in Portsmouth who are passionate about public service and keen to make a positive difference

in their community. Politics should be accessible to everyone, regardless of background. At the end of August, I will be hosting a political summer school for 15 to 21-year-olds in Portsmouth to inspire the next generation of leaders, campaigners and community champions. Can the Leader of the House advise me on how Members across the House can work with the Government to encourage more young people to engage in politics and public service, and what message would he send to the young people taking part in my summer school?

Sir Alan Campbell: My message to the young people taking part in my hon. Friend's summer school is to enjoy themselves—to enjoy what they might learn, but also to enjoy working together in what is a fantastic field. Taking part in public life is an honour and a privilege, and we should encourage everyone who aspires to public service to be able to follow that ambition.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Despite the recent successes of two new dental contracts in Bridlington and the decision to postpone the closure of the care unit at the hospital, I am sure the Leader of the House is aware of the challenges of optimising health services in coastal towns, particularly in Bridlington and Hornsea in my constituency. Can we have a debate on this issue in Government time? Can the Minister come to the House and update us on the implementation of the recommendations made by Chris Whitty in 2021 on health inequalities in coastal communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman raises two important matters that are very close to my heart. The first is making sure that people can access dental services wherever they are. The second is coastal communities, which are very important indeed—as he knows, I represent one. Of course, it has been a challenging time for dental services, but the Government are determined to put that right; we are taking action and investing. The hon. Gentleman has referred to the recommendations of the Whitty report; let me go back to the Minister responsible and get the hon. Gentleman an update.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): Care Quality Commission guidelines state that to be a fit and proper person to be a care home director, a person has to be honest, trustworthy, reliable and respectable. Through numerous complaints from my constituents, including court cases, the director of Wayside care home—which serves my constituents—has repeatedly failed those tests, including by charging for services for deceased residents. Will the Leader of the House please make available Government time for us to debate why care home directors and owners found to be in breach of the stringent professional standards expected of people in their roles are able to continue in their positions, looking after the most vulnerable people in our society?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a serious matter—care providers must employ fit and proper staff. I understand that the provider he mentions has been placed in special measures to ensure it makes significant improvements. The Care Quality Commission can use its enforcement powers to respond to inadequacies and ensure that action is taken. If it is appropriate in this situation, I hope the commission will use those powers.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Could the Leader of the House make a commitment that the new Chancellor of the Exchequer will come to the House on the first day we are back from recess? The current Chancellor has raised taxes on payrolls, and we have fewer payroll jobs; she has raised taxes on businesses, and businesses have closed; and she has raised taxes on non-doms, and millionaires have fled the country. The reality in the world outside is that, with a new Chancellor, we are going to have a whole summer of speculation about other tax rises in the run-up to the Budget. During that period, hiring and investment decisions are going to be put on hold, so I think the Leader of the House can see how important it is that we hear from the new Chancellor at the earliest opportunity.

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady is assuming that there will be a new Chancellor. As of today, the Chancellor has delivered the highest growth in the G7; I see that the most recent numbers confirm that is happening. We have faced a very challenging situation—one that we inherited and that was made worse by aspects of the international situation—yet inflation has fallen. We have also seen interest rates fall after the dramatic rise following the Truss Budget. I therefore do not agree with the hon. Lady's analysis. However, she raises an important point. We are looking at a new Administration—the continuation of a Labour Government, but a new Administration—and I would expect that any Secretary of State and the Prime Minister would want to come to this House to set out their view of what will happen going forward.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): Endometriosis makes life a misery for many women and girls. Far too many are left waiting for diagnosis and treatment, and often they are left without clear communication on their treatment paths. Colchester hospital is the only specialist centre for endometriosis in our county, but waiting times are long. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on improving local services for this debilitating condition?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is unacceptable that women face long waits for the health services they need. We published our renewed women's health strategy to deliver women's health priorities. We are committed to ensuring that women can access the services they need, whether that is through their own GP or through a women's health hub. I encourage my hon. Friend, perhaps on our return, to apply either for a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate, because I think it would be a popular topic for Members from all parts of the House.

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): Families in rural communities may spend the next six weeks finding out that the Government's "kids go free" scheme is not designed for them. In Thornbury and Yate, the Government are funding First Bus, but not the rural local bus companies, so the combined authority has had to foot the bill. I am sure that we are not the only rural community affected. I have written to the Transport Secretary about this, along with more than a dozen other MPs. Will the Leader of the House ensure that we receive an urgent response?

Sir Alan Campbell: I will ensure that the hon. Lady gets a timely response.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): My right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) has made it clear that reindustrialisation will be a key priority for this Government, but in order to be meaningful this must be done with true ambition, delivering good jobs, hope and opportunity in every part of the country, including the small towns of Rossendale and Darwen. To achieve that, we need to move beyond city-centric economics and the outdated assumption that our future is simply as a service economy. We must recognise that national renewal and resilience come from making more things in more places. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we can achieve that?

Sir Alan Campbell: The next Prime Minister has made clear the importance that he attaches to reindustrialisation, particularly in communities that, for a number of reasons, have felt left behind. I am sure that there will be ample time when we return to debate some of these matters, but if my hon. Friend wants to get in quick, a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate might get him an update from the relevant Minister.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): In support of the Government's drive for economic growth and export earnings, may we have a debate in Government time on the role and potential of international inbound tourism? We have a lot of strengths in that sector, but we have lost cost competitiveness, and the introduction of an overnight visitor levy would make that worse.

Sir Alan Campbell: The right hon. Gentleman will appreciate that a new Administration will want to look across some of the commitments that have been made to see whether they want to take them forward. The overseas visitor levy is welcomed by many, but it has caused some concern. I am confident that when we return after the recess he will have an opportunity either to take part in a debate on this matter or to seek such a debate, because we will be discussing it in the autumn.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): Last week I was honoured to welcome the families of those who had been onboard the Lisbon Maru, a freighter that was sunk in 1942, claiming the lives of more than 800 allied prisoners of war. We came together with MPs from across this House and the Minister for Scotland, my hon. Friend the Member for Midlothian (Kirsty McNeill), for a memorial photograph and a special screening of the documentary "The Sinking of the Lisbon Maru". Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking my constituent Gerry Borge and all the members of the Lisbon Maru Memorial Association for ensuring that this tragedy is never forgotten?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in paying tribute to Gerry Borge and all the members of the Lisbon Maru Memorial Association for their work in honouring the memory of those affected by this tragedy. It is important that we remember and pay tribute to the more than 800 allied prisoners of war who lost their lives, as well as the extraordinary endurance of those who survived. We must remember that behind every statistic there are families who did not see their loved ones return.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Last summer, the Prime Minister and his family holidayed in my constituency. Now that he has more time on his hands, he would be very welcome back—as are all hon. Members. If the Leader of the House finds himself unexpectedly with some spare time towards the end of the month, may I invite him to join me on the last Friday in July in the muckle toon of Langholm for the common riding, where he will see Cornet Hope presented with the burgh standard and, accompanied by hundreds of riders, ride around the town boundaries, as well as hear the crying of the Langholm fair by Rae Elliot not once but twice on horseback?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his kind invitation—as ever, I will need to check my diary. On a serious point, common ridings are an important tradition, bringing communities together, preserving local history and putting on a spectacular display for visitors. I join him in thanking all the volunteers who make such events a success and in encouraging people to go and see for themselves what happens.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): GMB union members at Glen Dimplex in my constituency have been on strike for five weeks over proposed workload changes. This week, after showing remarkable grit, they secured a return to the status quo while negotiations continue. Will the Leader of the House provide Government time for a debate on what more can be done to protect workers' rights from unfair changes to their terms and conditions and ensure that employers negotiate in good faith?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend will know that the Government have been instrumental in bringing forward advanced industrial rights for working people; it is therefore sad to learn of what is taking place in her constituency. Should she seek a debate on our return, she could make that case. I hope that the dispute is over by then, but if she wants to hear from the relevant Minister about what further we can do, and perhaps what other measures are needed, she could apply for an Adjournment debate so that she might get that assurance.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): As the school summer holidays start, most children will be excited about six weeks of lazy days and endless play, but for young carers summer can be more like groundhog day, as children as young as five have to support their family. I pay tribute to those children and to MYTime Young Carers in my constituency, which works to support them, along with Romsey Young Carers and Newcastle Carers, who I met last week at the launch of the “Equity for Young Carers” report, where I shared my Bill—the young carers champion Bill—which would ensure that an individual in schools takes responsibility for their education and potential. As we are expecting the education Bill in the autumn, will the Leader of the House agree to a debate in Government time on how we can better support our young carers and ensure that they get the recognition and support services they need?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady raises a really important matter and looks to the legislative route by which we might take for that. I pay tribute to everyone involved with young carers—they do a fantastic and

often unrecognised job. If she wants a meeting with an Education Minister to talk about what might happen in the legislative process, I will help her to achieve that.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Many constituents have reported significant delays in requests from the DVLA for medical information. My constituent Graham, for whom it took five months from first contact with the DVLA to resolve his inquiry, reported that the delay has had a significant impact on his mental health due to the loss of independence. Behind each of these statistics is a person, so I add my name to the welcome call made by my hon. Friend the Member for Erewash (Adam Thompson). Will the Leader of the House arrange for a statement after the recess, so that Transport Ministers can hear about DVLA waiting times from hon. Members and update the House on what they are doing to resolve them?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is unacceptable that people face delays due to medical conditions. We recognise that such delays have knock-on consequences. As I said, the DVLA is working hard to reduce delays and has introduced a new casework system that will improve things significantly, but I will take up the matter with the relevant Minister. If, as they monitor progress, a statement is required on our return, I will certainly give that some thought.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Last week I visited Red Industries in my constituency and heard that discarded nitrous oxide canisters are becoming an increasingly common waste stream. Residents and litter pickers feel and see the same, with canisters strewn across parks and incidents of antisocial behaviour. Will the Leader of the House make time for a debate on what further action is needed to tackle nitrous oxide misuse and clean up our communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is very much at the forefront of the Government's thinking that we want not only to clean up local communities, but to put in their hands the powers to do so. If the right hon. Lady seeks a Backbench Business debate or a Westminster Hall debate, I am sure that her concerns about nitrous oxide and other things will be echoed across the House, and she will find others who will want to join her for that debate.

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): Year 6 McKellen pupils at St Philip Westbrook primary school in my constituency are campaigning against hostile architecture, such as spikes and divided benches, which makes life harder for people experiencing homelessness. Will the Leader of the House join me in praising their courageous advocacy and make time for a debate on ensuring that our public spaces are designed with dignity and compassion in mind?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises an important matter. I commend the McKellen pupils at St Philip Westbrook primary school for their thoughtfulness on these matters. We have been working hard to try to find a long-term solution, including through a national plan to end homelessness and the repeal of the outdated Vagrancy Act, but if my hon. Friend wants to hear directly from a Minister, either a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate would be an appropriate way forward.

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): I recently invited residents to vote for their favourite local businesses in my constituency. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating MLP Wealth Management in Banstead, which won best overall small business; the Chapel in Reigate, which won best independent café; Murray Designs in Reigate, which won best independent shop; and the Garibaldi pub in Redhill, which won best community-supporting small business? Small businesses throughout Reigate, Redhill, Banstead and the surrounding villages are an important part of what makes our area such a great place to live and work, so may we please have a debate on what more we can do in this place to support them?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join the hon. Lady in congratulating everyone who won an award, and I also congratulate her on not only highlighting this matter but playing such an important role in her constituency in doing so—I pay tribute to her for that. The hon. Lady rightly says that small businesses are the heart of our local communities—that is a constant theme running through Government policy. Should she seek an Adjournment debate and a response from a Minister on what more we can do to support small businesses in her constituency, and indeed others, I am sure that would be appropriate.

Emma Lewell (South Shields) (Lab): I echo Mr Speaker's comments at the start of business questions and hope that everyone has a lovely summer.

Reform-led South Tyneside council is planning to close down our publicly run, high-quality STANLEY's—South Tyneside Accredited Network for Learning in the Early Years—nurseries and daycare, which will affect hundreds of children, their families, and staff. The campaigners' petition has attracted more than 11,000 signatures. If the seven STANLEY's centres in South Shields close, the children will have nowhere else to go. Will my right hon. Friend use his good offices to press urgently for tighter controls on councils that ride roughshod over their communities like this?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a great champion for her fantastic constituency, and she highlights a theme of many of our sessions, which is that Reform offers a great deal in order to get elected and then delivers very little when elected. Perhaps because I am an optimist, I hope that South Tyneside council has heard what she has said and changes its mind. I also hope that the affected residents reflect on that and do everything they can for the campaign because, knowing my hon. Friend very well, I can guarantee that she is not going to give up on this.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I herald the passage into law of the Public Office (Accountability) Bill, but many will be disappointed that the judge in Tuesday's High Court hearing had to rule, under current legislation, that the Chinook families were out of time to challenge the Ministry of Defence, which has kept secrets and hidden the truth from them for decades. Will the Leader of the House ask the new Prime Minister and his colleagues to consider how victims of cover-ups might know or discover that they were or are victims of a cover-up, so that they can challenge in good time any Department that is doing the covering up, and to ensure

that legislation associated with the Hillsborough Bill guarantees transparency for victims, not just time limits that protect Government Departments?

Sir Alan Campbell: As the hon. Lady suggests, the next Prime Minister was absolutely central to helping to deliver the Public Office (Accountability) Bill. It is crucial that we got that Bill through this place, and I hope it will see the statute book, but, as the hon. Lady has alluded to, that is just the first step. It is often about changing the culture in institutions. I know the next Prime Minister well, and he is not going to give up on this matter either.

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all colleagues throughout the House a very restful recess.

Can the Leader of the House give us an update on the progress of addressing the backlog of civil service pension scheme cases, particularly those affected by the McCloud judgment? I am extremely concerned that one of my constituents has been retired for two years now and has still to receive their pension scheme benefits.

Sir Alan Campbell: The service provided by Capita has been, quite frankly, dreadful. Too many pension scheme members still face unacceptable delays after years of dedicated public service. After this matter was raised in the House on several occasions, the Minister for the Cabinet Office provided an update on the action we are taking. If my hon. Friend provides me with the details of individual cases, I will see whether we can raise them with the relevant Departments and get a resolution. I am sure the Cabinet Office will want to keep the matter under review and, when we return in September, not only update the House on the progress made but give assurances about the future.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking West Yorkshire fire and rescue for its continued efforts to tackle the wildfire that is currently on Silsden moor? At the height of the incident, 12 fire engines were in attendance. As the risk of wildfires on moorlands increases, may we have a debate in Government time about the Government's decision to ignore the advice from the National Fire Chiefs Council, scientists and conservationists and to ban the controlled rotational burning of heather, which is resulting in more uncontrolled wildfires, peat degradation and severe impacts on biodiversity?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to West Yorkshire fire and rescue service. I fear its services will be called on more in future as climate change has further effect. I will take away and raise with Ministers the hon. Gentleman's particular points, but let me be clear: we have invested around £100 million for the biggest upgrade of national resilience capabilities in nearly 20 years, to combat the escalating threat of wildfires. We have also made available around £2 billion for fire and rescue authorities in England. It is obviously of concern to the hon. Gentleman's local communities, though; let us see what more we can do.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): Lightwood in my constituency is earmarked in the emerging local plan for a whopping 3,000 new homes.

Not only would a development of that size be simply too much for the area, but no masterplan has been brought forward to guide development. Without a proper masterplan, there is a risk of piecemeal development, and my constituents cannot be reassured that there will be the transport, schools, healthcare, protected green spaces and updated water infrastructure that their communities need. Will the Leader of the House make Government time available for a debate on the importance of requiring masterplans for large-scale developments?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend knows that the Government are committed to building 1.5 million new homes to fix our housing crisis and ensure that everyone has a safe, secure and affordable place to live, but she is absolutely right that infrastructure needs to be built alongside those new homes. Our planning frameworks are clear that large-scale development should be sustainable and infrastructure-led. I encourage my hon. Friend to ask for either a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate when we return, so that she can hear directly from a Minister how the situation can be resolved.

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Over recent years, the people of Stockton have seen investment in the local health service, with a new diagnostic centre, a new mental health hub and new state-of-the-art robotics. But North Tees hospital is reaching the end of its life. The outstanding staff who work there deserve a first-class place to work, but instead of a new hospital, all they have had from this Government is 600 job losses. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate on the urgent need for a new North Tees hospital?

Sir Alan Campbell: First, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman—I am sure many of us envy him—on Stockton making the shortlist for town of culture, which is a great tribute to the work taking place there. The Government are of course committed to doing everything they can to address the crisis in the NHS, not least in respect of infrastructure. This Government are different from the last Government, in the sense that we are not just committed to bringing forward plans, albeit I understand the urgency; we are actually going to provide the money for those plans. That was the bit that was missing.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): I want to put on record my thanks to the Prime Minister, not only for turning the Labour party around and getting us elected, but for helping me to be elected as the Member for South Derbyshire so that I can represent constituents of mine such as Abbey Wright, whom I met this week to talk about her beloved dad. Phil Wright died by suicide in April this year at the age of 62, leaving a family devastated by his loss. Abbey and I discussed how I can support her and others who face the loss of a loved one following suicide.

Abbey told me of her family's struggle to get help for her dad, who was so ill that he could not leave the house. Doctor's appointments were offered, but they were by phone, and there were suggestions that he could attend a mental health café. As Phil could not leave the house, this approach was never going to work for him. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to make home visits mandatory in cases like Phil's? People are

sometimes so ill that all other options will not work and a face-to-face assessment is the only option to help prevent crisis points and painful losses of life.

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for raising this matter, and send condolences to Phil Wright's family following this tragic case. We are investing £3.6 million in suicide prevention as part of England's first ever men's health strategy. Both crisis and community mental health teams should be able to visit patients in their home, and it is sad to hear that that did not happen in this heartbreaking case. The NHS is improving, but I acknowledge that more needs to be done. I know that is of little comfort to my hon. Friend's constituents. I will raise this issue with the relevant Minister and ask them to write to her about it.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Thanks to the outsourcing of interpreter and translation services to private providers, qualified interpreters and translators are being exploited through lower pay and are often substituted by those providing substandard services. We have already seen the West Midlands police rely on Cintra for such services—to the detriment of the force, interpreters and my constituents—and NHS Birmingham and Solihull is now on the verge of doing the same through Word360. Will the Leader of the House consider setting some time aside to discuss these predatory practices?

Sir Alan Campbell: These are concerning matters, and the hon. Gentleman is right to raise them. I suggest that he seek either a Westminster Hall debate or an Adjournment debate when we return, so that he can go into further detail on an issue that I am sure is causing distress to some of his constituents.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Our roads in Hastings, Rye and the surrounding villages are riddled with potholes, and it is one of the biggest issues we face. One of the most frustrating things is that on the rare occasion that a pothole gets filled, all the other potholes around it are left untouched. That is why I wrote to the new leader of the Reform-led East Sussex county council on 21 May to urge him to take decisive action on this issue by reviewing the contract with Balfour Beatty and changing the intervention criteria. Two months later, and despite my writing repeatedly to him about this issue, he has not responded to any of my questions about potholes. Does the Leader of the House agree that this shows that Reform is not interested in fixing the issues that local people care about, even when it gets record money from this Labour Government to do so?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this matter, because I know it is of interest to other Members who represent areas that have a Reform administration. The Government are providing councils with a record £7.3 billion over the next four years for local road maintenance. This is not the first time she has raised the underperformance of the Reform-led East Sussex county council in this House. As I have said before, Reform is very good at offering to do a great deal in order to get elected, and then it delivers much less service to residents. I hope that Reform councillors have listened to her contribution today, that they take their job seriously and that they get on with the work that is necessary. The lack of communication from the

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leader of her council is disrespectful to Members of Parliament, and I hope that he has heard my hon. Friend today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Leader of the House for all his answers to our questions and wish him well for the summer. I look forward to returning in September.

Can we have a statement from the Foreign Secretary on the continuing discrimination faced by the Baha'i community in Egypt? The Egyptian authorities continue to refuse to recognise Baha'i marriages, leaving Baha'i children without legal status and denying them access to citizenship rights, residency and, in some cases, education. Will the Leader of the House make time for a statement so that the Government can set out the representations that they are making to the Egyptian authorities on upholding freedom of religious belief and the fundamental rights of the Baha'i community?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his consistent attendance at these sessions, for raising these very important matters and for the tone in which he raises them. He should be commended for that, and he asks a serious question. The UK strongly condemns the persecution of Baha'i communities in many countries around the world. We continue to raise concerns about freedom of religion and belief with the Egyptian authorities, and I will ensure that he gets a response from the relevant Foreign Office Minister.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I joined the Old Meeting church in the centre of Bedworth earlier this summer to celebrate the

300th anniversary of its wonderful building. The church provides a friendly warm space every Friday where everyone can get a great lunch and a good cuppa for a reasonable price, and a repair café every month where people can bring treasured items back to life. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Linda and the other volunteers for the wonderful work that they do for our community?

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly will. My hon. Friend makes a point about the fantastic work that churches and church communities do, which I am sure is echoed around the Chamber. They are absolutely central to our wider communities. I thank Linda and everybody else involved, and I wish them well for the future.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Fireworks play a spectacular and important role in many of our public and private celebrations, but all too often the antisocial and year-round use of loud fireworks causes deep distress to pets, veterans and elderly people in Rochdale, as well as posing a severe wildfire risk on our moorlands. Does the Leader of the House agree that today's Government proposals to restrict the sale of loud fireworks will finally put an end to this misery for many of our constituents?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I do. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to mention the particular risks of loud fireworks and, as was raised earlier, the risk of wildfires. As he suggests, we have published a written statement today that announces the launch of a consultation on fireworks legislation. This issue has been raised with me repeatedly, and I know that Members will want to take the opportunity to ensure that the voices of their constituents are heard.

Local Government Reorganisation

12.27 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): This Government are driving the most ambitious programme of local government reform in a generation by replacing the inefficient two-tier system with new unitary councils so that all parts of our country are ready for devolution. We need to devolve power out of Whitehall so that we can rebalance wealth, power and opportunity right across the country. This is the second richest country in Europe, yet England has seven of the 10 poorest regions in northern Europe. That is the case for change.

Devolution requires strong local councils that deliver good public services and support economic growth, and which are closely connected to the communities they serve. Two-tier structures are confusing for residents, divide responsibilities, slow down decisions, duplicate costs and blur accountability. In many areas, existing boundaries no longer match patterns of local economies, public services or local identities. We cannot continue with an outdated and misaligned system that does not serve local people well. We can do better.

Today I am announcing further decisions on local government reorganisation in the remaining areas of the programme. Subject to parliamentary approval, I have decided to implement proposals for new councils in the following areas. In some of these areas, modification powers will be used to make the boundary changes requested alongside proposals.

The specifics are in the accompanying written statement, and for ease I will refer to the proposals in the following shortened form: in Derbyshire and Derby, the two-unitary option put forward by Chesterfield, Derby, Erewash and High Peak, including boundary changes; in Devon, Plymouth and Torbay, the four-unitary proposal put forward by Exeter and Plymouth, including boundary changes; in East Sussex and Brighton and Hove, the two-unitary proposal, including the boundary changes requested by Brighton and Hove city council, except for the parish of Falmer; the one-unitary proposal in Gloucestershire; the four-unitary proposal in Hertfordshire, including boundary changes, except for the ward of Arbury; in Kent and Medway, the four-unitary proposal put forward by Dover, Swale and Thanet; in Lancashire, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen, the four-unitary proposal put forward by Chorley, Lancaster, Preston, Ribble Valley, South Ribble and West Lancashire; in Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland, a two-unitary option put forward by Leicester city council, including boundary changes; in Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire, the four-unitary proposal put forward by Lincoln city council, including boundary changes, but leaving North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire unchanged; in Nottinghamshire and Nottingham, a two-unitary option put forward by Nottingham city council, including boundary changes; the three-unitary proposal in Oxfordshire, including boundary changes; in Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, the two-unitary proposal put forward by East Staffordshire, Stafford and Cannock Chase, but also by Stoke-on-Trent; the two-unitary proposal in Warwickshire; and the two unitary proposal in Worcestershire. On Cambridgeshire

and Peterborough and West Sussex, I am not making announcements today, because further time is required to get the decisions right.

Everyone involved wants to see stronger local councils delivering better local services that will improve the lives of the people we serve. The decisions announced today will do that, and improve local government for more than 15 million people. We will see 38 councils operating across these areas in place of the current 134. That will result in more than 250 fewer senior posts, significant salary savings and nearly 3,000 fewer councillors, which could save up to £20 million per year on councillor allowances alone across these areas. Councils themselves projected that the decisions could lead to net savings of about £1 billion by the end of 2032-33 when the anticipated benefits are fully realised. Those savings will be reinvested in the frontline services that local people care about the most. Across England, once all decisions are taken, we will have cut the number of councils from 317 to a maximum of 173. That will simplify and strengthen local government serving over 20 million people.

Reorganisation will also support city growth. For example, Plymouth is a nationally significant defence growth location and a house building priority, driven by investment at Devonport. Leicester is a major urban economy facing cross-boundary housing, employment and infrastructure pressures, including unmet housing need. Our decisions today will help those two cities grow, along with others, including Preston, Derby, Nottingham, Exeter, Oxford, Brighton and Hove, and Lincoln. These bigger cities will be crucial in ensuring that our country can build the homes we need.

I am tremendously grateful for all the hard work that councils put in to their proposals, but I appreciate that some Members of this House and some councils will disagree with my decisions. I am sure we can all agree that the hard work of transition to new councils must continue to be a shared endeavour across local and central Government. To protect the services that some of the most vulnerable people in our communities rely on, we all need to get that right.

A broad support offer is in place for councils, including support to councils through our sector advisers and through funding to the Local Government Association. We have already announced £63 million in capacity funding to support the reorganisation process. I am pleased to provide further detail today on how this funding will be allocated. Each area will receive an unprecedented £900,000 per new unitary council in capacity funding. On top of that, we are committing up to £150,000 in supplementary funding, as part of a wider package of support for children's services, adult social care and public health leadership. Taken together, for every reorganisation area, there will be over £1 million in capacity funding for each new unitary council. This is the first time that reorganisation has been supported in this way, and it shows this Government's commitment to supporting councils to ensure that we get these reforms right.

The programme will now move forward in line with the timetable already set out, with elections to the new unitary councils scheduled for May 2027, ahead of new councils taking up their powers in April 2028. Today marks a significant milestone for the future of local government, with decisions now taken on 19 out of 21 two-tier areas across England. Reorganising local government is not a debate about where to draw lines

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on a map or about structures and systems; it is about making real improvements to people's lives and to the communities they are a part of. This reform programme is ambitious, but it is the right thing to do. I commend this statement to the House.

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

12.35 pm

Sir James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement.

This is blatant—blatant. These changes, like so many of the Secretary of State's decisions, have been driven by party politics. He tried to cancel local elections, and he was caught trying to tip the balance in Labour's favour, but nothing in today's statement has done anything to dispel the belief that this is purely partisan. Many communities have been left in limbo, while Labour councils have been allowed to redraw the map on which the future elections in which they will be engaged will be fought. Can he honestly say that that will inspire confidence in the integrity of the process?

If the Secretary of State wanted accusations of gerrymandering to be put aside, why on earth did he create such a clearly gerrymandered set of boundaries? The maps speak for themselves. In Devon, he has accepted the proposals put forward by Labour-run Exeter and Plymouth. In Leicester, he has accepted the submissions by a Labour-controlled council. In Nottingham, he has accepted the proposal put forward by the Labour-run city council. I could go on and on, but time does not permit. How on earth can the Secretary of State expect anyone to believe that the process has been politically impartial?

Devolution should be about transferring powers away from Whitehall. It is about giving freedom to succeed to local areas, and for them to keep the reward of that success, creating the conditions for more investment, more jobs and more opportunity, but none of that is dependent on imposing a single organisational model from Whitehall. Unitaries should never be the admission price for a devolution deal, nor should local areas be compelled into so-called strategic authorities simply because the Secretary of State and Whitehall prefer organisational uniformity. Devolution should mean trusting local people to make local decisions.

The Secretary of State says that he is holding councils to the standards of best value, transparency, consultation, good governance and sound decision making, yet by the very same standards he fails his own test, with minimal consultation, partisan judgments and arbitrary decision making. He speaks about stronger councils, yet some of these new authorities will be burdened with crippling debt from the day they are created. In Nottinghamshire, Conservative-run Rushcliffe council is a well-run, financially secure council, yet under his plans it will be carved up with most of its assets transferred to debt-ridden Labour Nottingham city council. How on earth can weakening well-managed councils to prop up bankrupt ones create a stronger foundation for local government?

What of local democracy? The Secretary of State talks with great pride about how many local representatives will be culled in these proposals, but that means decisions taken further away from the communities they affect and planning powers becoming increasingly removed from the very people who have to live with the implications of those decisions.

The Secretary of State complains about two-tier local government, but his own mayoral proposals create two tiers of local government. So please can he inform the House: is two-tier local government good or is two-tier local government bad? He does not seem to know.

What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the democratic deficit? Given the pace at which he is driving the changes, and the fact that a number of the proposals have still not been outlined and will not be until the autumn, what on earth gives him the confidence that they will be implemented in time for shadow elections in May next year? What assessment has he made of the likelihood of judicial reviews further delaying the timetable before 2029?

The statement raises more questions than it answers. If this proves to be the Secretary of State's final appearance at the Dispatch Box in this role—[HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] Although we do not agree, I have enjoyed working with him across the Dispatch Box; but I hope he recognises the mess that he is leaving behind. He cannot believe that he has squandered this opportunity for genuine devolution. Instead, his legacy will be one of taking power away from local communities, imposing an unfair funding review on councils and gerrymandering local government boundaries. I find it difficult to believe that that is a record he will genuinely be proud of.

Steve Reed: I have also enjoyed working with the right hon. Gentleman, who is, unfortunately, a very effective shadow Secretary of State. I hope that our relationship can continue in this manner for a long time into the future. Unfortunately, the facts do not support the claims he is making. The majority of proposals I have outlined as decisions have cross-party support. I accept that reasonable people may agree or disagree with the decisions, but the important thing for residents is that we move ahead to realise the savings and to secure economic growth, because those things will benefit local people.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about debt. Of course, when the Conservative party was running Woking council, it racked up billions of pounds. The Government have had to intervene and write that off because of the severity of that debt. In fact, councils across the country will realise savings of up to £1 billion—that is the councils' own estimate—that they can then invest in frontline services. That is to the benefit of local people.

The right hon. Gentleman will know that I cannot comment on judicial reviews, but I reassure him and the House that this programme will go ahead, on schedule.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am broadly sympathetic and supportive of the proposals for Staffordshire, as the only MP in Staffordshire already in a single unitary authority, but may I ask the Secretary of State why he did not use the opportunity to make some of the very small consequential changes to the southern boundary of places such as Stoke-on-Trent, where development has spilled into the neighbouring

boroughs but has absolutely no connection with the borough and the council it will now be? Did anyone from his Department physically visit those places to see where he is now creating borders? On council tax harmonisation, my constituents pay the lowest council tax in the county. Is it expected that everybody else will be harmonised to their level—a council tax reduction—or will my constituents see a council tax increase in order to give a council tax cut to some of the wealthiest in the county?

Steve Reed: I have visited my hon. Friend's constituency with him on several occasions and I recognise the work he does to champion his local communities, including through the process we are currently engaged in. Council tax will be a matter for the council to set for itself, within the parameters permitted, and it will take those decisions in due course. The particular split in the case of Staffordshire was proposed and selected to minimise service disruption by aligning with delivery, commuting, patient flows and partnership. The proposal we have adopted will be very strong on financial sustainability and resilience. That will benefit the stability of services, but it should also benefit council tax levels further down the line.

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

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of his statement. I recognise that a lot of work has gone into the proposals by a lot of people, but many of the details add to an existing impression of chaos. We are finally getting sight of the detail just 9.5 months before many affected areas have elections. Councils have been forced into putting time and resources into coming up with proposals, many of which have been ignored. Councillors and officers have been uncertain about their future for the nearly two years it has taken to get to this point. Many communities will feel done to, not done with.

The lack of notice and opportunity to scrutinise the Department's decisions is also a huge concern. The Secretary of State's suggestion that local identities are being considered will come as a huge surprise to my constituents in Culham and Clifton Hampden, which, although many miles from Oxford city centre and surrounded by countryside, will be incorporated into Greater Oxford. Many communities and council wards in Oxfordshire will also now be arbitrarily divided between the new unitary councils. Colleagues in Devon worry that rural communities have been ignored at the expense of new unitaries designed to benefit the needs of cities.

There were endless changes of mind about Sussex elections and boundaries, and now, the fact that a decision has not been made about West Sussex has been met with disbelief. The Government promised to work in partnership with local authorities and rebuild the trust that was shattered over the past decade. What assessment has the Secretary of State made of the long-term financial viability of the proposed unitary structures, given that several of the councils being merged risk being financially unviable?

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his questions. Long-term financial viability is one of the main reasons why the process is taking place. It was one

of the key criteria on which the final decisions have been taken. He will find the details in the written ministerial statement.

Of course it is necessary to consult, and of course that means that areas will put forward proposals. Today, the Government are responding to those proposals. In the cases of Oxford and Devon, and in the other cases he has referred to, the selected option was chosen because it is the best for economic growth. Right at the start of my statement, I pointed out that despite us having the second-richest economy in Europe, we have seven of the 10 poorest regions in northern Europe. We cannot allow that to continue. We need economic growth. That is how we put more money in people's pockets, and that is what this Government are focused on.

In the case of West Sussex, where we had a re-consultation, we have received an awful lot of additional information, and I think it is only right to consider that information carefully before coming to a final decision. We owe that respect to the parties, councils and residents' groups that took the trouble to provide responses.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I come to Back Benchers, let me say that, as Members will be aware, a lot of you wish to get in. It would be very helpful if questions were succinct.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): The Secretary of State and I have known each other a long time—we served in local government together—and he knows that I am as passionate as he is about bringing power back closer to people, but I have to say to him, in all honesty, that the decision to split my home community of Gedling borough in half and force communities in Gedling into an expanded new Nottingham city council area against their will is bad for my constituents and bad policymaking. I have to tell the Secretary of State that this is a decision that I cannot and will not support.

Will the Secretary of State tell me what on earth makes sense about creating two councils for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, when official figures show that from day one, one of them will be £147 million better off than the other? Will he explain to my constituents why the Government have backed the option that did not adhere to the strict criteria set out by the Government at the start of this process? Finally—thank you for your forbearance, Madam Deputy Speaker—given his announcement that he will hold off on making a decision on Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, will he re-think on Nottingham and Nottinghamshire, and hold off on making a decision until an agreement can be made in my part of the world?

Steve Reed: First of all, I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the way he always champions and represents the views and interests of his constituents. We have indeed known each other for a very long time, and I always appreciate his views, even when we disagree. I will, of course, be happy to ensure that he has a meeting with me or a relevant Minister to discuss his concerns, but the decision we have taken on Nottingham and Nottinghamshire was made because it offers the strongest economic geography, and allows economic growth to happen at pace. That will benefit everyone living in Nottinghamshire. We really must take decisions

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that will tackle the wide economic divides that are pulling this country apart. Everyone everywhere in this country deserves the chance to get on, and that means bringing investment and good jobs to every single part of this country. This is what this proposal is intended to achieve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I call the Father of the House.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): One of the poorest wards in the entire country is Gainsborough south-west ward. Why is the Secretary of State splitting West Lindsey in half? Why is he taking Scampton away from Gainsborough? It makes no sense. Why is he cutting away the nuclear fusion site from Lincoln? Why is he loading debt on Lincoln city council—for example, for the Hykeham bypass? There is no logic in this, other than it being a stitch-up by Lincoln Labour party. This is the only Labour-controlled council in Lincolnshire. Everybody else has been treated with complete contempt.

Steve Reed: The right hon. Gentleman is a doughty champion of his constituents, as we just saw. The Government have published criteria against which the proposals have been judged, and the decisions are being taken. The decision for Lincolnshire give Lincoln the space to grow; it allows economic and housing growth, which will benefit people right across the council, and will strike the best balance on service delivery, reflecting both urban and rural needs across the county. That is why we have taken the decision.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): The announcement today and the proposals in it are completely unacceptable. I reject them in the strongest terms—[*Interruption.*] Don't heckle me. I have been saying this all along, so let me finish; I speak for my constituents. There is nothing in the proposals that reflects the views that I have consistently put to Ministers, or any acknowledgment of the concerns I have heard from thousands of people in Newcastle-under-Lyme.

How does the Secretary of State think we can protect the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme from the debt held by Staffordshire county council, Staffordshire Moorlands district council and Stoke-on-Trent city council? Why should any of my constituents have faith in the proposals, which they do not want? It is utterly unacceptable and a disgrace that the statement has been put to the House on the final day of term, four days before a new Prime Minister takes office. It is not too late to stop and think again. The Secretary of State said a minute ago that he was going to pause to get other proposals right, and I urge him to do the same on this one.

Steve Reed: It is important that we get the process moving, because we will not realise the benefits of economic growth, job opportunities and money in people's pockets if we keep delaying it. We need to get it completed in this Parliament and get areas ready for the mayoral devolution that will follow. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend, and support him in ensuring that his constituents will benefit from the changes. I know from earlier conversations that he is keen to ensure that we maintain the unique heritage and identity of those communities, and I will support him in doing that.

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I welcome the moratorium on, and potential saving of, West Sussex, in response to my opposition and that of thousands of residents who did not want our historic county cleaved in two. Now that he has acknowledged that the proposal from the Government was less sustainable than the status quo, will the Secretary of State remove the jeopardy and confirm that he will not be proceeding with the proposal, and will instead save West Sussex?

Steve Reed: West Sussex will benefit from eventual local government reorganisation, just as other areas will, because of the savings from two-tier duplication, which we can plough straight into the frontline services that matter to the hon. Gentleman's constituents and residents across the county. As I said to the hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), there was a re-consultation, and we have had a vast amount of information coming in. I did not want to push ahead with a decision before we had considered all the views that were shared. We will look to proceed and announce as soon as we can after the summer recess. The intention is that the timetable for elections will remain the same.

Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab): The Secretary of State mentioned in his statement that part of the driver of the proposals is that he wants to do something about areas of high deprivation. However, the plans presented today would make East Lancashire one of the most deprived unitary authorities in the country. What will the Government do to support areas like East Lancashire, if these plans are pursued, to ensure that we do not become a place of incredibly high deprivation, and that we are an area that benefits from economic growth?

Steve Reed: I have long recognised that my hon. Friend is a strong champion of the communities that she represents, and I am grateful to her for raising those points. We had a number of proposals for Lancashire, which were assessed against the criteria. The option we selected was chosen because it aligns with economic areas, commuting patterns and transport links, which will support inward investment, skills development and jobs, and therefore put money in the pockets of residents across her splendid county.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): The proposals are not the result that I wanted for my constituency or Gloucestershire. However, I am a reasonable man, and I am willing to take the Secretary of State at his word. Will he reassure me that the new Gloucestershire unitary will not end up coming to the Government with a begging bowl on day one, because the Government are not giving it enough money, including to fill the potholes that I am told about every day by my constituents? To prevent that, will he designate the Golden Valley in west Cheltenham an area for retained council tax? That would help Gloucestershire to become more financially sustainable by allowing us, as the incoming Prime Minister would say, to keep the proceeds of growth that we are creating in our area.

Steve Reed: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his support in principle for the changes that we are making. The option we selected for Gloucestershire was chosen in part because it was the strongest financial case, for precisely the reasons that he has just outlined. There

will be savings from eliminating duplication, which will be ploughed back into the frontline services that he cares about, and that are the most important consideration for his constituents.

Dr Lauren Sullivan (Gravesham) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. In Gravesham, we mostly advocated for option 5A and against options 1A and 4D. I welcome the decision to pursue 4B, as it is clear that the Government have listened to the calls for smaller communities that are local to councillors, and that keep local identity while having room for growth and jobs. One concern remains about the debt for Kent and Medway councils. Thanks to a Labour council, Gravesham is financially sound; how can the Government ensure that the new authority will continue to be like Gravesham?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is right that her council has achieved something remarkable in stabilising its finances, and therefore the foundation of its public services, so well. The option we selected for Kent is intended to support economic growth, which will benefit my hon. Friend's residents and the financial stability that she is keen to see continue. That is how we can ensure good-value and secure public services for her constituents and others across the county of Kent.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): I can see the sense in what the Secretary of State is trying to achieve with this reorganisation, and the target of 500,000 people per unitary authority makes a lot of sense—it brings a lot of people together. But why, after Wyre Forest district council voted for the single unitary, did the Secretary of State deliver a two-unitary solution for Worcestershire? North Worcestershire, where Wyre Forest is, will consist of 293,000 people. We are now splitting up adult social care, children's services, highways, education and refuse disposal. It does not make financial sense. Will the Secretary of State reconsider what is being proposed for Worcestershire, and go with a single unitary authority?

Steve Reed: It is of course important that the critical services that the hon. Gentleman referred to are protected and become stronger through reorganisation. It is because we will be able to secure savings, and invest them back in frontline services, that I believe reorganisation will benefit his constituents. The area size was a target, not a threshold. There were other factors in the published criteria that weighed on my mind as we took those decisions, including economic growth, potential for housing—given that we face a housing crisis in this country—and people's local identity.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): Unitary authorities have big benefits, but I am angry about the proposals. According to our own statistics, the new East Lancs authority—with Blackburn, and without the Ribble Valley—will create the most deprived unitary authority in the country, with an awful lot of debt already on its books. We are going to need a lot of cash to make it work, and I cannot support it. Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield will not stand for being part of Greater Blackburn. The headquarters of the new authority must not be in Blackburn, and the accountable officer must not be a Blackburner. Our people, bondholders,

culture, businesses and communities cannot be steamrolled and forgotten in this way, much though I like the hon. Member for Blackburn (Mr Hussain). Does the Secretary of State agree?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and always championing the interests of his residents. I would remind him that through fair funding, we have realigned Government funding for local authorities with deprivation and need, which will ensure that funding is distributed fairly in a way that it was not during the 14 years of the previous Government. The decisions for Lancashire were taken in part because of the strong alignment with economic areas, commuting patterns and transport links, because that is the way we can attract inward investment to bring the jobs that will put money in the pockets of his constituents and other people across the county of Lancashire.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): Eleven thousand people in Oadby, Wigston and Great Glen recently voted in a referendum against joining the city of Leicester. Ministers know that people do not want this locally, and yet they are forcing it on them anyway. People in the rest of Harborough are losing their local council, to be replaced by a giant, remote, doughnut-shaped council for the whole county. Ministers are doing this on their last day in office. They think they know best, and have the arrogance to inflict this on a community they know nothing about. I want to know whether the Minister will publish all the advice and correspondence he had before making this decision so that we can see that the only person he has listened to is the Labour Mayor of Leicester, and the rest of us can just get stuffed.

Steve Reed: I would remind the hon. Gentleman that the vast majority of these proposals have cross-party support. We have taken the decisions about Leicestershire, as in other cases, because they are the best way to secure the economic growth that the area needs and deserves, so that we can put money in people's pockets, eliminate duplication and invest the savings in frontline services. We are interested in protecting the services his residents rely on, even if he is not.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Reorganisation makes sense. The situation that we have now, with services split across a borough or district council and a county council, causes many issues. If a drain is blocked by leaves that are on top of the drain, it is one council; if the leaves are below the drain, it is another. We had a big fire last week, and the responsibilities were again split between two councils. As the Secretary of State knows from our conversations, it is vital that the voices of the coastal community that I represent are not overridden in this process. Can he assure me that we in Hastings and Rye will retain powers to summon certain people who deliver services, be that the academy trusts, the cabinet members for social care or for potholes, or the integrated care board? We need those powers, because right now we do not have them. Can he give me an assurance that Hastings and Rye will be at the front of the queue for those new powers?

Steve Reed: I have visited my hon. Friend's constituency with her on many occasions, so I know at first hand that she is one of the strongest advocates for her constituents

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of any Member in the House. She makes an important point there, because we do not want to lose the voice of individual towns such as Hastings and Rye within unitarisation. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 allows for what are referred to in the legislation as “area committees” but which could sit as town committees, operating as a scrutiny function, to call in the providers of public services and hold them to account within the locality that makes sense to local people.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): What would the Secretary of State say to my constituents in Broxbourne, who never asked for this reorganisation and are concerned that it is just a waste of time and money that will leave them with higher council tax bills and less say over local planning decisions?

Steve Reed: I would say to the constituents of the hon. Gentleman, with whom I have conversations quite often—not least on the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, of which he is a distinguished member—that the selections for the county were made because they best reflect the distinct economic areas that operate across the county, because they will keep services closer to residents by organising around where people live, work and travel, and because they will make the best set of proposals for attracting further inward investment into the county, which will, I am sure, benefit his constituents, as well as others across the county.

Jo White (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry on the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I have grave concerns about the Nottingham and Nottinghamshire proposal, under which there will be an extreme deficit of a predicted nearly £150 million. Most of our areas, because of the demographics in our post-coalfield communities, are band A with high social care needs. I cannot see how this proposal will cover those costs. The Secretary of State has talked about a rebalance; I perceive it as an imbalance. A city solution will sacrifice my communities, who are an hour away from Nottingham, and will not solve the problems that left-behind communities have experienced for far too long. I ask the Minister to meet as soon as possible the six Labour MPs who have expressed severe concerns about this proposal.

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for sharing her views with me in advance of this statement. Of course, I would be more than happy to ensure that the meeting she has requested goes ahead, and that she and other colleagues in the county are able to express their views directly to a Minister. I would just like to put on the record that the proposal that we accepted for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire was the most financially stable option and the best for economic growth and jobs in the area, and the option that best supports mayoral authority growth ambitions within the county. All of that will, I hope, benefit her residents and others living across the county.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): What a poisoned chalice this Secretary of State is leaving for the incoming Prime Minister. I have a very specific

question to put to him. A report published in *The Times*—online on 18 June, and in the paper the following day—stated categorically that this Secretary of State had overruled senior civil servants and lawyers from three different Departments in order to make decisions that were favoured politically by Labour council leaders. Was that report correct or was it false?

Steve Reed: I would just remind the right hon. Gentleman, as I have said several times already today, that the vast majority of the proposals that we have accepted have cross-party support. As much as the Opposition might like to pretend that this is being done in the interests of only one party—I would suggest that the right hon. Gentleman listens to some of the criticisms from the Labour Benches, too, if he thinks that is true—it is not the case. Many of the proposals were not only supported by Conservatives, but put forward by Conservatives.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and for delivering the option supported by five out of seven councils in Worcestershire, including the Conservative leaders of Wychavon, Bromsgrove and my council, Redditch borough council. I am hopeful that the decision to create North and South Worcestershire unitaries will mean those two distinct communities will now be able to deliver more tailored local services and, in Redditch’s case, actually deliver a fit-for-purpose economic development plan, which we have not had for 20 years. This will not be an easy time for staff in those seven affected councils. Can the Minister assure me that the Government will provide the money and support needed to make this transition a success?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is quite right to point out that the proposal we have accepted was put forward with cross-party support—the opposite of the claims of Opposition Members, who are trying to politicise a situation, when that played absolutely no part whatsoever in the decisions. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that these proposals for Worcestershire will benefit his constituents in Redditch because they will attract more inward investment, which means more jobs for the future and more money in the pockets of people living in Redditch, as well as across the rest of the beautiful county of Worcestershire. I have announced additional funding for every area going through reorganisation to ensure that services—particularly those used by the most vulnerable—can safely transition to the new organisations that will be responsible for them from April 2028.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The dictionary definition of gerrymandering is the manipulation of boundaries to suit a particular party, and decision after decision after decision in Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Derbyshire and many, many more have, surprisingly, been the local Labour party’s proposal. Is the Secretary of State aware that the decisions made around the local government reorganisation have directly contradicted the very criteria set by the Government and, as such, will result in multiple judicial reviews?

Steve Reed: I remind the hon. Gentleman that the vast majority of the proposals I have accepted have cross-party support. If he has been listening to these exchanges so far, but he will have noticed that not every

single Labour Member supports every single decision that I am making, which rather contradicts the case that he is trying to make.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): So much has been said across north Staffordshire about local government reorganisation, but it is important that we deal with facts. Can the Secretary of State please outline, in simple terms, how reorganising our local councils will benefit residents across Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove, whether they are in Mow Cop or Milton, Butt Lane or Baddeley Green, Talke or Tunstall, or anywhere in between?

Steve Reed: I recognise what a powerful champion my hon. Friend is for his constituents. The decision we took on Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent was taken because it is the best for economic growth and housing. Those are two of the great challenges facing the county and his constituents, and we need to tackle them. We want to support his constituency, so that we see more investment coming in, which will bring in the jobs that local people want. That will give them a better future and put money in their pockets. We want to expand prosperity to every single part of this country, including to his constituents, for whom he is such a powerful champion.

Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con): The Secretary of State claims that decisions reflect local identities. Well, I can advise him that the majority of my constituents and those living in rural Devon would highly disagree. Instead, we have an urban Labour stitch-up that ignores the plethora of rural voices who oppose Plymouth and Exeter's land-grab plans and creates a rural council that would be two and a half hours from north to south and two hours wide. Is he also aware that he is creating a two-tier system? Parish precepts are likely to remain on the bills of South Hams residents, who will be paying higher council tax than the city dwellers. Does the Secretary of State agree that this bakes in inequality from day one?

Steve Reed: I am afraid to say to the hon. Lady that the south-west is sadly one of the poorest regions in the country, and her party left it that way. We are reorganising local government, and in the case of Devon we are doing so in a way that best aligns boundaries with economic geographies and transport planning so that we can get investment into Devon, which will bring the jobs that her constituents need and put money in their pockets. She may be against that, but Labour Members want to see her constituents prosper.

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): I welcome the model proposed for Hertfordshire, with four unitary authorities. Very importantly for me and my constituency, it keeps Hatfield and Welwyn Garden City together, and I am looking forward to working even more closely with my hon. Friend the Member for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia). It makes sense because of the A1(M) corridor and our shared history of new towns and garden cities. Would my right hon. Friend agree that the single biggest benefit for residents is no longer having to navigate the complexity and confusion of a two-tier council system? We will have one council and one point of accountability for the delivery of services.

Steve Reed: I have had the pleasure of visiting my hon. Friend's constituency with him. Indeed, I know the county very well because it is where I was brought up. He is absolutely right. The savings that we will realise through local government reorganisation will be ploughed straight back into the frontline services that he and his constituents care about the most. They will see a benefit from that, and greater inward investment. That will bring further jobs and opportunities that people in Hertfordshire deserve.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): If we had to have change, I thank the Secretary of State for listening to the vast majority of people Gloucestershire and coming up with the best proposal that was on the table. However, my real worry about all this—we have done a lot of work on the Public Accounts Committee on it—is what happens if small councils that have financial problems are merged into one big council. A number of small financial problems makes one very big financial problem. He really has to consider that when thinking about how we go forward with local government in the future.

Steve Reed: I believe that the option we have selected was the one supported by the Conservative party in Gloucestershire. We selected it because it was the strongest and most stable option, and presented the strongest financial case. There will be savings coming through this process, and they can be ploughed back into improving the frontline services that residents in Gloucestershire want to see running far better. It is good to know that they have the hon. Gentleman's support in seeking to achieve that.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Can I make another exhortation for short questions, please?

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome the four-unitary model for Devon, as I think it best serves the interests of everyone across Devon. This has been a long time in the making for Exeter. It has been increasingly unsustainable to retain Exeter—an economic driver of the region—as a district council. Does the Minister agree that this proposal will allow Exeter to better drive sustainable economic growth, jobs and opportunity, and will mean that decision making is better represented by the people in my city?

Steve Reed: I have visited Exeter and know what a great champion my hon. Friend is for his constituents, who live in what is surely one of the most beautiful cities in the country. It has such growth potential, and this proposal will benefit the people living there. The proposal that we have accepted for Devon will allow Exeter to achieve its true potential, as part of a Devon that can also achieve its wider potential. We cannot allow the south-west to continue to be one of the poorest regions of the country. People living there deserve the same opportunities as people who live in wealthier parts of the country.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): This could be worse for Torbay unitary authority. However, it is a catastrophic carve-up for Devon, led by Exeter and Plymouth—both Labour councils—and driven forward by a Labour

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Minister, which will result in a rural rump in Devon. Can the Minister please advise us on his belief as to the financial viability of this rural rump of Devon?

Steve Reed: Financial viability was one of the key criteria against which we assessed all the proposals, and we selected the most viable options in all cases where that was before us. We would certainly not have accepted proposals that were not financially viable. I believe that the hon. Gentleman's constituents will benefit from the proposals because of the inward investment that will be brought into Devon, the jobs it will attract and the money that will be put into local people's pockets. I know that he and I share a determination to correct the economic imbalances that hold back people who are living in Devon. They deserve more access to opportunity. Thanks to these proposals, that is what they will get.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State and his officials for all their hard work. I lobbied hard for a single unitary in Warwickshire, and I know that is not the decision that he has been made. There is pretty much near unanimity among politicians and officials at Rugby borough council and Warwickshire county council. Will the Secretary of State ensure that he looks at the disparities around tax income in the north of the county versus the amount of expenditure on services? Will he also ensure that towns and parish councils get a proper role, and that the role of MPs is protected, because it sometimes feels as though our role is diminished in this new ecosystem of government?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for his question. I recognise what a strong champion he is for his constituents. I am sorry that he did not get his preferred option in this case. We had to select the option that we believe will be best, against the criteria that we have published. He is quite right to be concerned about the voice of people living in distinct areas in the county. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 allows for area committees or town committees that can operate with the councillors who are elected on to the unitary operating within that particular locality. They can act as a scrutiny committee and call in those responsible for public services or other decisions affecting the town or rural area. That way, they can really champion their needs and hold to account those who are taking the decisions.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): When a Minister comes to the House on the last day before summer recess to announce proposals that his own MPs describe as “utterly unacceptable”, “sacrificing their communities” and “a disgrace”, and other proposals such as those for Cambridgeshire are put on hold, it is a clear sign of a flawed process. He has given no detail as to how long the delay is for Cambridgeshire or what the additional information he is now seeking is. Will he publish that today, or will residents in Cambridgeshire be left in the lurch over the summer, not knowing for how long this farce will go on, or what further information is being sought?

Steve Reed: In the case of Peterborough and Cambridgeshire, it is right that we take the time to get the decision absolutely right. I offer reassurance to the

right hon. Gentleman and his constituents that our full intention is that the election schedule for 2027 will go ahead as timetabled and that the new unitaries will come into force in April 2028.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I am a strong proponent of unitaries, given that the root-cause of many of the problems in my constituency is the fact that we have districts and the county council. There is no perfect solution for anywhere, and everywhere is special, but Kent has a lot of elements that are particularly special. We have three coasts, links to the continent and the rest of the country and, in my constituency, two industrial towns that are completely outwith the rest of the county's economy. There are challenges around the decision that was made, particularly where transport links and NHS boundaries do not line up. Also, because the constituency has been separated from the rest of the Thames estuary, we are missing out on huge economic potential. Will the Secretary of State outline what we will do to accelerate devolution powers to Kent and my constituency—particularly to ensure that we are creative so that we do not just follow the medieval boundaries but maybe bring in some emergency development corporations so that we can bridge the gap?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. That really is enough.

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for the creativity in his proposals, which would further benefit his constituents and Kent. I am happy to ensure that he has a meeting with the relevant Minister to discuss those. The option that we have accepted for Kent gives us the best alignment with functional urban areas and allows us to attract inward investment that will benefit people in his constituency and right across the county. However, I am happy to discuss some of the other ideas that he has just put forward.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Residents, local leaders and businesses in South Cambridgeshire have been left in limbo by the last-minute announcement that the Government cannot yet determine the optimal option for Cambridgeshire's local government reorganisation. Does the Secretary of State understand the chaos that risks causing in one of the fastest-growing places in the country? Will he reassure me and local leaders that he will build on local successes, partnerships and the robustly evidenced proposals put forward, rather than on a proposal that smacks of irrational gerrymandering?

Steve Reed: I hope the hon. Lady will agree that we should take the time to get it right, rather than rush into a decision that I do not think would be right at the moment. The intention is that the elections will go ahead in 2027 as scheduled. The final decision will be brought forward as early as possible after the summer recess, so people in her constituency and elsewhere in the county can know with certainty how they are moving forward.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): My role as an MP is to speak up on behalf of my constituents in Peterborough. The mess of local government is not the reason for the announcement today; it is the decade of austerity, cuts and underfunding of places such as Peterborough that has left us in the sorry mess that

local government finds itself in. Peterborough is the fastest-growing city in Cambridgeshire, yet we have already heard two Members who are part of our reorganisation not even talk about my city and instead just talk about Cambridgeshire as a whole. One of our troubles is that successive Government policies have sought to erase Peterborough from the map by talking just about development in Cambridgeshire and Cambridge, and forgetting that we are the biggest city in the county and an engine of growth. Will the Secretary of State reassure me that we will know the criteria soon, that economic growth will be part of that, and that economic growth will happen in all parts of our ceremonial county, not just in Cambridge?

Steve Reed: I have had the great pleasure of visiting Peterborough with my hon. Friend on many occasions. He is always very powerful in putting forward the case for the city and the people who live there, and that includes, as he has just shown, his determination to ensure that Peterborough continues to grow in a way that will bring in jobs and investment and put more money in the pockets of his constituents. He is quite right to point to fair funding, because that has corrected unfair funding settlements for Peterborough over a very long time. The final decision on Cambridgeshire and Peterborough will be brought to this House as early as possible after the summer recess. It is important that we get the decision right rather than rush it now, but I will ensure that he is fully involved in those conversations as we move forward.

Edward Argar (Melton and Syston) (Con): I live in my patch and I know that there will be genuine local fury at the contempt this Government have shown for my constituents in approving a Leicester city land grab, which has cross-party opposition locally. I have been clear throughout, as have my local councillors and my residents, in our opposition to a Leicester city land grab that will take county communities such as Syston, Thurmaston, Queniborough, Barkby and Beeby into the city and see local residents paying more tax for almost certainly less in the way of services. I continue to oppose what the Secretary of State has announced today, so I have a simple question for him: what makes him think that the views of the Labour Leicester city mayor are worth more than the views of thousands of my constituents?

Steve Reed: As the right hon. Gentleman will have heard during the statement, there are reasonable people who support and oppose various decisions that we are taking today, but it is important that we move forward. In the case of Leicester and Leicestershire, the option that we have selected is the one that will best allow economic growth in that county. That is how we bring in the jobs and the opportunities that will put more money in the pockets of his constituents. I hope that, in time, he will come to welcome that.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for his statement confirming the outcome for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland. With three very different options on the table, it is inevitable, as we have heard, that there will be opposing views on the outcome. My priority throughout this process has been to secure the best outcome for North West

Leicestershire, in services such as planning, highways, housing, care and buses, and to make navigating the complex system of local government that much easier for residents. However, the biggest barrier to growth for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland is being without a mayor. Will the Secretary of State outline how devolution powers can be delivered post local government reorganisation?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for the way in which she champions her constituents, whom she so ably represents. She is quite right: one of the key reasons for local government reorganisation is to streamline local government so that areas right across England are ready for mayoral devolution and the additional powers that will come with that in due course. That benefits people across the country where they already have those powers, and I want to see it extended right across the country, including to her constituents.

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, as I am an East Cambridgeshire district councillor. There will clearly be a great deal of uncertainty across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Has the Secretary of State considered additional funding for the electoral staff who are planning for elections in May, which the Secretary of State says he intends will go ahead, when they do not know the boundary of the council, let alone the ward boundaries or the number of councillors? Will he also explain what process he has in place to liaise and consult with local people over the next few months to make a proper decision on what will happen in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough?

Steve Reed: I will ensure that the decision is taken in good time for the appropriate electoral arrangements to be put in place. That will be shortly after the summer recess. The council will then be able to prepare for those elections. As I made clear in my statement, there is a record amount of money available for transitioning services into the new authorities, which her constituents and her constituency will also benefit from.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): Local Amber Valley leaders and I support devolution, but we are incredibly concerned about the decision to split Amber Valley between two unitary authorities, particularly because the option selected was not subject to public consultation. It also places a huge burden on Amber Valley borough council during the reorganisation, with double the amount of work. I am thinking about my constituents and their absolute right to excellent public services throughout the process, and the Secretary of State will know, through my many representations, of my concern about capacity to deliver the change. My local authority is considering the next steps, and the Secretary should know that that includes all options available to them. I am pleased to hear about the capacity funding—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady needs to ask a question, as indeed do all Members, as quickly as possible, because this is taking a very long time.

Linsey Farnsworth: Will the Secretary of State give a commitment that the lion's share of the capacity funding for Derbyshire will go to Amber Valley, given that we are the most affected?

Steve Reed: I can attest to the fact that my hon. Friend is a powerful and frequent advocate for her constituents in Amber Valley. The option that we have accepted is the one that best supports economic growth across the county. That will best support her constituents' ambitions and aspirations for themselves, their children and their communities. It was also the one that we believed best reflected Derbyshire's north-south geographies and economies. I am always happy to ensure that she has a meeting with relevant Ministers to discuss any further concerns that she has.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): With a stroke of his Whitehall pen, the Secretary of State has just abolished Malvern Hills district council, Worcester city council, wonderful Wychavon district council and Worcestershire county council. He said in his statement that this is about making "real improvements to people's lives and...communities". Can he explain how it will help with the situation faced by my constituents, in which two major highways in west Worcestershire have collapsed and the council has no plan to repair them? This chaos is surely going to slow that down.

Steve Reed: It is regrettable that the hon. Lady appears to be defending a system with so much duplication that money is being wasted on multiple tiers of senior officers when it could be saved and ploughed back into the frontline services that might address the very concern that she is talking about. Labour Members and I want to see public money spent on frontline services, not wasted on duplication. I urge her to consider that what she advocates would see more waste and less money available for her constituents.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Like many in Cannock Chase, I am glad that this reorganisation, which no one asked for and no one voted for, is finally nearing its conclusion. It is fair to say there was not a whole lot of consensus on council boundaries in Staffordshire, but there is consensus on wanting a combined authority, so that we can seize the opportunities open to other parts of England and turbocharge growth in our incredible county. Will the Secretary of State give me some reassurance that we can get on with this as quickly as possible, for the benefit of the people of Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent?

Steve Reed: As always, my hon. Friend is powerfully advocating for his constituents. The option we selected is the one that is the best for growth. It will support opportunities in Stoke-on-Trent and Cannock Chase, bringing in investment and creating new job opportunities, so that people living in the area can access the same opportunities that people in other parts of the country take for granted but that people in his county have been denied for far too long. We are here, and he is here, to change that.

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is astonishing that the decision for West Sussex has been postponed yet again. I understand that local council leaders received the information only this morning, in a six-minute phone call during which they were not allowed to ask questions. There is a high degree of consensus about what to do, but the Labour group on the south coast wishes to gerrymander a coastal authority that would

be unviable from day one—the very thing about which the Secretary of State professes to be concerned. Will he, or his successor, have a meeting with all local leaders before we commit ourselves to this disastrous decision?

Steve Reed: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that there was a re-consultation on the situation in West Sussex, and an awful lot of stakeholders across the county submitted evidence. He would surely agree that it is only right and respectful that we take the time to consider all those proposals, rather than ignoring them and taking a decision without listening to what local people have said.

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. The option taken for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire sees Broxtowe borough council split in two; Eastwood and Brinsley will sit in the county and the rest of the borough will form part of the Greater Nottingham authority. What consideration has he given to the additional difficulties that splitting up an area will cause for our public services and electoral services?

Steve Reed: I remind my hon. Friend of the additional funding that is available for transitional arrangements; that is a recognition of the challenges that she has just described. The option we have selected for Nottingham and Nottinghamshire is the one that is the most financially sustainable and the best for economic growth. We cannot allow the wide economic chasms across this country, which the Conservative party did nothing about, to continue. Her constituents deserve far better futures than those left to them by the Conservatives.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): The Secretary of State has announced that there will be a delay to the decision in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough. Most Cambridgeshire and Peterborough MPs are in the Chamber, but he has not gone into more detail on the reasons for the delay. What specific issues are causing a delay to the decision in Cambridgeshire and Peterborough?

The Secretary of State also mentioned that the election timeline will be stuck to, so when will the structural changes order need to be made for Cambridgeshire to ensure that the elections can be delivered? Finally, he offered the hon. Member for Peterborough (Andrew Pakes) a meeting to further discuss these concerns; will he extend the same courtesy to me?

Steve Reed: I am happy to extend the opportunity of a meeting to the hon. Gentleman so that he can make clear his views. It is important that we take time to get decisions right in cases where I am not satisfied that the information available is sufficient, so we are doing that. We will make the announcements in due course, and the elections will go ahead as scheduled in 2027.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): I have so often been frustrated when constituents come to me with their problems with a district council, a borough council or the county council, and the councils pass the buck between them, so I am a strong advocate of people having a single unitary council. I am particularly pleased that the decision for Hertfordshire is a new central authority that goes along the A1(M) corridor, which

would be great for our local economy. That is a major undertaking, so what review of the benefits and challenges of reorganisation will there be in the years ahead?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend is a very powerful champion for Stevenage, and I have had the pleasure of visiting the constituency with him on numerous occasions. He is right to point to the many problems that come with duplication and the benefits of eliminating it. Buckinghamshire council estimates that it costs it £30,000 just to tell people that they have phoned the wrong council. That money will now be available in that county, and similar amounts will be available in other areas going through a reorganisation, to invest in frontline services. That will benefit his constituents.

The way we will measure the benefits of the changes is through improved frontline public services. I have also announced proposals for an outcomes framework and a neighbourhood guarantee, so that my hon. Friend and residents can see for themselves how well their services are performing compared with other councils in the area and across the country.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Essex is a county of nearly 2 million people who are opposed to Labour's plans by more than two to one, yet in a train-crash statement that has lasted more than an hour, the Secretary of State has not referred to Essex once. What on earth is going on in Essex? We are going to have shadow elections in May, but we may not know until autumn which councils are having the elections. When will we learn what is happening in Essex? Is there any chance at all, given the overwhelming public opposition, that he will drop the whole barmy proposal?

Steve Reed: I am sorry that the right hon. Gentleman seems to have forgotten that I made the announcements about Essex in a previous statement—perhaps he was not paying attention, but he should have been. I am sorry, as well, that he is against the savings that this will deliver, which will be invested in the frontline services that his residents will benefit from. When that funding goes in, perhaps he would like to write to his residents to tell them that he opposed the additional funding for those public services, and that it is Labour that put the money in.

Mr Francois: What are you doing in Essex?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Mr Francois!

Mr Francois: He did not make a—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Good temper and moderation are called for at all times in this Chamber.

Jodie Gosling (Nuneaton) (Lab): I welcome today's decision, which brings an end to decades of destabilising indecision across Warwickshire, and I thank the Government for being decisive. The decision, which has cross-party support from four of the five districts in Warwickshire, will empower North Warwickshire to focus on growth, investment and funding to meet the needs of our communities, and allow us to be the masters of our own destiny. A previous report raised concerns about sustainability—this was before the Government's generous

settlement under fair funding—so can the Secretary of State reassure my residents that financial assessments were done in full before considering the options?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for recognising the benefit to her constituents from eliminating duplication and putting the savings into the frontline services that her residents care about—it is a shame that the shouty Members on the Opposition Benches do not care about their constituents in the same way as she cares about hers. Of course, financial viability was one of the key criteria that we took into account in accepting the proposals that we are putting forward today.

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): What chaos in Sussex! The West Sussex decision has been delayed, and splitting East Sussex is okay according to the Secretary of State. My constituency is the only one that covers both East and West Sussex in its current form. It is a dog's breakfast. It is unclear on special educational needs and disabilities and adult social care. In the letter sent to me today there was no clarity on the Sussex mayoralty. There is uncertainty on elections. The one thing that is certain is that Labour and Lib Dem proposals are priorities. Why have the Secretary of State and this Department shifted so far from the initial proposals that we in Sussex considered in good faith? Surely that explains why so many people feel that this is such a huge mess.

Steve Reed: The proposals we are bringing forward are the best for economic growth and for savings, which we can plough into the frontline services that I believe the hon. Member's residents care about the most. I have said on a number of occasions already that the reason for the delay in West Sussex is that there was a reconsultation. We have had a huge amount of responses to that. I want to show those people who took the time to share their views the respect of considering them before we come forward with final proposals. She referred to social care services. We have announced £1 million of transitional funding for all areas undergoing a reorganisation, so that we can guarantee that services come through local government reorganisation in a stronger position than they went into it.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): My constituency straddles both the proposed Staffordshire unitaries quite substantially. I welcome the creation of a North Staffordshire unitary—an area that has a long-held identity and significant growth potential—but opting for the smaller proposal for North Staffordshire and creating one much larger Southern Staffordshire unitary does create some concerns. I know that my Stone rural villages, such as Swynnerton and Oulton, will be happy with today's announcement, but can the Secretary of State reassure my Stone rural constituents that they will be heard equally sitting north of Stafford, as they will be in the large southern unitary, and that the proposed smaller North Staffordshire unitary will be an equal member in the strategic authority following devolution?

Steve Reed: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Of course, her constituents in both the areas she refers to deserve and will have their voices heard. The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 allows for the establishment of area committees or

[*Steve Reed*]

town committees—whatever they want to call them—on which the councillors representing the area on the unitary can come together and operate a scrutiny function through which they can advocate for that area. That will give them a voice that I am sure she will ensure they are helped to use.

Mr Adnan Hussain (Blackburn) (Ind): Devolution can succeed only when it reflects real economic opportunity, not when boundaries are drawn around the communities facing the greatest challenges. I ask the Minister why my constituency's council, Blackburn with Darwen, covering an area already facing high levels of deprivation, is being grouped with other councils that suffer equally from very high levels of deprivation. Why is Ribble Valley excluded from these proposals? There is cross-party consensus and consensus across my constituency and other constituencies that this is a stitch-up. All the Government are doing is lumping together deprived communities and areas. This plan will not work, so I ask the Minister to reconsider his proposals.

Steve Reed: I respectfully urge the hon. Member to remember that fair funding reforms have aligned funding with deprivation. Under the previous Government, only three out of 10 areas got funding that aligned with levels of deprivation and need. Now it is over nine out of 10—a far better outcome for the entire country. The decision we have taken for Lancashire, including Blackburn with Darwen, is the best option for economic growth and investment in the infrastructure, which will create jobs and put money in the pockets of his constituents.

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): I have long advocated for Warwickshire to be served by two unitary councils, so I am absolutely delighted that the Secretary of State has listened. It is the model that is rooted in our place-based, problem-solving approach. It makes the most sense for the way people access local services, and it gives my constituents the best opportunities for transport, growth and jobs. My constituents have not been served well by Warwick, so I look forward to working with my hon. Friends the Members for Nuneaton (Jodie Gosling) and for Rugby (John Slinger) to help make our new council the best it can be for all our residents. Will the Minister outline what support the Department will provide to us and our council through the reorganisation process?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for her question and her support for the changes being brought in, which, indeed, she has long advocated for. As a powerful advocate for her area, she will ensure that the changes happen successfully. Up to £1 million is available for each area undergoing reorganisation, to ensure that services transition safely and securely into the new organisations that will be responsible for running them.

Andy MacNae (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): I have long been a proponent of the principles of LGR, which Lancashire and my constituents have desperately needed for a long time. It is a chance to reinvent local government. However, today, in respect of a decision made by the Secretary of State, I have to associate myself with the comments made by my parliamentary neighbours, my

hon. Friends the Members for Burnley (Oliver Ryan) and for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith). I cannot accept the suggestion—the claim—that these boundaries match the natural economics of Lancashire. It will leave us with the most deprived local authority area in the country. We are good at making the best of things, so I ask the Secretary of State to work with me and us to bring in the much more significant capacity and capability funding that we need to reverse that deprivation and catch up with neighbouring places, such as Manchester. Will he meet me and east Lancashire colleagues to drive this forward with urgency?

Steve Reed: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his powerful advocacy for his constituents. The changes we are making are, in part, intended to lay the framework for the mayoral devolution that will follow. That will provide significant new powers for Lancashire when it comes. I am happy to ensure that he gets the meeting he has asked for.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I am proud to represent Portsmouth, whose local people want their pride reflected in the name of the reorganised local council. Both Portsmouth MPs and, I believe, councils representing over 75% of residents, support including Portsmouth in the name. It would be laughable, if it was not so awful, that the new name being publicly criticised by the council is the one that was submitted by Portsmouth city council itself. Does the Secretary of State agree that it is time for the Liberal Democrat council to stop playing political games, stop scaremongering, stop wasting time and—I know it might be hard for them—be honest with residents about this process? Will he help me ensure that Portsmouth is indeed in the name of the new unitary council, because it is so important?

Steve Reed: I have had the great pleasure of visiting Portsmouth with my hon. Friend on several occasions, so I have seen at first hand what a powerful champion she is for her constituents. She has raised this point with me previously. I am more than happy to ensure that she has a meeting with me or another appropriate Minister to discuss her very legitimate concerns.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. This morning, the Department arranged an official briefing for Members about what was going to happen to their communities, but Leicestershire Conservative MPs were not invited. I have seen the schedule, and we are not on the list. I thought it was a rule of this House that MPs should be told everything at the same time, yet some appear to be more equal than others. Can you advise, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what redress we can seek?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. It is not a matter for the Chair, but he has put his point on the record. I am sure the Secretary of State will have heard his comments, and if a correction is needed, he will make it.

Michael Payne (Gedling) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call Oliver Ryan.

Michael Payne:—Michael Payne.

I simply seek to correct the record. I should have, when I made a contribution in the statement, drawn attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a serving Gedling borough councillor. I seek through this point of order to correct the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Perhaps I also need to correct the record—it has been a long summer already.

I thank the hon. Member for correcting the record in that way as it did pertain to this particular statement.

Gibraltar: UK-EU Treaty

1.48 pm

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Stephen Doughty): With permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the UK-EU treaty on Gibraltar. Before I do, I am sure the whole House will want to join me in expressing our sincere condolences to the people of Spain following the recent wildfires in Andalusia. Our thoughts are with those who have lost loved ones, all those affected and the emergency responders working under extremely difficult conditions. We are thinking of all the British nationals tragically affected by the fires, and our embassy and consular teams remain available to support those who require assistance.

I am pleased to inform the House that on Tuesday 14 July, I signed the treaty in Brussels, alongside EU Trade Commissioner Šefčovič, who signed on behalf of the EU. The Chief Minister of Gibraltar, the Deputy Chief Minister of Gibraltar and Spanish Foreign Minister Albares were also present at the ceremony, in recognition of the important role Gibraltar and Spain have played in the negotiations.

This is genuinely a historic moment. It represents the culmination of over five years of work, and I pay tribute to all those whose efforts have brought us here: members of the previous Government, including the right hon. Member for Braintree (Sir James Cleverly) and the noble Lord Cameron of Chipping Norton; and particularly my right hon. Friends the Deputy Prime Minister, the Foreign Secretary, the former Defence Secretary and the current Defence Secretary, and our crucial teams of negotiators in London, Brussels and Madrid. I particularly pay tribute to the Gibraltar team in the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, who have done sterling work at so many levels; it has been recognised in the Department, but I want to place on record my sincere thanks for all their efforts over many years. Of course, I also thank the Government of Gibraltar, who have been our partners at the negotiating table throughout. Nothing in this treaty has been agreed without their full involvement and support. I am also grateful to the European Commission and Spain for the constructive approach they have taken to negotiations. Together, we have found solutions that worked for all.

Throughout this process, we have been committed to transparency with Parliament. Since last June, when we reached political agreement on the treaty's core elements, we have regularly kept Members informed of developments, including through private briefings and, on many occasions, being held to account here and in the usual ways. As I promised, we laid the final text of the treaty before Parliament on 14 July, the day of signature, alongside an explanatory memorandum, which was the earliest possible opportunity to do so. Members will see that, as I assured them, the signed treaty has not substantively changed from the draft treaty that I deposited in the Library of the House in February, which they have been examining for the past four months.

Signature of the text enabled provisional application of the treaty on 15 July. That has given the people of Gibraltar clarity and certainty. They do not have to wait for a far-off and undefined date of ratification before they can enjoy the economic and social benefits of the treaty—the fluid border is here now. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will have seen the joyful, moving and

[Stephen Doughty]

genuinely historic scenes at that border after so many years, which reflect the fact that people have been at the heart of this agreement throughout. With the European Union, Spain and Gibraltar, we have put the interests of the people of Gibraltar and the wider region first.

Yesterday morning, the Chief Minister and the Spanish Prime Minister, Pedro Sánchez, oversaw the removal of the final pieces of the fence, and there were emotional scenes. Workers, Gibraltar residents and holidaymakers are now crossing between Gibraltar and Spain with ease. The Government of Gibraltar have worked tirelessly to put in place all the necessary legislative and operational changes to make this happen, and I am very grateful for their dedication. As I said, they were truly historic and special scenes, and I was honoured to be presented with a piece of the now removed frontier, to celebrate this significant moment of a barrier coming down in continental Europe.

Having mentioned the benefits of the treaty, I think it is right to set out in full once more what those are. Over half of Gibraltar's workforce cross the border every day. They depend on being able to do so swiftly and easily, as do the shoppers and holidaymakers going in both directions. The treaty guarantees that. Customs and immigration checks will no longer take place at the border. Instead, everyone arriving into Gibraltar airport will undergo dual immigration checks: first, a check by the Gibraltarian authorities, who remain responsible for immigration and entry into Gibraltar; and then a check by Spanish officials to enable entry into the Schengen area. Completion of both checks will enable people to move freely between Gibraltar and Spain as they choose.

As for goods, Gibraltar and the EU will form a bespoke customs model. Gibraltar will bring its standards and tariffs for goods in line with the EU's where relevant. That eliminates the need for checks on goods at the border, making life easier for ordinary shoppers and providing reassurance for businesses. The impact of the treaty on Gibraltar's prosperity is not limited to the fluid border, as significant a change as that is; it also enables commercial flights between Gibraltar and EU member states in the Schengen area, removing a block that has been in place for years. That will potentially bring new investment to the region and unlock economic and transport opportunities.

Among all these changes, the treaty preserves the operational autonomy of our military base. As Members will know, British Forces Gibraltar is a critical hub for naval, air and joint operations across the Mediterranean and into the middle east and more widely. The treaty fully protects our ability to operate to, through and from Gibraltar. Spain will have no ability to restrict the movement of UK military personnel or goods into the base. All information sharing will be limited to the necessary details required to support the new border arrangements. British Forces Gibraltar will remain a sovereign base for operations well into the future.

This treaty has always been about creating a framework for Gibraltar's relationship with the EU and providing its people and businesses with the stability and certainty they need post Brexit, having been left out of the arrangements at the time of withdrawal from the European Union. Nothing in it affects UK sovereignty over Gibraltar, but to make that explicit, article 2 of the treaty clearly

states that no part of the treaty can be used to challenge the UK position on sovereignty. Gibraltar is a vital part of the UK family—that will not change.

In conclusion, I would like to reflect on the significant achievement that this treaty represents. It has banished the fears of a hard border between Gibraltar and Spain, bringing back memories of the past. It has given Gibraltar the certainty to move forward with renewed confidence. It will enhance the prosperity of both Gibraltar and the wider region. It has bolstered our relationships with the EU and Spain, unlocking wider and deeper co-operation, which is very welcome. I am very proud to have signed it and to have worked alongside all those others to achieve a hopeful future, to put the past behind us and to find a way forward focused on people and prosperity. I want to celebrate that new relationship here today. I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the shadow Minister, I gently remind the Minister that the statement he just gave seemed to deviate slightly from the copy I had received. We need to ensure that they align perfectly. I call the shadow Minister.

1.56 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): Let me start by joining the Minister in expressing the Opposition's sincere condolences to all those affected by the recent wildfires in Spain.

I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. Our starting position is that an agreed legal basis for Gibraltar's relationship with the EU is needed. Gibraltar deserves certainty about its future. Businesses in both Gibraltar and Britain need certainty. British citizens travelling to Gibraltar need certainty, and the many thousands of frontier workers need certainty. We need to have proper scrutiny, not least because an acceptable deal between Gibraltar and the EU has to do many things at once. It must uphold unequivocally and without qualification British sovereignty over Gibraltar and the express will of the people of Gibraltar to be part of the British family, not Spain. Every Government has a duty to defend the integrity of the United Kingdom and the British family wherever it exists. It must also deal with the practical realities of the frontier and Gibraltar's economy.

However, we find ourselves in the extraordinary position that, with the treaty signed and provisional application under way, and even with the final sections of the frontier fence now removed, Parliament has still not been afforded a proper debate in Government time to scrutinise this agreement. Since the agreement was announced, the shadow foreign affairs team has asked five urgent questions and numerous oral and written parliamentary questions to try to establish the Government's intentions, often receiving unsatisfactory non-answers. The FCDO is responsible for Britain's treaty obligations, but it has been the Government of Gibraltar, including the Chief Minister, who have all too often kept Members of this House informed. I thank them for that.

Even today in this statement, there is no mention of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act process and scrutiny, so I ask again for confirmation that the 21 sitting day CRaG process will apply. Will the Minister set out the timetable for that today? We cannot have a repeat of the way the Government have tried to avoid scrutiny with the Chagos deal.

On the substance of the deal itself, starting with the military base, can the Minister offer an unambiguous and unequivocal guarantee that nothing in this agreement constrains the operation, freedom of action or sovereign control of His Majesty's armed forces in Gibraltar? Britain's military base is not a matter for compromise, negotiation or shared competence. It is sovereign British territory, serving vital British and NATO interests.

On the entry of British commercial goods, including British foods, into Gibraltar, can the Minister confirm whether the new process has been stress-tested with British businesses and when guidance for businesses will be published?

On the movement of people, having a fluid border with Spain—a key request of the Gibraltar Government—clearly comes with trade-offs, and we should recognise that. The decision to have Schengen checks in a British overseas territory is obviously one such compromise, and there is understandably a real strength of feeling about it, notwithstanding that Gibraltar has always had its own entry requirements, including for Brits.

In the light of reported chaos at the border, it is imperative that the Government get this right. Given the totally chaotic way that the EU has introduced its entry-exit systems across Europe, it is imperative that we do not see a similar situation at Gibraltar airport. The Conservatives will be watching. What tabs is the Minister keeping on the roll-out of the new checks by the EU, and what is his recourse if British nationals end up being disrupted by EU issues?

Gibraltar's new residency regulations came into force on 14 July. What assessment has the Minister made of their impact on the ability of British citizens to live and work in Gibraltar? What is the anticipated impact on British citizens of retirement age wishing to relocate permanently to Gibraltar? Do the Government have contingency plans to support Gibraltar if the Spanish Government stage any provocations for their domestic audience now that the border fence is down?

Finally, the Leader of the Opposition in Gibraltar has expressed concern that the UK-Gibraltar concordat envisages circumstances in which the UK could act without the consent of Gibraltar's Government or people on treaty matters. What is the Minister's response? If there were to be a change of Government in Gibraltar, what would the implications be?

To conclude, Gibraltar is as British as any of our constituencies. Britain and NATO rely on Gibraltar's strategically vital military base. In an age of insecurity, the base is indispensable for our country. Any deal to secure a long-term future arrangement between Gibraltar and the EU needs to be subject to the most rigorous scrutiny in this House. The Government should know that, and they should expect that Opposition Members rightly desire to understand what this treaty means in practice.

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

Stephen Doughty: Madam Deputy Speaker, may I apologise to the previous occupant of the Chair? There was no substantive difference in my statement as delivered from the copy provided, but I may have stylistically altered a couple of lines slightly; I apologise.

I thank the shadow Minister for her very reasonable questions, her broad support for what we have signed and agreed, and her recognition that the agreement is supported by the people of Gibraltar. It is what the people of Gibraltar want and there was unanimous support in the Gibraltarian Parliament for the deal; that is very important.

The right hon. Lady asked about the CRaG process. As I explained in the debate that we had the other day, the treaty is now laid so the CRaG process starts, but scrutiny will only take place when both Houses are sitting—the intervening period of the recess does not interfere with the ability of both Houses to provide scrutiny. Helpfully, this aligns with the process in the European Parliament, which has its own processes, so scrutiny will take place in the autumn there as well. I remain completely at the disposal of the right hon. Lady, shadow Ministers and other shadow spokespeople if they have further technical or other questions, and I am sure that officials would be happy to provide further briefings.

I would gently say that we have answered many, many questions on this issue. We published a draft treaty text on 26 February—it has been available to study in this House for four months—but the text has not substantively changed since then. I have appeared before multiple Committees and indeed we had a debate in Westminster Hall just the other day. I am very happy to talk about this; there is absolutely nothing to hide. It is an important treaty and, despite the right hon. Lady's comments about the process, I am glad that she broadly endorses it.

The right hon. Lady asked about military autonomy. I can tell her absolutely that military autonomy is protected—that was a key red line for us. Indeed, I think the treaty reflects a new relationship of co-operation: Spain is a key NATO partner, who we are working alongside on many different issues. The agreement reflects a mature and responsible way forward, but it does not affect the operations of British Forces Gibraltar in any way.

The right hon. Lady asked about goods. Guidance is being provided to businesses. There are always teething issues when bringing in such processes, but we are actively monitoring what is happening and ensuring that the systems can keep up.

The right hon. Lady asked about checks on people. I am not sure what she meant by “reported chaos”. I think there were some slight issues with the first flight that came in, but the second flight has come in, I think, without incident. We are closely monitoring what is happening on the ground. As with any new system, this is a dramatic change and there will be implementation issues. She rightly raises important concerns about the entry-exit system. The deal was made to prevent that system from operating at the existing—now removed—hard border, which would have been very logistically complex; she knows from the geography at the border. I am confident the new arrangements will work and we are monitoring them closely. Myself and other Ministers have been regularly raising with other European counterparts and the European Commission the wider entry-exit system issues that she mentions.

The right hon. Lady made some specific points about pensions, which I will happily write back to her on. I do not expect to see any provocations in the future—I am not sure what she was referring to when she said that.

[Stephen Doughty]

I expect co-operation in the mutual prosperity of the people of the whole region. That was clearly reflected in the remarks made by the Spanish Prime Minister, the Chief Minister of Gibraltar, the Mayor of La Línea and Spanish officials. Everybody wants this treaty to work for people and for businesses, and we see a new spirit and a way forward.

The right hon. Lady asked about the concordat. I have signed the concordat with the Chief Minister. I have also written with some further clarifications, which I hope are satisfactory and address any concerns, but we are very clear: nothing about Gibraltar without Gibraltar. Of course, we have some constitutional responsibilities, but as I have set out, only in exceptional circumstances would there be any difference in our position and we would always be working alongside Gibraltar. I set that out very clearly in the documents, which she can read. I hope she is satisfied and I remain at her disposal for further detailed technical questions.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on this important agreement, which provides certainty for the people of Gibraltar, while also providing economic opportunities and important safeguards for that place. I thank Foreign Office staff for the work that they have done, and both the current and previous Gibraltar Government representatives in the UK, Jonathan Scott and Dominique Searle. Does the Minister agree that this much-needed agreement provides certainty for the people of Gibraltar?

Stephen Doughty: I absolutely do. The agreement enjoyed unanimous support in the Parliament. Gibraltar has been at the heart of the negotiations throughout: one of our key conditions was that Gibraltar was entirely satisfied with what was agreed. Fundamentally, the agreement will benefit people, businesses and communities—that is at its heart. I add my thanks to the officials mentioned by the hon. Gentleman.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, having had the privilege of visiting Gibraltar last July. I warmly welcome the agreement and congratulate the Minister and the Government, together with Gibraltar's Chief Minister and Deputy Chief Minister on securing it. Gibraltar has always insisted that there should be nothing about Gibraltar without Gibraltar, and this agreement both meets that expectation and honours that principle. I also pay tribute to the Spanish Government for the pragmatism they have shown in coming to this arrangement.

The agreement finally resolves the existential uncertainty created by Brexit. It protects Gibraltar's economy, safeguards our defence interests and gives the territory certainty and confidence in its own future. Self-determination is and must remain the bedrock of our relationship with all our overseas territories. Sadly, that is especially important to say today after the disgraceful scenes in Atlanta last night, where football was used as a platform to challenge the democratic right of Falkland Islanders to determine their own future. That principle is not negotiable and never should be.

I ask the Minister three simple questions. First, in relation to the EU's entry-exit system coming into force, what reassurance can he give British travellers that journeys to and from Gibraltar will not face unnecessary disruption this summer and into the future? Secondly, have the Government assessed the practical impact of the Schengen 90-day and 180-day rule on British citizens travelling to Gibraltar? If so, what conclusions has that assessment reached? Finally, will the Minister reassure the House that the constitutional safeguards within this agreement are sufficiently robust to ensure that Gibraltar, the United Kingdom and Spain never again return to the uncertainty and border disruption of the past?

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman and his party for their wholehearted support, which is very welcome. I assure him that the constitutional safeguards are in place; they are at the heart of this agreement and are entered into in good faith by all involved, particularly by ourselves and the European Union. That is why this has been a complex and long process. The treaty is a substantive document that ensures that the right safeguards and provisions are in place.

The hon. Gentleman asked about the 90-day and 180-day rule. People do not have an automatic right to go and spend beyond that period in Gibraltar at the moment, and Gibraltar remains responsible for its own immigration processes. We looked at these issues, and this is what Gibraltar agreed to in order for there to be fluid access into the Schengen area. Gibraltar residents are not prevented in any way from returning home to Gibraltar, and we will look at how these things are implemented over time. Fundamentally, this treaty opens up opportunities for people and businesses to travel to Gibraltar and the wider region. Hopefully, new flights will also open up—obviously, subject to commercial interests. This genuinely opens up new hopes for travel and investment in the region.

The hon. Gentleman asks about the entry-exit system. As I explained to the shadow Minister, we keep this matter under close monitoring, as we do in relation to all entry and exit points in the Schengen area. We are always raising issues through our posts and concerns, and we raise things with the European Commission. There are exceptions and processes by which those can be dealt with when queues get too large or problems emerge, but we are confident that they will be dealt with in the case of Gibraltar.

The hon. Gentleman mentions the events yesterday, which I agree were deeply inappropriate and disappointing. It is a real shame that people could not focus on the football, and I think most people looking at the events would feel that way. We have absolutely no doubt about our sovereignty over the Falkland Islands and the surrounding maritime areas. The Falklands are British—they remain British, and they will continue to be British. Falkland Islanders want to be British, and they have explained that many, many times. Let us get back to focusing on the football.

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister and his counterparts in the Gibraltarian Government on getting this treaty over the line. Along with many Members across this House, I went on a visit to Gibraltar a few weeks ago, as part of the armed forces parliamentary scheme. It was incredible

to see our British forces in Gibraltar and to see how many of them are actually Gibraltarians, and are not just from the mainland United Kingdom. I was really impressed by the Chief Minister and all his team; they were really looking forward to this moment. They are a very agile Government. We could learn some lessons from them—I suppose the population of Gibraltar being only the same size as the population of the Isle of Sheppey in my constituency probably helps slightly! Can the Minister confirm that there will be no diminishment in or deterioration of the capability and operational abilities of our forces and our base in Gibraltar? Are there things that this treaty enables us to do that will enhance our military capacity in Gibraltar?

Stephen Doughty: I am glad to hear about my hon. Friend's visit. Having visited Gibraltar a number of times myself, I know that it is a truly special place to visit. Having also been caught in long queues while crossing the former border, I know how delighted I will be not to face that in the future and to be able to enjoy the wider region in Spain as well. The impact is very positive. There will be no changes to our military capability or ability to operate; our autonomy and operational capability remain the same. I think this is a new era for co-operation between the UK and Spain as NATO allies and in many different areas, and this treaty sets a new spirit for that co-operation going forward.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): May I warmly endorse what the Minister said about the Falkland Islands, and ask a question or two about security aspects? Given that both we and Spain are in NATO, the reassurances about the sovereignty of the base are welcome. Can the Minister confirm that on those occasions when military assets, including munitions, have to be moved into the area, the report that I have seen suggesting that everything about munitions has to be reported to the Spanish authorities does not mean that this cannot be done in secrecy when that is required? Finally, with regard to the border, is there any danger that, without the land border, people will be enabled to get on an aeroplane and come to the UK who might pose a security threat, and then we would be in difficulty sending them back? Hopefully none of those fears is warranted, but I would like to hear that from the Minister.

Stephen Doughty: As always, the right hon. Gentleman asks important questions. I can absolutely assure him that there is no change in the ability to operate in the way that we have done from Gibraltar in the past. Indeed, I welcome the new co-operation with our Spanish friends—our NATO allies. All the appropriate liaison will take place, but our ability to operate will not be affected in any way. That was an absolute red line for us.

The right hon. Gentleman can be absolutely assured that the wider security concerns were a key part of our discussions. They are important for Spain, they are important for us, they are important locally, and they are obviously important given air travel from Gibraltar. I will not go into the operational details in the House today, but he can be assured of that.

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. As chair of the all-party

parliamentary group on Gibraltar, I warmly congratulate the Government on successfully securing this historic, landmark agreement. I thank the Minister and his team for engaging with the APPG and for his words today explaining the sheer emotion that this treaty brings to Gibraltarians. Having visited Gibraltar on a number of occasions, and having spoken and listened to its Government, businesses and people, I know that they are really proudly British and want to remain so.

This agreement protects Gibraltar's sovereignty and its sovereign military base, strengthens our relationship with Spain, improves co-operation with our European neighbours and delivers what Gibraltar has consistently asked for. It has been backed by the Gibraltarian Parliament and supported by every former Chief Minister—I thank them for their commitment, dedication and trust in us. Does the Minister agree that those criticising this agreement should spend less time speaking on what they believe is for Gibraltar and more time listening to the people of Gibraltar? They have consistently supported this agreement and, as I have heard today, joyfully welcomed it.

Stephen Doughty: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for her work and that of the all-party parliamentary group. I genuinely welcome the cross-party involvement in that group over many years, which has always been done with a focus on the interests of the people of Gibraltar. I can see that a number of members of the APPG are in the Chamber today, and that is very important. I absolutely agree; we need to listen to what the people of Gibraltar want, what they have clearly expressed throughout this process and what Gibraltar's Parliament has reflected in its unanimous support for the agreement. She rightly summarises all the benefits. It was a delight to see her in Brussels just before I travelled over to sign the treaty in person, and I thank her and all Members who have taken an interest in Gibraltar for their work. I encourage them to continue to do so as new opportunities emerge.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): I understand entirely why His Majesty's Government of Gibraltar needed a new arrangement following our departure from the European Union. Gibraltar was excluded from the trade and co-operation agreement by the last Conservative Government and left high and dry, so it needed a new arrangement. However, I believe this agreement is deeply flawed—it is quite clearly a constitutional compromise. British citizens will no longer have the same right of access to Gibraltar that we have today. Having sat in this House when the previous Labour Government tried to negotiate joint sovereignty with Spain, I know that we simply cannot trust Madrid or the European Union—if we give them something, they will give nothing back. Their ultimate aim is sovereignty over the Rock, so any compromise on the constitutional arrangements for Gibraltar should be opposed by this House.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Gentleman was previously a member of the party that left Gibraltar high and dry when it was in government, so it is quite rich to hear him make those comments. I am afraid that I totally reject his claims. If he had seen the scenes of Gibraltarians celebrating and actually listened to them and what they wanted, and if he had actually read the treaty, he would know that it says nothing about joint sovereignty.

[*Stephen Doughty*]

Sovereignty was not on the table in these negotiations, and it never would have been. His comments about trust are completely out of kilter with what people on the ground want. People in Gibraltar and in Andalusia want to work together, have prosperity together and celebrate their trade and commercial links, so it is not for him to stand up in this House and tell Gibraltarians what to think.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab): I congratulate the Minister on the agreement. Does he agree that it is only possible in part because of the work that this Government have done to repair the relationship between Britain and the European Union? That is in the interests of the people of Gibraltar and the people of Glasgow who I represent.

Stephen Doughty: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. The benefits of this agreement go well beyond just being for the people of Gibraltar, La Línea and the neighbouring region; they reflect a new relationship between the UK and EU—one of trust, co-operation and working in the interests of people, business and consumers, not pursuing an outdated ideology. The element of trust that we all collectively were able to inject into these negotiations is why we have come to this successful conclusion, and it provides a very good basis for discussions on other matters.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Notwithstanding the article 2 sovereignty clause, this treaty demands that Gibraltar aligns with a number of EU laws, standards and tariffs. If the European Court of Justice is at odds with a Gibraltar court on the application of those, no matter of arbitration will ever shift the European Union from being absolutely wedded to the supremacy, in their eyes, of the European Court of Justice. How can that sovereignty test ever be met?

Stephen Doughty: I have been very clear that sovereignty was not on the table. Gibraltar—its Government and its Parliament—has freely agreed to this agreement, and a range of arrangements are in place, as well as dispute mechanisms, to ensure that fluid movement can take place across the border and high standards will continue to be enjoyed. Those are set out very clearly in the treaty, and I would be happy to write to the hon. Gentleman about the detail of those arrangements and how they will operate in practice, but I emphasise that this agreement has Gibraltar, its Government and its people at its heart. They have backed it, and they have agreed to remove that border and the risk of a hard border, which would have been disastrous for Gibraltarians.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): As the Minister knows from our Westminster Hall debate last week, I was part of an APPG delegation to Gibraltar a couple of months ago, where we had a wide-ranging set of meetings. I congratulate all those involved in achieving the treaty. One reservation that was put to me by the Leader of the Opposition there—who did, of course, eventually support the treaty—was about possible future changes. He wanted an absolute guarantee that the people of Gibraltar would have the final say on any future constitutional changes. Could the Minister confirm that is the case?

Stephen Doughty: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his consistent advocacy and support on behalf of Gibraltarians—it is very important to see that support on both sides of the House today. The concordat that I have set out with the Chief Minister, and indeed the letter I have written, set out how we will work incredibly closely with the Government of Gibraltar going forward to address any unforeseen circumstances. The treaty has clear provisions in relation to that, as well. Of course, we do not foresee circumstances in which those provisions would ever be needed, but it is important that they are always there, and I am confident that they will stand the test of time.

Transition to State Pension Age

WORK AND PENSIONS COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Select Committee statement on behalf of the Work and Pensions Committee. Debbie Abrahams will speak for up to 10 minutes, during which no interventions may be taken. At the conclusion of her statement, I will call Members to ask questions on the subject of the statement—these should be brief questions, not full speeches. I emphasise that questions should be directed to the Select Committee Chair and not the relevant Government Minister. Front Benchers may take part in questioning.

2.22 pm

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I express my gratitude to the Backbench Business Committee for granting me the opportunity to present this Work and Pensions Select Committee report on our inquiry into the transition to state pension age, which is a really important area for us to examine. Our inquiry follows very closely on from the inquiry we held last year into pensioner poverty—that report was published this time last year. During that inquiry, we identified the real health and financial issues facing many working-age people as they approach state pension age. This was particularly evident following the increase in the state pension age to 66 back in 2020, but as many—but not all—know, the state pension age has started to rise from 66 as of April this year, and will reach 67 by April 2028. Our reports have shown that people experience the effects of that state pension age increase unevenly. Our transition to state pension age inquiry asked a direct question: what happens to those who cannot keep working until their state pension begins?

The Committee recognises the pressures on the state pension system. In 2005, spending on the state pension and pensioner benefits was 5.3% of GDP. Twenty years later, as society has aged, that figure has increased to 6%, and it is estimated that by 2070 it will be as high as 9%. Over half of all Department for Work and Pensions spending is spent on the state pension and, as I have said, this is set to increase as our society continues to age.

The Committee recognises the need to balance sustainability, adequacy and fairness in our social security system as a whole, including our state pension system. However, fairness must mean fairness not only between generations, but within generations. Fairness to those who are least well equipped to build a secure retirement is equally important. Unfortunately, it is clear that disadvantage, ill health and frailty are not spread evenly across the country; they are concentrated in some communities more than others, and they go hand in hand with poverty. It cannot be fair to ask those with the poorest health, the fewest resources and the greatest risks to face the increase in state pension age without support.

The evidence that we received was clear: financial resources, the capacity to work, and good health help people manage the transition to a higher state pension age. However, many people reach their early 60s in poor health and unable to work, after years in low-paid and

often physically demanding work. As the Health Foundation's recent report shows, since 2012 the healthy life expectancy—the average age someone is expected to live in good health—has fallen by two years, to 60.7 years for men and 60.9 years for women. Again, that is an average; in areas such as mine, a former industrial area, the healthy life expectancy for men and women is 56 and 58 years, so we can see the difficulties that the country is facing with this issue. Of course, different cohorts will have different healthy life expectancies as well.

Many people experience disadvantages in older age as a product of a life lived in poverty, having few financial resources and having experienced insecure work and, often, poor housing. This poor health in later working life is reflected in different employment rates; for example, in 2025 only 42% of people aged 65 were in work. For those aged 66—the current state pension age—that figure fell to under 30%, less than one in three. However, ill health is not the only reason people leave work. The Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), told us that while poorer people tend to leave work before state pension age because of ill health and/or disability, wealthier people are more likely to retire early because they can afford to do so. There are other reasons why people leave work before state pension age, including becoming family carers.

On the flip side, we heard about older workers who wanted to work but could not find a suitable job, and people who had left employment because of illness or caring responsibilities and could not get back into work. Sometimes these people ended up having to draw down small pension savings just to get by before their state pension began. It is not generally recognised that the previous state pension age increase from 65 to 66 caused a doubling of absolute poverty among 65-year-olds. Our real concern is that the rise in the state pension age to 67 may have an even greater effect. The Committee heard that work-limiting health conditions among people aged 60 to 64 have increased from 28% in 2014 to 31% in 2024. We also heard that almost half of people aged 60 to 66 in the lowest income quintile were already classified as frail. These are people who are vulnerable to deterioration in physical and cognitive functioning.

The Department has said that the poverty that pensioners and pre-pensioners experienced when the state pension age rose from 65 to 66 was mostly temporary, because people were lifted out of poverty as soon as they reached state pension age. However, temporary poverty can still do lasting harm—it can mean going without essentials and carrying stress into later life. Half of pre-pensioners are already frail; experiencing poverty, even temporary poverty, increases the risk of accelerating or exacerbating this deterioration in physical and cognitive function.

These issues are not inevitable—they are solvable. First, older workers need better support, healthier workplaces and flexible working opportunities. The Government's current approach is focused on supporting later working, including through the Mayfield review, which the Committee wholeheartedly supports and welcomes. As we have said in other reports this year, we wish the Government would do more to accelerate that work. However, it is unclear how many people would be lifted out of poverty by the Government's current labour market measures. We hope that the Mayfield review will help in time, but it is a three to seven-year programme,

[Debbie Abrahams]

and even if change comes quickly, it could come too late for many people who are now approaching the state pension age. Support to stay in work often needs to reach people in their 50s, rather than in their mid-60s. That is why my Committee concluded that additional social security support is needed. That is not an abstract concern, but a direct and foreseeable effect of state pension age policy. For people unable to work, the longer wait for the state pension can mean a year or more on inadequate working age benefits, a year using up savings or a year of hardship. We recommend that the Government as a minimum consult on an uplift in universal credit in the year before state pension age, with the aim of introducing additional support by the end of this year. We heard that such an increase would cost around £600 million a year, but that must be considered alongside the estimated savings of around £10.5 billion a year once the state pension age is 67, compared with if it had stayed at 66.

We recognise that work incentives matter, but the proposal is modest. It is targeted at people in the year before state pension age. Many of those out of the labour market at that point are unlikely to return to it. The overriding priority would be to prevent hardship that would otherwise be the predictable result of public policy enacted in the Pensions Act 2014. We also recommend that when the Secretary of State's state pension age review commences, they consult on longer term support for those unable to work up to state pension age. That review should model costs and benefits, including the effects on work incentives downstream and on health and social care services.

Our report also looks at Government decision making. The Government have relied on impact assessments from 2011 and 2013. We think those assessments are now outdated and insufficient. They do not reflect the recent increase in work-limiting ill health and deepening inequality in healthy life expectancy, and they do not provide a basis for understanding who would be most affected by the rise to 67. In 2023, the previous Government decided to proceed with the increase to 67, but said they would keep under review the position of people unable to continue to work. No such review had been published by the time of the 2024 general election, and the current

Government do not plan to evaluate the increase until after it is completed in 2028. That is too late. They will have missed an opportunity to identify risks and put mitigations in place before any further increases take effect. [Interruption.] I have just about half a minute left, if that is convenient, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Committee recommends a more holistic approach to future assessments. The Department should consider the cumulative impact of policies on individuals. It should use evidence that reflects employment history, occupational class, health status, caring history, income and protected characteristics. It should consult the chief medical officer on health impacts. It should estimate likely poverty increases in time to act before they happen.

I also mention the importance of communication. Not everybody is aware of the increase to 67, and we know from previous pension policy the impact that can have on people. Finally, I express my concern about the irresponsible rumours of a potential acceleration of the further increase in the state pension age. That fear-mongering is unhelpful, to say the least, and is untrue. I commend my report to the House.

Gordon McKee (Glasgow South) (Lab) *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): There was no bobbing earlier. Does the Member really intend to contribute?

Gordon McKee *indicated assent*.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Quickly.

Gordon McKee: I am grateful to the Select Committee Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Oldham East and Saddleworth (Debbie Abrahams), for her statement. Did she look in her report at the measures the Government could take to keep older people in work? As she rightly noted, that is a problem as people get older.

Debbie Abrahams: The Mayfield review came up with some good recommendations, which we thoroughly support, and I can direct my hon. Friend to other reports that made similar recommendations. It is important that we look at older people and not just people with health issues and disabilities.

Backbench Business

Sir David Amess Summer Adjournment

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): We now come to the Sir David Amess summer Adjournment debate, and I call Bob Blackman, who will speak for up to 15 minutes. Many Back Benchers wish to speak, so I suspect that there will be a speaking limit.

2.34 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming adjournment.

This debate, as you rightly point out, Madam Deputy Speaker, commemorates Sir David Amess, who was brutally murdered doing his job as an MP at his surgery. He was an expert in this debate. He would raise 25 to 30 items in five minutes, and then had all his press releases ready for the whole summer from one debate.

It is my first opportunity to pay tribute to Ann Widdecombe, who was brutally murdered. I remember Ann when she came up to Bedford and Kempston, when I was standing as a candidate in 1997. She came up with Michael Howard, and famously they did not particularly get on as ministerial colleagues. I was talking to Ann and she said, “Don’t talk to me, young man. Get over there and talk to Michael.” I said, “He’s surrounded by all these sycophants.” She gave me a keen piece of advice: “Use your sharp elbows and get yourself in the photograph. Do not let them be in the photograph.” She was an outspoken individual, and we miss her dearly. We thank her for the service she gave to this House and after she ceased to be a Member.

I was delighted by the local election results in May this year. I am delighted to announce that my constituency now has only Conservative councillors. My parliamentary neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (David Simmonds), also has only Conservative councillors, and in my neighbouring constituency of Harrow West we made significant gains, taking 12 seats from the Labour party. We now have 41 out of the 55 councillors.

In Brent, which has one ward in my constituency, we have more than doubled the number of Conservative councillors. I am delighted that one of my Brent colleagues is now the deputy mayor of Brent council as a result. I look forward to the next general election, whenever the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) chooses to call it, and the next local elections in 2030, when we will make a clean sweep and turn Harrow fully blue. That shows the revival in the Conservative party under the Leader of the Opposition. We have been rising in the polls, winning by-elections and gaining seats from Reform, which seems more interested in campaigning against a bin and continuing to pretend that the Conservative party is dead, when in reality we are winning and coming back.

As we have passed the halfway point of the year, I will update everyone on the important work of the all-party parliamentary groups that I chair. I begin by putting on record my frustration—I am sure many colleagues share this—at the increased bureaucracy with annual general meetings, extraordinary general meetings, membership, quorums and more. I have written to the

Committee looking into this issue, asking that those concerns are looked into, because they significantly impact on the APPG work that we all undertake.

None the less, I will run through some of the successes we have had. I chair the all-party parliamentary group on fire safety and rescue, which was chaired previously by the late Sir David Amess. We continue to press for sustained action on public and firefighter safety. Nearly two years after the Grenfell report, the priorities must be: coherent implementation of effective building safety regulation, faster remediation, reform of construction products and approved document B, and stronger investment in fire engineering, research, competence and learning from fires. Fire and rescue services are facing growing pressures from wildfires, flooding, new energy technologies and increasingly complex buildings. The all-party group welcomes the recent investment in national resilience and firefighter health, but we will continue to argue for sustainable funding, properly trained and equipped services and a greater attention to operational safety, not least as part of the proposed college of fire and rescue. Earlier today, I hosted a reception on the Terrace for people who are bringing forward greater accreditation.

On the all-party parliamentary group on UK-Israel and the Jewish community overall, we have seen attacks in Golders Green on Hatzola ambulances, and antisemitism across the country rising significantly. We must join together as a House in condemning that in the sternest possible way, recognising that actions are needed, not just words.

Security concerns remain significant across the wider region and are a pressing issue for millions of Jewish individuals around the world. While Israel and Lebanon have agreed a framework aimed at preventing Hezbollah’s return to southern Lebanon, the group has rejected the agreement, whose success will depend on enforcement and international pressure. Iran also retains substantial military capabilities, including almost all its ballistic missile infrastructure and a stockpile of highly enriched uranium that can no longer be independently verified following the end of the International Atomic Energy Agency’s access.

I am delighted that the Government have finally designated the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. I have raised that in the Chamber more often than I can count. I have tabled motions, put questions to Ministers of Governments of both parties and heard every excuse in the book—that it was “under review”, that it could not be done, that it was being “considered”, that the Government “do not comment” on proscription and so on. All the while, the IRGC was murdering Iranians on the streets, arming Hamas and Hezbollah, running cyber-attacks against this country and plotting on British soil against people who had come here to be safe.

I welcome the decision, but it is the beginning, not the end. The IRGC controls the Iranian economy through its sprawling web of front companies. That means that anyone doing business with the regime is putting money into the pockets of the guards. That has to stop. Every front company in this country should be identified, investigated and shut down, and anyone working for the IRGC here under diplomatic, commercial or cultural cover ought to be expelled.

I thank Madam Rajavi and the National Council of Resistance of Iran, whose painstaking work exposed the guards’ covert operations and financial empire, which

[Bob Blackman]

gave Parliament the evidence needed and helped make the decision possible. My thanks go to the Iranian exiles here in Britain who were harassed, threatened and watched by these people but kept telling us the truth when it would have been far easier to keep quiet. The Iranian people have shown us time and again what they want, which is a democratic republic founded on free elections, human rights and the separation of religion from the state. I will continue to fight for that. Today, we are a step closer; I thank the Government for that.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus, virtually every week I host an event in Parliament on behalf of the Indian community, bringing together the community, entrepreneurs and businesses who are working hard to contribute to the UK and showing the best of the Indian diaspora in this country. The trade agreement, which had been negotiated for so many years, has provided a welcome boost to the relationship. I hope that we will see future agreements and benefits for the UK.

I have also continued to work hard in raising awareness of the proposed sale of the only Hindu temple in Peterborough—a disgraceful decision by the council—which would see the only Hindu temple in the area closed, leaving a significant Hindu minority in Peterborough and neighbouring Cambridge with no place of worship. There is an ongoing court case and a review of the proposed decision, so I will not mention specifics, but I have made my position clear. We all have a duty to ensure that individuals can practise their religion peacefully. It should concern us if there are councils or individuals who seek to deny that for an entire community.

We have recently re-established the all-party parliamentary group on Azerbaijan. I was in Azerbaijan over the weekend and on Monday and Tuesday, meeting key people and speaking at a conference on energy. That reflects the importance of a country that is both a key UK energy partner and a source of stability in the south Caucasus. During the visit, I saw how disruptions to traditional routes through Russia and parts of the middle east have elevated Azerbaijan's role as a vital transport and aviation hub linking Europe and Asia via the middle corridor.

As geopolitical uncertainty grows, it is essential that the UK continues to strengthen its relationship with Azerbaijan and does not take it for granted. We should move quickly to deliver the strategic partnership announced last year, deepening co-operation in trade, investment, defence, education and digitalisation. Having witnessed the impact of landmine contamination in Azerbaijan at first hand, where the liberated territories are being brought back into operation, I also believe that the UK should continue supporting the mine-clearance efforts. The UK and Azerbaijan already enjoy a strong partnership. The priority now is ensuring that our political relationship matches its growing strategic importance and that we continue to encourage Azerbaijan and Armenia to live peacefully alongside each other.

The Tobacco and Vapes Act 2026 has now become law, ensuring that anyone born on or after 1 January 2009 will never be legally sold tobacco products. This legislation, which was first introduced under the previous Conservative Government, is a strong example of cross-party co-operation delivering better outcomes. The Government's consultation on the Act—particularly on tackling youth

vaping—is extremely welcome. Parliament will have an important role in scrutinising the regulations. However, there are still 4.9 million smokers in the UK, and there is growing anticipation for the Government's promised road map to a smoke-free nation. It is therefore disappointing that the planned NHS investment in smoking cessation support has been paused, particularly given commitments to expand opt-out support in hospitals and to create smoke-free NHS sites.

As the House knows, I am very keen on ending homelessness and the threat of homelessness, so I was delighted finally to see the long-overdue repeal of the Vagrancy Act 1824, ending the criminalisation of rough sleeping. Credit is due to the charities, campaigners and parliamentarians from across both Houses who worked tirelessly over many years to achieve this change and replace punishment with support.

In that same cross-party spirit, I hope that the Government will continue to engage with the APPG for ending homelessness, which I co-chair. While some indicators are improving, significant progress is still needed if the Government are to meet their goal of ending homelessness. As I have repeated on many occasions, priorities should include implementing the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023—my private Member's Bill—expanding Housing First nationally and introducing a much stronger duty to collaborate so that public services work together more effectively to prevent homelessness.

As chairman of the 1922 committee—you were a distinguished officer of that body, Madam Deputy Speaker—I thank my fellow officers and the executive committee for their support this year. I am delighted that we have not had to stage a leadership contest. I also thank my team, who work in my office. Since I was elected in May 2010, we have dealt with 106,000 individual cases from constituents, and we have dealt with more than 10,000 this year already. The fact is that casework is increasing, not reducing, I am afraid.

I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker, the other Deputy Speakers, the whole House and all those who contribute to our work a very happy summer recess. I shall start my work experience programme with my students on Monday—so I am quietly glad that there is no bank holiday. That programme gives young people an opportunity to learn what it is like to be with a politician.

I will end on a slightly lighter note. We often use this debate to test our vocabulary skills, so I am grateful to Parallel Parliament, which contacted me to confirm that I was the only MP or Member of the House of Lords to use the words “avenged”, “deities”, “inverts”, “handicaps” or “franked” in the previous Session.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. There will be a four-minute speaking limit for Back-Bench Members. I want to put on the record my gratitude to the late Sir David Amess. He was a huge mentor of mine and he constantly fretted about my security. It never occurred to me that we should have been fretting about his.

I want to thank my constituency team for being fantastic—especially Pavlina, who is about to go on maternity leave.

2.40 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the Chairman of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). I join him in paying tribute to Ann Widdecombe. We must be able to disagree without being disagreeable—or in this case, murderous—in our country. It is the British way and the sooner we get back to that, the better. Ann and her family are in my prayers and, of course, like you, Madam Deputy Speaker, I think about Sir David Amess and his family.

I am grateful to be called to speak so early in the debate; this is a novel experience for me. I have had to completely rewrite my speech following the Secretary of State's announcement on local government reorganisation. In business questions earlier, the Leader of the House said that a new Administration may want to look at whether they want to proceed with any current proposals in other areas. I hope the next Administration will hear my call today to look again at that reorganisation.

The issue is important, because the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme must be at the heart of any changes to how our community is run. It cannot be the case that neighbouring areas hold anything close to decisive sway over decision making, or that the views, needs and concerns of people across Newcastle-under-Lyme are dismissed or diminished in favour of other areas. There was very little in the proposal announced today to suggest that anything will mitigate that risk, or that reassures the people of Newcastle-under-Lyme that their concerns have been heard. I will not stop banging on about this until we put it right.

More generally, I welcome the £120 million support package for the ceramics industry in Staffordshire, and I am grateful to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade and the Minister for Industry, my hon. Friend the hon. Member for Stockton North (Chris McDonald) for their support in helping to make that happen. I welcome the roll-out of free breakfast clubs to schools across Newcastle-under-Lyme, which is, as I have said in the House before, best described as the centre of our collective universe.

I welcome the continued improvements to our air quality and the health and wellbeing of our people following the closure of the Walleys Quarry landfill site. That is one of the few things I do not have to bang on about quite as much as I did when I was first elected to this House. I have worked hard to represent our excellent local farmers, who produce—with their flock and animals—excellent British food, and I will continue to be a strong champion for them.

I have enjoyed visiting our schools and education institutions—we are proud of Keele University, Newcastle college and many schools—and engaging with and listening to our veterans and forces organisations. I am looking forward to a summer back home in Newcastle-under-Lyme, where the sun shines brightly. I would like to acknowledge the service of Godfrey, Margaret, Richard and all those who have looked after us, and those who came before us, for so many decades. I wish them well in their retirement.

I have a minute and a bit to go, so I will take the opportunity to add a few words. I thank my constituents for their commitment to our country and our community, and for holding me to account in no uncertain terms

every single day. I thank my family for their forbearance, and my office team for all their hard work, their support for me, and their commitment to the good people who live, learn and work in Newcastle-under-Lyme. I wish the Prime Minister and his family well for the future and thank him for his service to our country. Happy summer, Madam Deputy Speaker—and there are 47 seconds back for you.

2.52 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate on the last day before Parliament rises. As ever, I have so much to say and there is never enough time.

As we approach the summer recess, I have reflected on the issues that matter to my constituents. What makes the communities that I represent so special is, inevitably, the people who simply care about where they live, including the volunteers at Pelsall carnival, the wonderful Wombles and the Aldridge volunteer gardeners, to name but a few. That same pride is reflected in our green spaces, so I was delighted to learn that five green flag awards were received this week across the constituency, recognising the work of groups such as the Barr Beacon Trust, the Friends of Pelsall Commons and many volunteers. Our green spaces are what define our communities.

Members know what I am going to come to next, because it is the last opportunity to mention the precious green belt of Aldridge-Brownhills. My constituency is under siege by developers, thanks to the Government's relaxation of planning rules and their redefinition of green belt as grey belt. Currently, applications are in for the following sites: 345 houses at Birch Lane in Aldridge; 330 at York's bridge in Pelsall; 245 in Chester Road East in Streetly; 81 at Barns Lane in Rushall; 160 at Little Aston Road in Aldridge; 41 in Middlemore Lane West in Aldridge; 600 at Chester Road West in Streetly; 850 at Queslett Road East, also known as Doe Bank Lane; and 155 at Longwood Lane—all currently under review. There are 2,767 applications in the pipeline, all on green-belt sites that developers have reclassified as grey belt. And that is not all: there is potentially more to come.

I know my constituency is a desirable place, but that is because the green belt creates its identity and prevents us from being swallowed up into a greater Birmingham suburb. We need more homes—of course we do—but they must be built in the right place. Instead, our communities face developers exploiting the definition of grey belt. Can a field of carrots or maize really be called grey belt? Of course it can't—it is productive agricultural land—yet developers at Birch Lane are using that label to force the hand of the local council. At a time when food security has never been more important, this policy is a recipe for food insecurity. Once these fields are covered in concrete, they are gone forever. I could talk at length about this issue, but I think I will have to put in for a Westminster Hall debate when Parliament returns. I have no doubt that we will have a lot of support for that.

I want to touch on a couple more areas, starting with the importance of our local businesses. I go on the high streets day in, day out to speak to traders. We have some fantastic new businesses such as Serenity Kitchens and Bathrooms; existing family firms such as Alan Foster Butchers, Herbarium and Orchard Hills Bakery; and

[Wendy Morton]

independent retailers such as H & Jodie's. Their message is the same: they are resilient, but they need the right conditions to succeed. They need a Government who back business, and I do not see that we have one.

In Brownhills, our pressures were compounded by a high street sinkhole. Although the road has reopened, it reminded us of the importance of shopping locally. I am pleased that we have the Pride in Place funding, and I hope that we can make progress. In Aldridge, we had a challenge with double red lines and what some people argued was predatory ticketing. It is an issue that we have been working through, but it highlights the importance of free parking, which Walsall council put in place. Let us see whether the Reform-led council will continue that.

I am running out of time, but let me just say that no debate is complete without a mention of Aldridge train station, a project that has been secured but needs money. I will continue my campaign.

2.56 pm

Chris Kane (Stirling and Strathallan) (Lab): Much has rightly been said about Sir David Amess's enthusiasm for using this occasion to celebrate the people and organisations that make our communities stronger. Many Members will recognise that some of the communities facing the greatest challenges often have the biggest hearts.

In my constituency, that spirit has been embodied by Fallin Community Voice, which was set up in 2022 with a simple ambition: to bring life back to the heart of the village. In just a few years, its volunteers have created a thriving community garden, helped deliver the Grub Hub community food project, and brought Christmas lights back to Fallin. Their work has helped renew community pride, and it is no surprise that they have been recognised at this year's Inspire Volunteering Awards.

A few miles along the road, the Cowie Rural Action Group has spent many years quietly improving village life. From the Wee Club, which brings older residents together each week, to community projects including the village skate park, the Cowie Rural Action Group has shown what can be achieved when local people work together.

One of the best and, dare I say, most out-of-the-box ideas in my constituency began when someone looked at an old red telephone box and refused to accept that it had reached the end of its useful life. The Balfron phone box food exchange has transformed that familiar landmark into a source of practical support for local people, while reducing food waste at the same time. It is a simple idea, but often the simplest ideas can be the most effective.

In Strathallan, I want to recognise PKAVS in Auchterarder. I visited the charity last summer and was reminded of the extraordinary contribution that unpaid carers make every day. For more than 50 years, PKAVS has provided practical support, respite and, just as importantly, somewhere to listen.

I want to recognise a campaign that shows why community action matters. Last year, after a determined seven-year campaign led by Sarah Heward, the Tyndrum Infrastructure Group and its partners, a Changing Places toilet opened at the Green Welly Stop in Tyndrum. It filled a significant gap in provision and is a lasting

reminder that determined local campaigners really can change lives. That message was brought home to me by Quinns, a remarkable young constituent from Bridge of Allan who lives with a rare genetic condition. His mother wrote to me and said:

"We are dependent on Changing Places toilets to give Quinns the same life experience as any other child his age."

Inspired by their own experiences, Quinns and his sister Anita have become proud advocates for more Changing Places toilets, and have helped other families by raising awareness of just how important these facilities are.

Across my constituency, volunteers are quietly making life better every single day. The Friends of Plean Country Park care for one of our best-loved green spaces, while the Friends of Kings Park look after the historic park beneath Stirling castle. The volunteers at the Bannockburn and Eastern Villages Sports Hub have created a place where the community comes together. At the University of Stirling, volunteers organise a parkrun every Saturday morning, bringing hundreds of people together through exercise and encouragement.

In Fintry, the community sports hub continues to transform village life, and local volunteers have opened a wonderful museum that celebrates the village's history. In St Ninians, the Mayfield Centre and its much-loved library continue to bring people together through books and community events. In Strathblane, residents refused to put up with a dilapidated library and raised the money to build a new one. In Braehead, the Crawford hall has remained at the heart of the community for over 30 years, while Braehead community garden has helped people to reconnect with food growing for more than a decade.

At the top of the town of Stirling, Cowane's Trust has been helping those in need since 1637. In Riverside, Action in Mind provides life-changing mental health support, and in Causewayhead, Recycle-a-bike gives unwanted bicycles a second life, while helping people to gain access to affordable transport. Across the constituency, organisations such as Valley Renewables Group in Carron valley and the Callander Community Development Trust are generating renewable energy to provide a sustainable income that can be reinvested directly in local communities.

I have mentioned some of the organisations in my constituency. I do not have time to mention them all, but it has been a privilege to place on record my thanks to a few of the volunteers, charities and community champions who make Stirling and Strathallan such a special place.

3 pm

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Madam Deputy Speaker, as we prepare for the longer summer recess and reflect on the past year, I want to extend my thanks to you and your team, and to Mr Speaker and his wider team for your and their work in making this place function as it does. I also put on record my thanks to all the amazing staff who work here in Parliament. I know that every single one of us is a doughty champion—I hear that phrase often at the Dispatch Box—but it is true of those who work in Parliament too, as well as of our staff who work out in the constituencies.

On a global scale, I know that many of my constituents in North East Fife care deeply and, indeed, despair about the horrific events in the middle east. I was unable

to be here for last week's debate on trade with illegal settlements in the west bank due to the late running of prior business, and I want to reiterate the comments of my hon. Friends and other hon. Members who called for a ban on all trade in goods and services to those occupied territories. Guidance to UK business is simply not good enough, particularly when significant building contracts are going out to tender, and UK Government requests might not outweigh the demands of shareholders and private equity contracts.

I also want to raise the worsening situation in the village of Umm al-Khair, which has been subject to multiple demolition orders from the Israeli civil administration. Just yesterday, I was at a meeting with Na'amod, a movement of Jews in the UK against occupation in the west bank, and those attending asked for urgent diplomatic intervention. I ask the Leader of the House to take note of that and feed it back to the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. This Palestinian village is currently having its future decided by a military court, and we must use all our diplomatic levers to prevent it from being demolished entirely.

Energy costs are high, and there has never been a more important time for us to retrofit households to make them as energy-efficient and green in their use as possible. However, when people's homes are at stake, these retrofits must be done right, and several of my constituents have had their homes in effect trashed by workmen installing heat pumps funded through the Government's energy company obligation 4 scheme. Ministers and officials in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are well aware of this, as I have raised it both in this place and more generally.

I had a meeting with some of my constituents and the Minister for Energy Consumers last year. That meeting was in December, and since then my team have written multiple times to follow up on the pledges made. I note a letter from the Minister to interested MPs today. Sadly, though, it is primarily focused on faulty solid wall insulation, and did not refer to the heat pump issues being experienced by my constituents and others. My constituents were promised audits of their properties for the purpose of remedial works, and although I am grateful to the Minister for his time, I do want to get something beyond my email update from last December.

Some of the building problems that my constituents have experienced stem from a lack of training and oversight for refitting older rural properties. Life in a rural community has its benefits, but it also comes with its own unique set of policy challenges, which are too often ignored. I have been trying consistently to get a banking hub for Cupar in the centre of my constituency, and I was pleased to meet the Chief Secretary to the Treasury at her surgery on Monday to discuss the review of the rules governing banking access. It is vital that everyone who needs access to financial advice can get it. As part of my battle for banking, I have spent a few Fridays travelling the bus routes of North East Fife to understand how hard it is to access services that are further away.

I would love to invite you, Madam Deputy Speaker, to visit North East Fife at any time—in fact, anybody is welcome. We look forward to the Largo and Pittenweem arts festivals this summer, and the Leven putting green is open every day, but I would never suggest that any hon. Members travelled across it by bus.

I want to finish by briefly highlighting a challenge that the University of St Andrews is experiencing in relation to cuts to the Science and Technology Facilities Council budget, which will badly affect the astronomy department. Cutting research and development is never the right answer, particularly with the scale of the challenges before us. I do hope that this decision can be revisited.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I look forward to visiting.

3.4 pm

Mary Glendon (Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend) (Lab): I am sure we are all aware of the importance of the role played by civil servants across the whole country. People often devote their whole working lives to these roles, so the least they deserve is to get the pensions they have paid for on time, and for their loved ones to receive their entitlements following bereavement. Sadly, the disastrous performance of Capita saw the backlog rocket to 120,000 in the first four weeks of it commencing work on the contract. I hope the Government manage to get the scheme sorted out as quickly as possible, and suspend payment and all future contract awards to Capita pending a full review. The decision to award Synergy the contract for payroll services across four Government Departments flies in the face of our Government's commitment to delivering the biggest wave of insourcing for a generation. Could we hit pause and review its ability to deliver before civil servants start to go unpaid, too?

Today, civil servants from the Public and Commercial Services Union are starting strike action at the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office in a dispute over staff restructuring. We appreciate that internal reorganisation is sometimes required, but too often there has been a failure to consult, including over planned closures to civil service offices, including the Department for Education office in Newcastle. I know other Members will have experienced similar situations with regard to other departmental offices across the country. I hope the Cabinet Office ensures that all Departments have proper discussions with the trade unions representing members affected by changes, especially where the closure of offices would be damaging to local economies and communities. An economic impact assessment really should be conducted before such plans go ahead. Could we also please extend a vote of thanks to all our hard-working civil servants and agree to listen to their concerns? Doing so could have helped to avoid many of the problems in the case of Capita.

Sir David Amess frequently raised the issue of hepatitis, as he was the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on liver health. World Hepatitis Day is on 28 July, and the UK has committed to achieving the World Health Organisation's goal of eliminating hepatitis C as a public health concern by 2030. The virus disproportionately affects disadvantaged and marginalised communities. It is preventable and curable. Left undetected, it can cause fatal cirrhosis and liver cancer. I am sure the House will join me in commending the efforts of our NHS, the Hepatitis C Trust, and harm reduction services, which have had considerable success in finding, engaging, testing and treating people who are at risk. Thanks to them, the UK is within reach of meeting the World Health Organisation's target of hepatitis C elimination by 2030.

[Mary Glindon]

Another concern of Sir David's that I share, as my north-east region is the worst affected in the country, is alcohol harms. I pay tribute to the organisation Balance, which has done excellent work in the north-east to raise awareness that alcohol causes seven types of cancer, including bowel cancer and breast cancer. Last year the drugs, alcohol and justice APPG, which Sir David supported and I formerly chaired, published a paper reminding us that although alcohol misuse costs our NHS an estimate £3.5 billion, there has been no alcohol strategy since 2012.

As we await a new PM and a new senior team to start work, I want to take this moment to congratulate the Minister for Equalities, Bridget Phillipson, for this week completing orders to enact the updated Equality and Human Rights Commission code of practice on services, public functions and associations, which will come into force on 5 August. There are now no more excuses. All service providers, local authorities and organisations, including our Government Departments, must bring their policies into line with the Equality Act 2010, so that women-only services and spaces are exactly that—for biological women only.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): A reminder for colleagues that we do not mention Members' names directly; we mention them by their constituencies.

3.8 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): Last month's sentencing of Nicola Sturgeon's husband exposed the real reasons behind the Scottish Government's persecution of Alex Salmond. From 2010 to 2022, Peter Murrell abused his position to embezzle almost £500,000 from the SNP to buy luxury items. He used SNP money to buy a £33,000 Volkswagen Golf. Then he stole £57,000 to buy a Jaguar car. Further luxuries included handbags, an £850 gold pendant, four separate coffee machines costing £9,000, luxury kitchenware, at least 26 fountain pens costing nearly £21,000, and two £350 Dyson hairdryers—for a man with no hair. Really? Then, of course, there is the infamous £124,000 motorhome. Did Sturgeon not wonder where he got the money for all the vehicles, the kitchenware, the handbags, the pens, the pendant she loved? After all, who used the Dyson hairdryers in that household?

My view on Sturgeon's denial is clear: she is lying. She knew full well what her husband was doing and how those luxury purchases were funded. That Murrell was a thief was obvious in the 1980s, when he stole from Alex Salmond. Salmond told Sturgeon it was deeply unwise to keep her husband on as chief executive, but she kept him in place, enabling his crimes for years. Eventually, in March 2021, three members of the SNP's finance committee withdrew and resigned, blaming "chaotic" and "incompetent" financial management. In their own words, they were on the receiving end of a "hostile" backlash, driven by Sturgeon's "toxic culture". They resigned in protest and were later followed by the treasurer of the organisation. Sturgeon told colleagues at the meeting where those first resignations happened:

"There are no reasons for people to be concerned about the party's finances"—
no reasons. And when the treasurer resigned, she ignored it.

Sturgeon was part of a cover-up, using her position to suppress justice. She behaved dishonourably and dishonestly, but her most evil act was stitching up Alex Salmond to hide the truth. When he was considering going on the national executive himself, the risk to the conspirators was clear: here is a numerate man who could not be silenced. So what did they do? In Salmond's own words, there was "a malicious and concerted" attempt to remove him from public life in Scotland by "a range of individuals within the Scottish Government".

Senior Scottish Government figures created a procedure for dealing with sexual harassment allegations that deliberately targeted Salmond. The procedure was so biased that a judge ruled it "unlawful" and "tainted by apparent bias". Having lost that, senior figures brought prosecutions against him, but Salmond was acquitted on all charges by a majority female jury, before a female judge. It now appears clear that those actions, to destroy a man's reputation and life, were motivated by a desire to hide their own crimes.

There are many unresolved questions. What happened with the £60,000-worth of items that were dropped from the indictment: the hair stylists, the lingerie and the books by Sturgeon's favourite authors? Murrell was clearly protecting Sturgeon by removing items that incriminated her. In the investigation, the police had further questions for Sturgeon, but prosecutors stopped them from putting them. Those prosecutors worked for the Lord Advocate, the principal legal adviser to the Scottish Government—a clear conflict of interest.

There is a clear pattern of secrecy, obstruction and power used to protect power—a pattern started by Sturgeon. Scotland needs a fresh start. That starts with a judicial inquiry into this entire sordid scandal, because it is a scandal that cost Alex Salmond his life.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): In keeping with the late David Amess's approach, the summer Adjournment debate is indeed broad.

3.12 pm

Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab): First, I have to say to the Leader of the House that I have a complaint about this Labour Government: it has entirely messed up the pattern of my life! At the beginning of every year, I used to know what I was going to be doing: I would be standing outside a train station, complaining about Tory fare rises—but no more! This Labour Government have introduced the first fare freeze in 30 years, alongside bringing in Great British Railways.

Come Easter, I would be campaigning about hens and eggs, as we would all be thinking about them. I have always thought that it is unfair that it should be allowed for hens to be in cages no bigger than the size of an A4 piece of paper, with no ability to display their natural behaviours, flap around and do the things that hens should be doing. They are called enhanced cages; I always thought that the marketing people had really earned their stripes by calling them that, because they are absolutely confinement cages. But again, this Labour Government are sorting it out. They are ensuring that, as part of the biggest change to animal welfare in a generation, we are going to get rid of those cages. I even heard today that the Government are consulting on fireworks, so I have no idea what I will be campaigning about come November!

There is a summer campaign, though, that this Labour Government still need to sort out. In the first month that I came to this place, I asked about maximum working temperatures and was told by the Minister that they were going to work to bring forward discussions with the Health and Safety Executive. By 2025, I was told by Ministers that they had given approval for the HSE to look into it, and this year I was told that the HSE is looking into it and that there would be a consultation in due course. I would say that is slow and steady—perhaps a little too slow, because there is a climate emergency. I do not think many people would deny that, except perhaps for some on the opposition Benches.

I have heard story after story from my constituents over the recent heatwaves of unsafe working temperatures in factories, shops, offices and classrooms. I was looking back at some of the previous debates on this subject, because Parliament has actually been talking about temperatures for workers for many years. The brilliant people in the Library actually showed me *Hansard* reports from the 1930s, which was the first time MPs were really talking about monitoring temperatures in workplaces and ensuring that there was a thermometer in every factory. It was at that time that the idea of minimum working temperatures was put into place.

Today we absolutely have to ensure that there is a maximum temperature in place as well. It is something that there is widespread support for. It is very similar to the minimum working temperature. Looking at the debates from the 1930s, we can see that workers were feeling unwell and were actually unproductive in temperatures that are not acceptable. Fast forward to our changed climate now, and the same is true today.

I think this is something we really must get our teeth into at speed. The climate has changed, and so must our laws.

3.16 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): It is poignant that we are having the Sir David Amess debate today, particularly in the light of the shocking murder of Ann Widdecombe only a week ago. Ann was a Devon resident, and although I may not have seen eye to eye with her politically, she definitely brought authenticity into politics in spades.

Ann would have benefited from Torbay hospital, which she could probably have seen from Dartmoor—there is an incredible view from certain patches of Dartmoor down to the fair constituency of Torbay. That hospital needs significant investment. Sadly, it has drifted down the performance league tables. It was promised investment under the Conservatives, but that was never delivered. There are fears of services being torn away from the hospital. Together with the Heart Campaign in Torbay, I am campaigning hard to protect those services and get investment. Like others, I believe that there is a lack of acknowledgment of our frail elderly population in Devon, where the finances are not following that particular challenge.

You may be planning to visit Devon at some stage, Madam Deputy Speaker. In Torbay, we have an incredible hospitality offer, but it is really challenged at the moment with the national insurance hikes, the increases in utility bills and the failure by the Government to change our business rates. I implore the Government to reflect on our hospitality industry and to take a leaf out of the

Liberal Democrats' book and cut VAT by 5% for 18 months to support our hospitality industry, because that would give it a significant boost.

Many people may be planning to visit the English riviera this summer, and when they do they may venture on to our coasts. I hope that the Minister will ensure that common sense prevails in appropriately recompensing our coastguards, who put themselves in danger's way to support people in tragic circumstances. I hope that we will see a positive way forward there.

As a Member who has a disability, I am delighted that this is Disability Pride Month. I am, however, really disappointed in the failure of my local council, Torbay council, to engage with me appropriately on special educational needs and disabilities issues. An MP should be there to champion his constituents, and I am now having to take this matter on to the ombudsman.

In conclusion, I thank all the staff across the parliamentary estate for their sterling work. I also thank my staff for their sterling work supporting my constituents, whether in sunny Torbay or in even hotter Westminster.

3.19 pm

Sarah Hall (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): I want to use my contribution today to talk about my constituent Lucy Harrison. I warn Members that what follows will be painful to hear—painful because Lucy was deeply loved, because Lucy's life was taken in circumstances that should never have happened, and because Lucy's family and loved ones have had to carry the truth of that day ever since. They have shown extraordinary courage in allowing her story to be told.

Lucy was just 23 when she died. She was from Great Sankey in Warrington. She had her whole life ahead of her. She was not simply a name in the news. She was Jane's daughter, and she was Sam's partner. She was deeply loved, and she should still be here.

Lucy had already achieved so much. She had earned a first-class degree in fashion buying and merchandising, and she had begun a career that she was passionate about. She was building a life with her partner Sam. Sam has described Lucy as the joy of his life. She meant everything to him.

Boxing Day 2024 would be the last time that Jane saw her daughter alive. On 27 December 2024, Lucy and Sam travelled to Texas to visit Lucy's father and his family—her father, a British citizen, now lives in Texas. They were due to return home on 10 January 2025. However, on the day that they were due to return home, just before leaving for the airport, Lucy went into a bedroom with her father. Sam waited for Lucy in the living room. A short time later, Sam heard a loud bang. Lucy had been shot by her father. She was in her father's home—somewhere she should have been safe.

It was the middle of the night when Jane, who was back home in Warrington, received the call that no parent should ever receive—that Lucy had been shot by her father and had not survived. Jane and Sam immediately found themselves trying to understand how Lucy's death was being investigated, what evidence was being considered, and whether anyone would ever be held accountable. They were left trying to understand a legal system without adequate support from the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. The Prosper police department investigated Lucy's death as a possible criminally negligent

[Sarah Hall]

homicide, but the case was later considered by a grand jury in Texas, and no criminal charges were brought. The gun had “simply gone off”.

When the evidence was later examined at Lucy’s inquest in Cheshire, the conclusion was very different. The senior coroner found that Lucy had been unlawfully killed. The senior coroner for Cheshire told the court that Lucy’s father’s actions on the day of her death were “truly, exceptionally bad and reprehensible”

so as to amount to her death. She rejected the account that the gun had simply gone off. The coroner found that for Lucy to have suffered the injury that she did, her father must have pointed the firearm in her direction, failed to check whether it was loaded, and then pulled the trigger. She described those actions as reckless and concluded that that amounted to gross negligence manslaughter.

An officer detected alcohol on his breath, and he initially denied having consumed any. Despite that, no breathalyser or blood alcohol tests were ever carried out. The senior coroner’s findings directly challenge the description of Lucy’s death as a tragic accident, and they raise serious questions about whether the original investigation followed the evidence with the rigour that the case demanded.

Lucy’s family recognise that the legal systems in England and Texas are different and are not asking for the Government to interfere in another country’s justice system. They are asking for the findings of a British coroner—reached after a full examination of the evidence—to be taken seriously. They are asking for Lucy’s case to be reconsidered by US authorities.

I implore the Government to use every channel that they have to press the relevant authorities in Texas to reopen or formally reconsider Lucy’s case and to stand alongside a British family and ensure that the findings of a British court are properly considered. As a matter of urgency, can the Government ensure that the FCDO does more in future to support the families of constituents who have been murdered abroad?

Jane has said that those who knew Lucy know what she would want them to do now: to make change, do better and be better. That is exactly what they are trying to do. They are carrying on the fight for Lucy.

3.23 pm

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I would like to raise a deeply troubling case that highlights serious concerns about the integrity of DNA testing within the Child Maintenance Service and questions surrounding the existing safeguards in place to protect families.

I want to share, as was recounted to me, what happened to my constituent Ms Chelsea Millar, her fight for justice and the serious questions that it raises. Ms Millar separated from her former partner Mr Brown shortly after the birth of their son in March 2022. When she applied to the CMS for child maintenance a few months later, paternity was disputed and the CMS arranged DNA testing through Cellmark, an independent private company specialising in forensic and relationship DNA testing. Ms Millar attended an approved testing clinic. However, her former partner requested that the DNA

sample be taken at Woodlawn medical centre, a location that was not on Cellmark’s approved list of collection sites. Despite that, the testing kit was sent there. Crucially, Cellmark did not verify that the centre was authorised or capable of conducting CMS DNA testing, and neither was my constituent informed of the change.

The result came back stating that Mr Brown was not the father. Ms Millar knew the result was wrong; she knew Mr Brown was the dad. Through her own determination, Ms Millar persuaded Mr Brown’s mother to participate in private DNA testing. That test established that the child was her biological grandson—Mr Brown’s mother was grandma—and as Mr Brown is an only child, it confirmed that the official CMS result could not be correct. Subsequent investigations by the Department for Work and Pensions and the police confirmed what had happened. An employee of Woodlawn medical centre, Robert Patel, had conspired with Mr Brown and tampered with the DNA testing process. Both Mr Brown and Mr Patel were subsequently convicted and sentenced to prison for fraud.

My concerns regarding this case are not limited to individual wrongdoing; it raises fundamental questions and concerns regarding the security of the chain of evidence relating to DNA testing and the process as a whole. Why was the DNA testing kit sent to an unapproved collection site without proper checks being carried out? What assessment or oversight of the company and its practices did the CMS undertake before and after the commissioning of DNA testing? Most importantly, what lessons have been learned to ensure that no other parent or child has to endure the same ordeal?

People need to have confidence in paternity testing, whether in child maintenance or other forensic uses. The chain of evidence needs to be secure. Will the Government urgently review that, and meet me and my constituent to discuss this case and the measures that can be taken to strengthen oversight, accountability and safeguards within paternity testing? Families must be able to trust that decisions that affect their children are based on processes that are secure, reliable and beyond reproach.

3.27 pm

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): It is a privilege to contribute to this debate in memory of Sir David Amess. Sir David embodied what it means to be a great constituency MP. He understood that our greatest responsibility is not just what happens in this Chamber, but what happens in our communities, our surgeries and our conversations with the people who put their trust in us. That is what this debate celebrates. Constituency work rarely makes the headlines, but it changes lives. None of it would be possible without my incredible team, and I hope the House and my constituents will understand my wanting to take this opportunity to thank them. They make me a far more effective MP, and I am enormously grateful for everything they do.

Since being elected, it has been the privilege of my life to serve the people of South Derbyshire. Regular surgeries and monthly coffee mornings are among the most valuable parts of my role. They allow me to listen, understand what matters to people and ensure that the work we do, both in the constituency and in this place, reflects their experiences.

Sometimes that work is about campaigns affecting whole communities: helping to secure the new school at New House Farm in Mickleover; standing alongside residents in Stanton in their opposition to the incinerator; and continuing the fight to protect Swadlincote's nationally important pottery. Often, however, it is the individual stories that stay with us. Derrick was just four years old when he had already waited more than a year—a quarter of his life—for his wheelchair. Receiving a photo of him smiling in it when it finally arrived is something I will never forget. Then there is Alfred, who is just 10, and his mum Emma, who we helped access funding for specialist therapies. There is Kaeson and his family, whose mobility support was restored, and families who have secured vital medical appointments, specialist equipment or simply someone to help them navigate an overwhelming system.

Those may seem like small victories in the grand scheme of politics, but they are not small to the people who live them. Behind every MP, and especially this MP, is a dedicated team quietly listening, chasing answers, navigating bureaucracy and supporting people through some of the most difficult moments of their lives. No one in my team came into politics from a political background. Between us, we have experience in the NHS, business, education, the arts and the charitable sector, but we all share one thing: a determination to help people.

Our constituency office has become a place where local organisations can support others, from Derbyshire Wish, which helps victims of domestic abuse, to Derbyshire LGBT+’s monthly “Spill the Tea” sessions—I want my trans constituents to know they have a friend and ally in me, even if they feel let down by this Labour Government right now—as well as our accessibility action group, which brings together residents and partners to make South Derbyshire more inclusive.

Of course, constituency work is not a catalogue of success. We did not stop the Stanton incinerator, too many SEND families are still battling a system that lets them down and many of my constituents continue to face challenges with fleecehold, inappropriate development and poor roads. But being a constituency MP is not about winning every campaign; it is about showing up, listening, being honest, even when the answer is no, and never giving up on the people we represent.

Different constituencies face different challenges, but we all share the same privilege: serving the people who put their trust in us. If the people of South Derbyshire know that they have an MP and a team who listen, stand beside them and will keep fighting for them, I will consider that the greatest honour of this job—and, I hope, a fitting tribute to the example set by Sir David Amess.

3.30 pm

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this week, I spoke in a Westminster Hall debate about the isolation of coastal communities. I had prepared a five-minute speech, but we were only allowed two and a half minutes—so here’s the other two and a half minutes.

The More in Common research group recently produced a report, commissioned by Associated British Ports, about understanding British coastal communities. The report is a wake-up call for Westminster. It surveys those living on our coasts, and the message is clear:

79% of coastal residents feel that the Government in Westminster do not understand their area. I have to say that I disagree with that to some extent, because many people, such as myself, live, work and were brought up in coastal communities. It is easy to knock Westminster for not understanding coastal communities or industrial areas when, in fact, many of us work hard to argue the case for the communities in which we live.

Young people in coastal communities can see the potential for their areas, but they need a reason to stay. Currently, 58% of young people in coastal communities are considering leaving because they feel they have no choice or because of a lack of decent jobs. In my area, we have Immingham, the biggest port in the country, right on the doorstep. If we unlock investment in port infrastructure, we can reverse the brain drain.

Turning from our economic future to the immediate health of our communities, I must raise deep concerns regarding NHS England’s proposed boundary changes for the integrated care board in our region. Neighbouring MPs and I have written to the relevant Minister and the ICB to argue the case. Services across North Lincolnshire, North East Lincolnshire and the wider Humber are deeply interconnected, and we need a single health ecosystem. If NHS England proceeds to break up our current footprint, it will directly undermine the viability of Scunthorpe and Grimsby general hospitals. Furthermore, 300,000 people from the Humber and North Yorkshire ICB footprint are threatened by the financial stability of the entire system. The proposals will dilute support and services in our area.

My speech would not be complete if I did not raise my long-running campaign to restore direct train services from Grimsby and Cleethorpes through to King’s Cross.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Twice in one day!

Martin Vickers: I have already raised the issue once, in Transport questions this morning, and I will do so at every possible opportunity. Grimsby and Cleethorpes comprise one of the largest urban areas in the entire country that does not have a direct link to our capital city. The Government claim that the creation of Great British Railways will boost economic growth and provide direct services. It is now up to Ministers to decide. They could, merely by signing an order, restore the service.

In my final 30 seconds, I must report that I had a close encounter with a cyclist this morning. Many pedestrians around London will be aware that some cyclists can be a danger; hon. Members can go outside this building and see hundreds of cyclists breaking the law. If we do not enforce the law at a low level, we turn a blind eye to law breaking at a higher level.

3.34 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate and to hear Members’ warm recollections of Sir David Amess, including from you, Madam Deputy Speaker. He was obviously widely respected across this Chamber. Last month, we also remembered my dear friend Jo Cox, whom we continue to miss. My thoughts this week are with the friends and relatives of Ann Widdecombe following her shocking murder. An attack on one parliamentarian is an attack on all of us.

[Melanie Ward]

I always say that community solidarity is our biggest strength in my part of the world, and I would like to use my time to highlight some of the people and organisations that are shining examples of that. I pay tribute to the Linton Lane centre, which celebrates its centenary this year. I was glad to join its celebrations. Formerly Kirkcaldy boys' club, it is a thriving cornerstone of life in Kirkcaldy, providing a wide range of services to the community. The Linton Lane centre is led heroically by Mandy Hunter, who celebrates 30 years of working at the centre today. I would like to say thank you to Mandy for her tireless years of service, and to thank all the staff and volunteers at the Linton Lane centre.

Turning to Dalgety Bay, after the success of our new banking hubs in Cowdenbeath and Burntisland, we need a new banking hub in Dalgety Bay to ensure that vital banking services are still accessible there, especially to a population that is perhaps not always au fait with online banking. I raised this with a Treasury Minister only yesterday and will continue to push for that to happen.

I turn now to two pieces of good news. I was inspired by the work of students at Dunnikier primary school, who produced an impressive display of artwork to celebrate diversity at their school. The school had become the target of vile racist attacks online as a result of holding diversity day celebrations, and I visited to offer my support. What I saw there were children from different backgrounds all with a love for Scotland and pride in their family's heritage. It reminded me that the real world is different and often better than the online world. These children had a greater understanding of each other than any of the abusive and racist trolls online. Let me say clearly that I am proud of the teachers and pupils of Dunnikier primary, and I hope that they are proud of themselves.

I warmly welcome the £515,000 new investment that this UK Government are making in Denfield park in Kirkcaldy through the Scottish Football Association. The current football pitch has been prone to flooding, and the new 3G pitch, which this funding will help pay for, will provide year-round football facilities for men's and women's teams across age groups and from across Kirkcaldy. I say a massive well done to all at the Kirkcaldy Community Football Partnership for all their hard work in making that happen.

As many Members have said, MPs would not be able to do our jobs without our incredible staff teams, and I am very lucky in that regard. I would like to say a huge thank you to Angela Bailey, who is soon moving on from being my office manager. I will always be grateful to her for her work with me in 2024 and ever since then, and I wish her and her family all the very best in the future.

That brings me lastly to a huge thank you and to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all the parliamentary staff a relaxing and rejuvenating recess—I think we need it after recent events. We are extremely grateful for all they do in making our democracy function.

3.38 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Your Party): When the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) introduced the debate, he quite rightly drew attention to the huge work done by our constituency and parliamentary

staff. It is right that we should thank them on this occasion and also thank all the parliamentary staff for what they do. I thank those in my local authority for what they do, in particular the street cleaners who cleaned up after the largest ever football celebration in Britain when Arsenal won the league. I am sure everybody will cheer that straight away—no. [*Laughter.*]

I also want to put on record my thanks to two of the Members' Tea Room staff who are retiring today, Godfrey Asare and Margaret Labulo, who have done fantastic work providing God knows how many cups of coffee and tea for all of us over many years. They deserve our thanks.

I want to refer to a number of things very briefly. Yesterday was the Prime Minister's last Question Time. He gave a characterisation of the Labour party he inherited when he became the leader that I profoundly disagree with and is completely wrong. The Labour party was not financially in any great problem when I ceased to be the leader; in fact, it had very large capital and cash assets at that time. Secondly, to call the party "morally bankrupt" and claim that it had been found to be "institutionally antisemitic" is completely wrong and will not be found anywhere in the Equality and Human Rights Commission report. I invite the Prime Minister to correct the record; I am sure he would wish it to be accurate.

Many things will face the new Prime Minister when he comes into office. I hope he will fundamentally change our policy on Gaza and Palestine and on Iran and Lebanon, and at the very least cease military support and security co-operation with Israel. I also hope he will support my private Member's Bill calling for a public inquiry into Gaza, in the same way that Sir John Chilcot undertook a public inquiry into the policy on Iraq.

My constituency, like many others, has a large number of leasehold properties, often fairly newly built and many of them covered with unsafe cladding that needs to be removed. I am pleased that the Government have made some funding available to remediate unsafe cladding. That is good, but why are the developers not being given that bill? Why are they not the ones who are forced to pay for what they knew to be unsafe cladding when they put it in? I hope we can do something for the residents in Drayton Park, Highbury Square and former stadium buildings in my constituency, because they have suffered very high insurance costs and are unable to sell or move, simply because something was badly built and they were unaware of that when they bought the place.

I wish to raise two other issues. I have a constituent, who I would rather not name because I think he deserves privacy, who suffers from advanced motor neurone disease. He is in a very bad way. He is getting nursing care from the local health service, and that is good. I have written several times to the Home Office asking that his family in Nigeria be allowed to visit. It has consistently refused to allow him to be visited by his son or any other member of his family. I appeal to the Home Office—I am sure the Leader of the House will pass this on, and I will follow up with another letter: please show some humanity for this man towards the end of his life, and let him at least have the opportunity to see the rest of his family before he passes on from a most terrible condition.

The shop Fish & Cook on Blackstock Road is closing. I ask that this successful small business is not allowed to be turned into a 24-hour gaming place and that we are given the powers to stop this kind of thing happening on our high streets around this country.

3.42 pm

Lewis Atkinson (Sunderland Central) (Lab): In the last year, Sunderland has shown that it is truly a city on the up. A new hospital, library, bridge, construction skills academy, offices and housing are all open or opening soon—all secured under a Labour council—and there are investment plans in place for the Crown Works film studio, expansion of the Metro to Washington and much more now.

Reform UK Sunderland might have criticised city centre regeneration as “vanity projects” and opposed council investment, but in the spirit of constructive cross-party engagement that I have tried to adopt following its victory in May, I should acknowledge that Reform has promised to bring back the airshow, which was an annual highlight of my childhood. That will presumably be returning next July, so I want to extend an early invite to all Members and the future Member for Clacton not just to enjoy our beautiful coast but to help ensure that all rubbish from day-trippers to Roker and Seaburn is properly disposed of—in the bin.

Sunderland fans will be minding the gap when they get off the Metro at the airport this summer, not just for our summer holidays but for getting carried away at Europa league fixtures, perhaps in Milan. Our first season back in the premier league was a resounding triumph, marking a huge turn in fortunes for the red and white team founded by a trade union. It just shows what can be done with the right manager, inspired recruitment and consistent hard work—yes, I am still referring to football, not the Labour party. I know the Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for Tynemouth (Sir Alan Campbell), is an ardent fan of Europe, so I am sure he will join me in wishing Sunderland AFC well for the season ahead. I specifically want to mention the contribution of David Bruce, who recently departed as the club’s chief business officer. As a lifelong fan and a local lad made good, he led the commercial revitalisation of the club and crucially its reconnection with the fans, including through the return of the fantastic Hummel kits. I wish him well in his future work as chief executive of Sheffield Wednesday.

We are at the end of the school year, so I want to thank teachers, staff and students across Sunderland for their commitment this year. A deserved summer break beckons and I hope that those awaiting exam results see all their hard work reflected in them. Mrs Helen Smith has been teaching at St Anthony’s girls’ Catholic academy for more than 30 years, including as head of sixth form and leading the A-level politics programme. She has encouraged and inspired generations of Sunderland’s young people to be engaged in our democracy, whether as runners at our speedy election counts, visitors to Parliament or as talented interns and staff in my office and those of my predecessors. I thank her for that and for the significant contribution that she has made to public life in Sunderland, as I thank all teachers and staff retiring at the end of this term.

Homelessness shames us all, and I pay tribute to the Prime Minister for the priority he gave to tackling it, including through a significantly increased homeless grant allocation to Sunderland. I am, however, still deeply saddened—angry, even—that that grant has not been used by the council to prevent the recent closure of the Basis homeless drop-in centre, and that no alternative provision has been put in place. Imagine being on the streets in a heatwave or, in a few months’ time, in the middle of winter, without having a drop-in service to provide somewhere to have a shower, to get warm or to wash clothes. It is a disgrace. I pay tribute to Dave Cawley and the Basis team, and to the engagement of churches and other faith and community groups that are doing what they can to serve our homeless neighbours in the city.

All that remains is for me to wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and all the staff of the House a very happy summer.

3.46 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): I start by joining the many other hon. Members who have paid tribute to Ann Widdecombe. She was a remarkable, inspiring and passionate woman, and I was honoured to welcome her to Stockton on numerous occasions. My thoughts go out to her friends and family.

One issue that is raised with me week after week is the growing scourge of off-road bikes and e-bikes. Whether it is in Bishopsgarth or Elm Tree, Ingleby Barwick or Thornaby, residents across Stockton West are fed up with feral, balaclava-clad thugs using these bikes to intimidate communities, tear through parks and footpaths, and make neighbourhoods feel unsafe. Families cannot enjoy parks, older residents feel intimidated and children cannot play safely. This is not simply anti-social behaviour—it is dangerous criminality.

I put forward amendments to legislation that would have made it easier for officers to seize vehicles, ensured that non-roadworthy bikes seized from persistent offenders were not returned and explored greater accountability around the sale of off-road bikes in the first place. Those amendments were not accepted, but the problem has not gone away; if anything, it is getting worse. I urge Ministers to look again at the issue and bring forward a comprehensive package of measures that equips police with the powers they need, tackles the supply of these machines and sends a clear message that those who use off-road bikes and e-bikes to terrorise our communities will face real consequences.

Another issue that I hear about almost every day is over-development. Across Yarm, Eaglescliffe, Middleton St George and Hartburn, residents increasingly feel that their communities are being asked to shoulder an unfair level of development without the infrastructure to support it. People understand that homes are needed and that young people want somewhere to live, but what they cannot understand is why developments continue to be approved without the roads, school places, GP capacity, drainage and local services keeping pace. Time and again, I hear from residents who feel their voices are ignored.

Development should happen with communities, not to them. The Government’s increasing housing targets risk placing more pressure on these communities. Planning

[*Matt Vickers*]

should improve places, not simply gobble up the greenbelt to maximise housing numbers. I hope Ministers will continue to look at ways to strengthen the role of infrastructure in planning decisions and ensure that local communities have a meaningful voice before developments are approved.

Finally, I pay tribute to Richard Pengelly from Strangers Bar who retires today after 37 years. Richard has not just poured pints—he has poured patience, good humour and the occasional reality check for MPs of every party. The place will not be the same without him. I wish him a long and well-earned retirement, and I look forward to reading his memoirs.

Stockton West is an amazing place, with amazing people. I am proud to call it home and I am proud to represent them.

3.49 pm

Adam Thompson (Erewash) (Lab): It is always an honour to speak in the Adjournment debate in memory of Sir David Amess. As is traditional, I will endeavour to cram as many topics as I can into my contribution before we break for the summer recess.

I will discuss recent knife crime in Ilkeston. While it would not be appropriate for me to discuss any one individual case in detail, some incidents recently have affected my community deeply. As always, my thoughts are with those affected. I will continue to engage with the families of those involved and the wider community over the summer, as well as our local police, our police and crime commissioner, Nicolle Ndiweni-Roberts, and local councillors from across the political spectrum as we work together to make our community safer.

Let me briefly address East Midlands Railway, a service that I use regularly to travel between Erewash and London. This week, EMR has continued to operate a reduced timetable, citing the impact of recent hot weather. While extreme weather can affect rail services, passengers have faced disruption and shortcomings for years, and the hot weather is not going away. The introduction of the new Aurora fleet is very much welcome, but progress has been very slow. In the meantime, passengers are relying on the ageing class 222 Meridian trains, which lack modern amenities such as properly functional wi-fi. Passengers deserve a reliable, modern railway, and I hope the roll-out of the Aurora fleet accelerates to deliver the improvements long promised on the midland main line.

Supporting grassroots music has always mattered to me, both as a former gigging musician and as the MP for Erewash. Last summer, I spoke in this debate about the importance of protecting the small venues that give new artists their first opportunities and bring communities together through live music. Since then, I have been out and seen a stack of bands at grassroots gigs, because those venues and acts thrive only when people show up. Grassroots music is about more than entertainment; it creates jobs, strengthens our communities and gives the next generation of artists somewhere to begin their journey—and, often, it is something for young people to do. However, the problems of venue closures, poor pay for artists and high prices for tickets endures, so, to repeat my sentiment from last time: colleagues and friends, please go and see a band this summer.

I have some quick-fire points. The Big Paddle Cleanup is Paddle UK's wonderful initiative designed to clean up our waterways, and I thank all volunteers for their work. I am really excited that Bennerley viaduct visitor centre is formally opening this week, and I very much look forward to my first coffee there. I wish a very happy anniversary to Manor fish bar in Ilkeston, which is currently celebrating 20 years of fantastic chips. Treetops hospice in Risley is an amazing local charity that provides hospice at-home support for thousands of Derbyshire families using its innovative provision model, and I hope to engage with the Health Secretary after recess to discuss that model.

Let me give a shout-out to my barber, Ev Swift, who is essentially a core member of my team at this point. He is always there to put a smile on my face, and he is far more famous on Instagram than I am, so do give him a follow—my guy is hilarious. I give an invitation to all Members: they are very welcome to join me for a creamy pint this summer in the Sawley Junction, the Burnt Pig or the Hoptimist over recess. I have one more point: may I beg Reform on Derbyshire county council to sort out the potholes? They are a right state.

I am sure that every Member across the House values the contribution of their own teams; we have heard from various colleagues about them and all the work that they do. I put on record my thanks to my incredible team. To Becca, Curtis, Harrison, Hollie, Jude, Robert, Ruby and Vikki, I express my very sincere thanks for everything that you do. Similarly, I thank my colleagues on Erewash borough council; James Dawson and our mayor, Greg Maskalick, are doing wonderful work.

I have covered as many topics as I can this afternoon—I have several further discarded pages that I would have raised had I had the time. As we head into this recess, I thank again my team, my colleagues on the council, all the staff in the House—particularly those retiring this summer—and everyone who works so hard behind the scenes to keep this place running. I wish all Members a restful and wonderful summer, and I look forward to returning in September to continue making the case for Erewash. Happy recess, Madam Deputy Speaker.

3.53 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Labour Members will recall the political pain that I am sure many of them faced when the winter fuel proposal was announced. It was put forward to save around £1.3 billion to £1.5 billion a year. They will also recall the angst, the ministerial resignations and the delay that occurred around the defence investment plan, which cost about £15 billion, less than half of which is actually new money—about £6.9 billion. It is very surprising that the Government propose to spend more on this building and this estate than they are spending on the defence investment plan. As a deposit, they are planning to spend more than half of what was put forward as a saving on winter fuel. If colleagues are surprised to hear that, I can tell them that of the four options being brought forward, even the cheapest is more than £10 billion. In a nice sleight of hand, though, all the works on the northern estate—which are essential to the restoration and renewal programme—are excluded. That is more than a further £5 billion over the next 10 years, and that is excluding the half a billion we have spent over the past five years just on preparatory work, before building anything.

After spending half a billion on preparatory work, the National Audit Office said last month that the £3 billion that is being brought forward is to allow the programme to progress from four options to two. When the legislation was passed, it was with one option; after seven years and half a billion pounds, we have gone from one option to four, and it is now proposed to spend a further £3 billion to go from four options to two. As the headline figure is so large, however, the proposal is to commit £3 billion, but to lock in the next Parliament so that, in essence, it has no choice but to sign off a figure that this Parliament knows it will be highly reluctant to sign off.

All of this is being done with no debate in this House, despite more than half the Parliament being new Members. This is not a new issue—I raised this point in the exact same debate last year, the Sir David Amess debate, and have raised it multiple times in the House. There has been no debate about these gigantic figures, despite the level of debate we have on other topics. The Government might say that this is a parliamentary matter, but it is not; it is the Government who will provide the money, and it is the Government who have the majority in the House.

This is happening because, bluntly, there has been a breakdown in trust between officials—who are deeply frustrated with Members and peers because they feel that we have not set a clear budget or a clear timeline, and that the goalposts are being moved regarding the options—and Members and peers, who are frustrated because they feel that officials are not responding to concerns. In 2021, the Leader of the House said that this scheme was massively gold-plated, but the trade-offs are still not being addressed. Let me give just one example—that of the Lords roof. Although the Finance Committee does not cover R&R, we had a proposal this week on the Lords roof, which is work outside of R&R. An extra £1 million of costs was being incurred just because the Lords would not agree to finish at 10.30 pm. When I put that to Members of the Lords, they were completely unaware of that figure.

I am almost out of time, but the point I want to make to the House is that these are huge numbers, and it is ridiculous that there has been so little transparency and debate. R&R is going to be a national scandal; I keep raising it, but nothing is changing. It is time that we had a debate in this House, made this issue transparent and brought some clarity to it, including a defined budget and a time limit, which I would set as one Parliament.

3.57 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): As this debate is always oversubscribed—a fitting tribute to Sir David that I am sure he would have been proud of—I am going to keep my remarks short.

I love Luton. It is my home, and my favourite part of my job is working with our wonderful, diverse, welcoming community. I have been proud to push forward the new play park in Stopsley alongside Sandra and Mike Stratford, Cherry Newbury, and the one and only Karen Cockfield. With spades now in the ground, this Government's Pride in Place programme is funding a fire engine-themed playground extension for younger children as well. It is a true community campaign—a Labour MP working alongside a Labour council, funded by a Labour Government and powered by local people. In Marsh Farm, local residents

will direct £20 million over the next decade through our Pride in Place neighbourhood board, led by our fantastic new chair Jackie Neufville. I visit businesses every week, and do a small business Saturday shout-out every weekend. I see businesses such as Crafty As Fk, run by Claire Lydon; Sensory5, opened by the passionate Kasey Foy; Hina Sohrab providing IT services globally from her home in Luton North; and the amazing Grand Bazar supermarket, which has celebrated its one-year anniversary, an event that I was honoured to mark alongside our Labour mayor Javed Hussain.

I love visiting schools. In the past few weeks, I have joined students bricklaying at Stopsley High with their wonderful head Karen Hand, after linking them up with local business Goodman to supply bricks for its courses. I have awarded amazing students at Putteridge High alongside their committed head, David Graham, and I have said goodbye to the truly brilliant Sandra Clarke, who retires from Woodlands High this week.

The love, care and community you feel when you walk into that school are amazing. While she will be greatly missed, she deserves a very happy retirement.

In Luton North, we have so many great people doing amazing things, whether that is Paul Prior opening up a veterans hub at the Legrave and Limbury British Legion, Michelle Boldeau running a half marathon—rather her than me—to support the hospital's charity, or Rose at the Ameina Centre, who welcomed me to meet amazing groups, such as Att10tive and Shanthona Women's Group. That is not the sum of everything happening in Luton North—and I could go on for 30 minutes, rather than three—but I want to put those achievements on record. We are a strong, united, diverse part of the world, and long may that continue.

Just like many others, I wish everybody here a fantastic summer, and I thank those members of the parliamentary staff who are retiring—people like Richard, Margaret and Godfrey. I want to say a massive thank you to them not just for keeping us fed and looked after, but for their continued friendship, especially Godfrey, who has been extremely kind to my little one throughout the years.

I want to say a massive thank you to my team. I could not do this without them and they serve the people of Luton North in such a brilliant, committed manner—I could not ask for more.

4 pm

Rachel Taylor (North Warwickshire and Bedworth) (Lab): First, may I thank all the House staff, particularly those leaving us this year, and pay tribute to my wonderful team? I could not do this job without them and the work they do for my constituents in North Warwickshire and Bedworth.

Sir David was known throughout this House for the pride he took in his constituency. I have always believed that sport has an extraordinary ability to bring people together, never more than when we watch our national team together. As someone who has played tennis throughout my life and become a Wimbledon tennis umpire, I know that sport gives us so much more than benefits to our physical health—although I am beginning to question those physical health benefits after sustaining a broken rib playing for the cross-party parliamentary team!

[Rachel Taylor]

Sport gives us confidence, friendships and the opportunity to meet people outside of our everyday lives. For many people, it just gives us a reason to get out of bed and to get outdoors. That is what I see every time I visit the fantastic grassroots sports clubs in North Warwickshire and Bedworth. They are places where young people build confidence, where volunteers give countless hours to their communities, and where people of all ages and backgrounds come together around a shared passion.

Earlier this year, I was delighted to visit Bedworth rugby club and support it in its ambition to install new floodlights. At Atherstone cricket club, I was pleased to attend the Martin Plackett memorial match, which every year raises vital funds for cancer research. I had the chance to join the fantastic ladies team in the nets—and they told me to stick to the tennis! I enjoyed my visit to the bowls club at Water Orton, and I can assure the House that crown green bowls is much harder than it looks. It was a joy to return to the Grove and see the local ladies darts league thriving; Margaret and the other volunteers do a wonderful job. The bowls team there are also a force to be reckoned with, and so many young people are taking up the sport.

Coleshill tennis club was a real lifeline for me during covid, and the Adders hockey team, where I played for a few seasons, have so many dedicated volunteers, including Mick and Jill Thomas, and thriving junior, men's and ladies' teams. Sport is so much a part of village life in so many of the villages in my constituency, from Fillongley to Newton Regis, from Corley to Austrey and from Warton to Polesworth, with its fantastic annual Office Abbott run, to name just a few.

I cannot talk about sport and physical activity without mentioning the two wonderful parkruns in my constituency: the rather hilly Bedworth parkrun in the Miners' Welfare Park and the picturesque Kingsbury Water parkrun, both of which I have run in and volunteered at. I also cannot talk about sport in my constituency without mentioning the three fantastic non-league football clubs: Atherstone Town community football club, known as the Adders, who nearly clinched promotion this season. I watched the nail-biting match in Coventry, which was wonderful. I also need to mention Bedworth United and Coleshill Town. I have also supported them and watched their matches this season.

It was great to welcome young people from Polesworth school and Nicholas Chamberlaine school to Parliament this year to talk about the barriers to them getting involved in sport. I joined the Activity Alliance recently at the junior para swimming championships. I know that I have seen the Paralympians of the future.

As we remember Sir David Amess today, I would also like to talk about our late colleague Jo Cox. She reminded us that

"we are far more united and have far more in common than that which divides us."—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

It was an honour to join Jo's sister, my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater), together with her parents Jean and Gordon to run the 10th and last Run for Jo last month. Grassroots sport demonstrates the truth of Jo's words every single week at the many brilliant sports clubs across North Warwickshire and Bedworth.

I thank the House for listening to me, and I thank in particular all those whose volunteer in community sport: they make North Warwickshire and Bedworth and our country a better place.

4.5 pm

Alison Taylor (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (Lab): I did not have the privilege of meeting Sir David Amess, but I do remember the sense of shock across the country at his murder. He was clearly a man of deep convictions and determination to serve his country and his constituents. My heart goes out to his family and all those who knew him. They are in my thoughts and prayers today.

As our neighbours across the Atlantic are reflecting on the 250th anniversary of their nation, I am reminded of America's great leader Abraham Lincoln and his words at Gettysburg, where he described those who died fighting in the civil war as having given their "last full measure of devotion".

It seems fitting that the same description can be applied to Sir David, and to Jo Cox before him: they gave their last full measure of devotion. They gave everything they had to their constituency and their country. It falls to us to honour their loss and to rededicate ourselves to the service of our country.

Like other hon. Members, I was deeply shocked to learn of the murder of the former Member Ann Widdecombe. When I was a newly elected MP, a constituent came to me with an issue that led me to contact Ann; she was incredibly kind and generous with her time. I record my deepest condolences to her family and friends.

Serving my constituents of Paisley and Renfrewshire North is the greatest privilege of my life. I am grateful to Mr Speaker for all that he has done to help us do our work safely.

For several years, I have served on the Labour-led Glasgow commission, exploring barriers and opportunities for the Greater Glasgow region. One inescapable conclusion from that work is the need for strategic, ambitious planning in transport, infrastructure and culture. I look at what has been achieved in Manchester as an illustration of what can be done with ambition and positivity. For example, Manchester is well served with an integrated transport network. My constituents can take a train to Manchester airport—they can even take a train to the less frequented Prestwick airport—but they cannot take a train to Glasgow airport, hampering access for both travellers and workers. Bus franchising has transformed commuting and leisure travel across Manchester, while Glasgow—one of the first places to have an underground system—has seen no expansion of that network and little thought on integrated transport.

My constituency includes Glasgow airport, and significant industrial and high-tech manufacturing, which is constrained not by its ambition but by the lack of ambition for two decades of an SNP-controlled Scottish Government. Following the publication of the strategic defence review, I will be convening a roundtable with defence-related businesses in my constituency to explore how, together, we can play a part in the challenges ahead.

For members still planning a holiday, may I highlight some of the delights of Paisley, Glasgow and Renfrewshire, all of which I represent a part of? A Renfrewshire museum holds one of only a handful of copies of the

beautifully illustrated “Audubon’s Birds of America”. Previous important visitors to Paisley include John Witherspoon, the only clergyman to sign the US declaration of independence, and former President Ronald Reagan, who had roots in the area. In fact, American influence radiates across Renfrewshire, which hosts a nine acre indoor leisure and entertainment zone at Braehead. We also have the Grid, which is aimed at children of all ages.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Members will have seen that we are a bit pressed for time, so after this speech I will be reducing the time limit to three minutes.

4.9 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): One of the things that Sir David understood well is that the best causes we take up as parliamentarians begin not in Westminster but in our constituencies. Like the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), I have had many constituents come to me worried about the growing presence of illegal e-bikes on our streets. Older residents are anxious about their safety, local businesses raise concerns about dangerous, modified e-bikes, and Carlisle’s police officers highlight a worrying trend linking illegal e-bikes to wider criminal activity. That is why, at the beginning of the year, I introduced a ten-minute rule Bill to ban the sale of illegal e-bikes and the kits that create them.

Since then, with thanks to Maisie Stewart and Clark Becken in my team, I have had the privilege of meeting manufacturers, retailers, charities, the bicycle and motorcycle industries, and police and community groups, not just in Carlisle but well beyond. The more evidence I have gathered, the more convinced I have become that action is urgently needed to tackle what is a national problem.

Perhaps the most striking conversation I had was with local schoolchildren when I visited Newlathes school in May. Pupils raised concerns with me about illegal e-bikes being ridden through Chances Park. They spoke eloquently and with conviction about the dangers posed to them, their friends and their families when they simply want to use their local park. There is something powerful about the fact that primary school children have recognised a problem that we as lawmakers have yet to address.

I would like to be clear: the issue is not e-bikes. It is illegal e-bikes. There is a reason why there is a tight legal definition of an e-bike: because vehicles that are capable of power and speed outside the legal parameters are simply not safe without proper checks, registration and licensing. The police understand the problem all too well. Cumbria’s police, fire and crime commissioner David Allen has been working with me and commissioners throughout the country, backing my call for a ban because, time and again, when the thread of illegal e-bikes is pulled, wider criminal networks unravel, with issues of illegal working, drug dealing and robbery exposed.

On a positive note, I have been delighted to spend time visiting and speaking with some of the amazing legitimate cycle businesses and organisations in my constituency, including Rebike Cumbria, which refurbishes bikes, helping people on low incomes to enjoy the physical and mental health benefits of cycling. The company also provides jobs, training and volunteering opportunities in my community.

Illegal e-bikes also raise fire risks. I heard earlier this week that there has been a nearly 150% increase in house fires of because of lithium ion batteries. A terrifying majority of those fires have been linked to illegal e-bikes.

Taken together, the issues demonstrate that this is not simply a transport matter. It is about public safety, crime, antisocial behaviour, consumer protection and business, and—most importantly for all of us—it is about our communities.

Next year, the Tour de France comes not just to Britain but to my constituency of Carlisle. I want to ensure that the tour is a celebration of cycling—good, legal cycling—and I want part of that celebration to be a ban on the dodgy, dangerous, illegal e-bikes that threaten our local communities.

4.13 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Like many colleagues who have spoken, I pay tribute to Sir David Amess.

Today, I make a speech that I never thought I would have to make, to pay tribute to a good friend, Councillor Shanika Mahendran, who passed away on 1 July at the age of just 28. I met Shanika in 2022 on the Next Generation programme run by the Local Government Association’s Labour group. Although I wondered why I was among such an incredibly talented cohort, it was plain to see why Shanika was. Despite being a relatively new councillor, she was clearly destined for an outstanding career in local government, and anything that she put her mind to. She was particularly passionate about planning, placemaking and her beloved home city of Milton Keynes.

As a young woman of colour in politics, Shanika faced condescension and sexism that no one should, particularly given that she was outstanding in all the roles she held. Despite that, Shanika carried a lot of self-doubt, but one of the joys of knowing her was seeing her confidence gradually blossom into a realisation of the enormous contribution she made. That is why we were devastated to hear, towards the end of June, that Shanika had been diagnosed with a rare and aggressive brain tumour. Such is the cruel speed at which this condition can move that Shanika was with us for just one week after we heard that news.

I do not think that Shanika’s loss has really sunk in yet, but I wanted to make this speech because, above all, she was someone who believed in doing things, not just saying things. I hope that sharing her story can shine a light on the experience of thousands of others.

Brain tumours remain the biggest cancer killer of children and adults under 40, yet fewer than 13% of adults diagnosed with a high-grade tumour will survive beyond five years, and the condition accounts for just 3.2% of national cancer research funding. There are more than 120 types of brain and central nervous system tumours, making them particularly difficult to identify quickly. The Brain Tumour Charity found that 41% of patients visited their GP three or more times before receiving a diagnosis. I welcome the Government’s commitment to improve outcomes through the national cancer plan, including by investing in the national Brain Tumour Research Consortium. Researchers are developing new approaches, from immunotherapies to personalised medicine, but many promising breakthroughs have yet to reach the bedside and we need to do more to support that.

[Josh Newbury]

In Shanika's memory, we can back earlier diagnosis and more research to ensure that every patient has access to the best possible care.

Before I completely go to pieces, I will finish with a few words from a poem by David Harkins that was sent around our Next Generation cohort by Councillor Lorna Fielker:

"You can shed tears that she is gone,
Or you can smile because she has lived.
You can close your eyes and pray that she will come back,
Or you can open your eyes and see all that she has left".

4.15 pm

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): Four years ago, we welcomed many new residents into a number of new homes in my constituency. Despite saving up, getting themselves on the property ladder and paying anything between £300,000 and £500,000 for brand-new leasehold properties, those living at the Bluenote apartments have found themselves living in a nightmare. Bellway Homes was the developer, and Bellway-appointed directors control the residents' management company.

When the residents moved in, they found that the boiler was not fit for purpose and they regularly went without any hot water or heating for days. The car park gates were constantly breaking down and trapping vehicles inside the car park. The patio slabs were uneven and dangerous, leading to injury, and there were leaks from the roof into individual apartments. Very quickly, service charge bills far exceeded the estimates provided by Bellway, and Bellway and its directors refused to engage.

Four years on, the scale of the problems has grown. Over £100,000 of residents' funds remain unaccounted for, including money from the heat supply and reserve funds. Service charge demands have doubled in four years, and residents have been charged for fixing defects for which the developer is responsible. Residents have been refused basic financial information, including the end-of-year accounts, receipts and invoices that they are entitled to see under the Landlord and Tenant Act 1985, even though they have gone through every appropriate route. The dangerous patio slabs remain.

Bellway has refused to transfer the freehold to leasehold, even though it is contractually obliged to do so. It has allowed the property management companies—Premier Block Management and Gateway Property Management—to act with impunity in sending out grossly inflated and incorrect service demands, and it has put my constituents under intense pressure to take over the property management companies and expose themselves to significant personal liabilities.

Bellway has been able to get away with this because it controls the management, has control of the freehold and has the resources to bully my constituents, including by instructing top law firms to send them threatening letters. All I am doing is calling on Bellway to be transparent about the building's finances, to resolve the outstanding issues and the physical problems that the residents are facing, and to transfer the freehold, as it is contractually and morally obliged to do.

I welcome the Government's draft leasehold reform Bill. However, this case exemplifies the fact that the Bill needs to be much more robust, particularly in relation

to service charges and the management transfer process. I do not want to experience this again with other constituents. As I have said, the residents have gone through a living nightmare because of the unaccountability of this development and the management company.

4.18 pm

Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab): Sir David Amess understood what every Member of this House should remember: our greatest privilege is representing the people and places who send us here. He never missed an opportunity to celebrate Southend, and today I want to do the same for Portsmouth. This year is especially meaningful, because we are celebrating 100 years of city status.

For a century our city has been shaped by courage, service, resilience and innovation. Portsmouth has defended our nation, openly welcomed people from around the world, built ships, driven industry and produced generations who have been fiercely proud to call themselves Pompey. Throughout this centenary year, our city has come together to celebrate, but Portsmouth 100 is about more than looking back; it is about recognising the people who make our city.

Reading through the nominations for the 100 Pompey Belles award, recognising 100 local women, has been inspiring and humbling. They tell the stories of the extraordinary women who quietly make Portsmouth a better place every single day. The hardest part now lies ahead, because we have the impossible task of narrowing down these nominations to just 100.

I have learned over the past two years that Portsmouth sometimes has a habit of talking about itself as though it ends at the guildhall. I have therefore made it my mission since being elected to remind everyone that there is another half of Portsmouth that is every bit as special, which is Portsmouth North. It is where so many of my own memories were made: the street parties on Mousehole Road; rolling down Portsdown hill, which I must confess I have done rather more recently than perhaps I should have; spending long summer days sitting on the concrete steps at Hilsea lido, and how wonderful to see this much-loved landmark restored for future generations to make memories, too; catching the bus as a kid into North End to go shopping, before treating ourselves to a burger at Uncle Sams; play dates with mates in the ball pit at the Sovereigns, and later on in the garden of the Rose in June; family picnics at Baffins park after a visit; and going shopping with my Nan in Cosham, or as my Auntie Irene likes to call it, "Cozam". These moments may seem ordinary, but they are what makes a city extraordinary. As we celebrate 100 years, I want to encourage residents to follow the lion trail, which takes them to so many gems in my city, and to make their own memories.

What next for year 101, and what will I strive to change? I will strive for building the homes that local families need, giving every child the opportunity to achieve and thrive, supporting our high streets, protecting our coastlines, backing our armed forces, speaking out for those who often do not feel they have a voice, and making sure every generation can build a good life in my city—the city that I and they love.

I want to thank my family and my loved ones for their support, and my fantastic team of Harry, Helen, Lucy, Abbie, Matthew, Jemma, Oscar and Flora—who,

with her partner, Neil, welcomed their beautiful baby boy, Sacha Henry, just two weeks ago. Before I finish, I want to pay tribute to our outgoing Prime Minister, and to thank him for his service to our country, and for his kindness, encouragement and friendship. I also want to warmly welcome our new Prime Minister. Around Greater Manchester, he is known as the king of the north. I gently remind him that there is another north that deserves attention, and that is Portsmouth North.

4.21 pm

David Pinto-Duschinsky (Hendon) (Lab): This debate is named for Sir David Amess, and I think it is an important chance to honour the values of unity, community and tolerance that both Sir David and our much-missed colleague Jo Cox stood for so strongly. I also want to echo hon. Members in commemorating Ann Widdecombe, which is why I want to use this speech to briefly highlight an appalling hatred that is spreading and urge this House to unite in action against it.

Like many in this House, I was appalled to hear of the terrorist plot against the Ijtima festival, and I am grateful to the police for their rapid action. As the Home Secretary has said, their decisive enforcement undoubtedly saved lives. That Muslims were targeted is despicable, but it is not, unfortunately, unusual. Just yesterday, an individual was charged with plotting attacks on multiple mosques. Anti-Muslim hate crimes are now at record levels. British Muslims, including my friends and neighbours in Hendon, are regularly subjected to a barrage of abuse, vilification and even violence. This hate is becoming normalised online, on our streets and, shamefully, by some Members of this House. We have seen mosques attacked in Peacehaven and other places, and in Edinburgh we saw where this all leads, with Muslims viciously attacked for no other reason than that they are Muslim. Let us be clear: these attacks are an affront to all we hold dear as a country. This hatred is an assault on British values, and it is the job of all of us to confront it and to defeat it wherever it is found.

In Hendon, we are blessed with a vibrant Muslim community and strong community institutions, including a number of mosques. They contribute so much to our area, but they are understandably worried. I welcome the action that the Government are taking to protect our Muslim community. Continuing action is essential so that our Muslim citizens can live free and safe as they practise their faith and go about their daily lives. That means continuing to take measures such as investing in protecting our Muslim community. It also means tackling the root causes of anti-Muslim hatred and the language and attitudes that allow it to spread, including in this House. I hope that is a cause we can all get behind. As we go into recess, I can think of no better way to honour the tolerance and British values that Sir David stood for.

I would like to finish by wishing every Member of the House a very happy summer recess, and by thanking our brilliant staff, particularly Godfrey, Margaret and Richard, for all they do.

4.24 pm

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate in memory of Sir David Amess. Sir David, as we have heard, was a tireless advocate for his Southend

constituency, so I felt it was fitting to focus on an issue—the role of the University of Essex—that connects Southend with my own constituency of Colchester.

Like fellow Essex MPs, I have been very concerned about the impact of the decision to close the university's Southend campus. Southend city centre has benefited enormously from having a university presence. I remember growing up there, so I understand the difference that presence would have made at that time. The loss of that presence is already being felt keenly by residents, staff and students. The university has said that it has taken the decision with great reluctance in response to the significant financial pressures facing the wider higher education sector. It has confirmed that its teaching will be consolidated in Colchester, although it also confirmed job losses at that campus.

As a former colleague to many staff there, my thoughts, and I am sure those across the House, are with those suffering right now as they face a very uncertain summer. They have been robustly supported by their trade unions, the University and College Union and Unison, over the past year. They are right to continue to raise concerns about jobs, workloads and the long-term sustainability of our universities. They have my support and that of the MPs who represent Southend—I am nodding to my hon. Friends in the Chamber behind me.

At a time when higher education across the country faces major challenges, I am very pleased to see that Universities UK is continuing its “Future Universities” initiative, urgently exploring how the sector can better support jobs, innovation, communities and students. The message is clear: our universities are central to the economic and social prosperity of our country. I hope that they are very high on the priority list of our new Prime Minister. In Colchester, we see that value every day.

The University of Essex supports thousands of jobs, encourages investment and enriches our cultural life. It is a source of enormous local pride. We can see that very clearly right now through the many joyous graduation ceremonies that will be happening over the next fortnight. I wish all our new graduates well, and I wish everybody in the House—colleagues, staff, friends and my own team—all the best for a very restful summer.

4.27 pm

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I am deeply honoured to have the opportunity to speak in the Sir David Amess debate. Sir David's life was defined by public service, including the 24 years he spent representing the constituency of Southend West. Indeed, it was in Sir David's memory that Southend was granted city status in 2022.

That passion for our stretch of south-east Essex coastline is something I share, and something that makes sense when we consider what it has to offer. From Wallasea Island and Shoebury east beach to Southend pier and the Kursaal, there is plenty to shout about along our shores. Yet although the coast is crucial to Southend East and Rochford's character, it also poses its own unique set of challenges. Bordered by water on three sides, we are physically isolated, an obstacle compounded by a single century-old link road and our location at the end of the railway line. I regularly hear from local residents, business owners and farmers about the impact that regular cases of standstill traffic has on their daily life and work. The cost of that, however, is

[Mr Bayo Alaba]

felt most acutely by our young people. Teenagers in coastal areas like ours suffer worse adult health than their inland counterparts, achieve below-average GCSE results in maths and English, and go on to earn lower wages.

There is, however, good reason to be hopeful. Southend is one of the country's fastest-growing seaside resorts, with more than 7 million visitors choosing the city for their seaside day trips each year. That is unsurprising when you consider the regeneration efforts of recent years, which I have been proud to play a part in. It is a particular pleasure to see the steps being taken to return our iconic Kursaal to public use.

Coastal communities are also beginning to feel the benefit of the turning economic tides generated by this Labour Government. The promise of local government reorganisation and devolution is also set to pave the way for greater community control of spending. In Southend and Rochford district, we know what the solutions to our problems are. We know how to unlock the huge potential for growth that exists along our coast, and in our towns and in our rural areas. We recognise the impact that a new link road would offer, and the opportunities that would be created by improved access to high-tech skills training. That is why I am proud to be reigniting the mission to secure a new link road into south-east Essex, and why I am working to attract new industries and investment into our area.

As I believe Sir David Amess understood, the success of south-east Essex is defined by our spirit of hard work and self-improvement. If our communities are given the tools to succeed, I have no doubt that we can achieve incredible things.

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

4.30 pm

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): I want to raise a concern on behalf of my hon. Friend the Member for Oxford West and Abingdon (Layla Moran). I understand that a number of MPs were not invited to a call this morning outlining the impact of local government reorganisation. I hope that the Leader of the House agrees that that was unacceptable.

Today I wish to celebrate the life of Sir David Amess. Following the untimely death of the former MP Ann Widdecombe, it is appropriate to use this debate to talk about Sir David and how he conducted himself in Parliament. I did not know him personally, but I felt that I did through the television. I remember his result being announced in the early hours after the 1983 general election and seeing him many times on TV in the years that followed.

Sir David was renowned for his tireless campaigning on issues ranging from animal welfare to tackling fuel poverty. He was also a passionate advocate for children with learning disabilities. He championed women with endometriosis by launching an all-party parliamentary group. He spent years campaigning for Southend to be granted city status, which was achieved in 2022.

Sir David's commitment to public service earned admiration from colleagues across the House. Following his death, the then Prime Minister, Boris Johnson, described Sir David as,

"one of the nicest, kindest and most gentle individuals ever to grace these Benches... our politics needs people like Sir David: dedicated, passionate, firm in his beliefs but never anything less than respectful for those who thought differently." —[*Official Report*, 18 October 2021; Vol. 701, c. 554.]

The then Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), echoed those sentiments, urging us to

"use the memory of Sir David's life...to recommit ourselves in standing for the things that he stood for...for decency in our disagreements, for kindness in our hearts, for our great democracy". —[*Official Report*, 18 October 2021; Vol. 701, c. 556.]

That message is as important today as it was then.

In an increasingly divisive political climate, we must remember that disagreements should never come at the expense of respect. Over recent years, particularly during the Brexit debate, political discourse has become more hostile. The populist politics of misleading narratives have often deepened division, rather than encouraged understanding. Social media has also transformed political debate; while it has created opportunities for engagement, it has also enabled anonymous abuse, threats against public representatives, and the rapid spread of misinformation. Such behaviour fuels hostility and weakens trust in our democratic institutions.

There is perhaps no greater symbol of that than the murder of Jo Cox in 2016. Her killer brought political violence into sharp focus and demonstrated how extremist ideologies can erupt in an increasingly toxic atmosphere. Tragically, Sir David Amess also became a victim of political violence. In 2021, he was murdered while holding a constituency surgery, doing something he had done so many times: helping his constituents—something he was well known for and that many Members do on a regular basis. Sir David's killer targeted him because of his parliamentary record. This tragedy reminds us that extremism can take many forms, but its goal is always the same: to intimate, divide and undermine our democracy.

We must do everything we can to ensure that what happened to Jo Cox and Sir David Amess never happens again, and that elected representatives at every level can serve their communities safely and without fear. We should also remember that the members of staff and volunteers who support MPs also share the risk that public service can bring. I think of Andrew Pennington, who was killed in 2000 defending the Liberal Democrat MP for Cheltenham at a constituency surgery.

We need more people in Parliament who conduct themselves as Sir David Amess did. The greatest tribute that we can pay to Sir David is to uphold the values he embodied: kindness, respect, public service and a belief that political differences should never diminish our common humanity. It is sad that these values no longer appear to be held by all political parties.

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

4.35 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to close the Sir David Amess Adjournment debate on behalf of the Opposition, in which we have heard a great many excellent contributions from across the Chamber. Of course, this is a time to remember Sir David himself, who always made sure that the people of Southend were put firmly on the map

during this debate. I will always remember his warmth, conviction and generosity when I was first elected to this House in 2017. He was a tireless advocate for the people he represented and for the causes he championed.

I join right hon. and hon. Members in paying tribute to Ann Widdecombe, who was a woman of great conviction and always said what she thought. You might not have completely agreed with her, but you always knew where she stood. The way in which her life was cut short last week in such horrific circumstances is truly heartbreaking, and my thoughts are with her family, her friends and everyone who knew and loved her.

I also pay tribute to the members of the staff who are leaving the House of Commons this summer, including Godfrey from the Tea Room; Richard, after 37 years in the Strangers Bar; Franceline and Denis, after 25 years and almost 27 years respectively at the Members' Restaurant; and many others who have served this House diligently for many years.

A number of Members have highlighted some of the great attractions in their respective constituencies today, such as the putting greens in Fife that the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain) mentioned, the air show in Sunderland that the hon. Member for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) mentioned, or the entertainment zone at Braehead that the hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) mentioned. Lastly, I am looking forward to visiting the green belt mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton).

The summer is a wonderful time to visit the Scottish Borders. Members do not need to take my word for it; only a few weeks ago Jeremy Clarkson described the Scottish Borders as Britain's "most beautiful" region. If Members are looking for a last-minute staycation this summer, they know where to come.

One of the highlights of my year remains my annual summer surgery tour, which starts on Saturday, on which I will hold more than 80 advice surgeries in every town and village across my Scottish Borders constituency. This is in addition to my regular monthly surgeries, and gives me an opportunity to visit every town, village and community, particularly those in the more remote and isolated parts of my constituency. I will once again be holding this tour alongside my Scottish Conservative colleague Rachael Hamilton MSP, who was overwhelmingly re-elected to represent the Scottish Borders back in May. There are still appointments available, so I encourage any of my constituents who would like to meet in the coming days or weeks to get in touch.

It has been a busy year. I have continued to campaign for better public transport links for the Borders, in particular to extend the Borders railway from Tweedbank to Hawick, Newcastleton and on to Carlisle, and to restore direct LNER services that have been cut from Berwick-upon-Tweed to London, which are so vital for keeping the Borders and north Northumberland connected.

My constituency is, of course, a borderlands community. We regularly cross the border to shop, visit friends and family, get to work or enjoy the beautiful Northumberland coastline. However, access to NHS services for cross-border communities remains a significant challenge. My view is simple: my constituents should be able to access healthcare as close to home as possible, even if that hospital or facility happens to be in England. It is only common

sense that taxpayers, who fund our NHS, should be able to use the services that best meet their needs. I will continue to campaign alongside local residents to ensure that access to NHS care is quick and easily available to everybody who needs it.

We have heard some excellent contributions from Members across the Chamber, and I want to mention some of them. The hon. Member for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane) mentioned the red telephone box in Balfron, which has been used as a food exchange. That is a great example of the redeployment of the red phone box network, and I know of several examples in my constituency. I congratulate the residents in Balfron on securing that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) highlighted some of the big questions regarding the Peter Murrell scandal and the problems circulating around the SNP just now. He rightly asked those questions, because many people in Scotland are asking them and calling for a full inquiry into who knew what and when—particularly former First Minister Ms Sturgeon.

The hon. Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) and my hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer) both raised very difficult and tragic cases. My thoughts are with the family of Lucy. I am grateful to the hon. Member for Warrington South for raising that challenging and difficult case. My hon. Friend the Member for Runnymede and Weybridge raised an important point about fraudulent paternity testing. I hope that the relevant Minister will take that forward.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) raised the important issue of off-road bikes in Stockton. I know that it is an issue for many communities. The hon. Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) raised a similar issue in respect of e-bikes.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay) raised concerns about the ongoing, increasing costs associated with the restoration and renewal project. I know that many Members share those concerns. It is imperative that the new Government make time for a debate on it so that the relatively newly elected Members from the 2024 election have an opportunity to have their say. Ultimately, we are dealing with huge amounts of taxpayers money, and we need to have an open and frank discussion about it.

The hon. Member for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), who is not in her place, raised the importance of sport, with which I wholly agree. She also highlighted the risk of taking part in parliamentary sports activities, given that sharp elbows seem to have given her a broken rib—a lesson for us all, perhaps.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) gave a very moving tribute to one of his late council colleagues. I am grateful to him for highlighting that serious condition and what people suffering from brain tumours have to deal with.

I have not been able to mention everybody, but I am grateful to all right hon. and hon. Members who have taken time to raise the issues affecting their constituencies. However, we should have had this debate next week, once the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) had assumed the office of Prime Minister, so that he could come to the House to explain what he plans to do with the country. As things stand, we have

[John Lamont]

little idea what he intends to do. The right hon. Member did not publish a manifesto during the Labour leadership election. He has not yet been tested. For many years, he has made countless promises without having to deliver them, but soon he will have to do so.

The right hon. Member for Makerfield said that WASPI women should receive compensation, but we hear now that he has changed his mind. What are his plans for taxation? Which taxes does he plan to increase? He has said that he will “take his responsibilities fully” to fund the defence investment plan after the Prime Minister and Chancellor left a £4.7 billion black hole. How does he intend to pay for it? What is his plan to tackle the out-of-control welfare spending? All of our constituents deserve answers to those questions. The new Prime Minister should have come to this House early next week to answer those basic questions. Instead, he has bottled it.

Yesterday, the Opposition planned to move a motion to delay the parliamentary recess until Monday so that the incoming Government could face proper scrutiny and to allow the nation to hear from the new Prime Minister about his plans. Instead, the Leader of the House—presumably acting as proxy for the incoming Prime Minister—came to the House and blocked the motion. I sincerely hope that the Leader of the House believes that his actions were worth it—or perhaps he will be rewarded with a plum job in the reshuffle. I, for one, hope that he will continue in his current job because I think that he has been an exceptional Leader of the House.

As I close, may I thank my amazing constituency team, who have worked hard for me since my election to this place in 2017, and some who have suffered even longer, since 2007, when I first became a Member of the Scottish Parliament? I thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and his office and the other Deputy Speakers. I also thank everyone who supports the Speaker’s Office throughout the parliamentary year. The Doorkeepers, Clerks, caterers, security staff, cleaners and Members’ parliamentary and constituency staff all work tirelessly to keep this place running every single day, and I am sure that Members across the House will join me in expressing our sincere gratitude for everything they do.

I wish colleagues from across the Chamber a restful and enjoyable summer recess. I know that for many of us, it will be time spent working in our constituencies. I look forward to seeing everybody in September.

4.45 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell):

It is a pleasure to close this debate, and I thank all hon. and right hon. Members who have contributed this afternoon. One theme in virtually all the speeches, quite rightly, is the way in which we remember the late Sir David Amess, who was an assiduous and tireless advocate for his constituents and constituency. His presence is a constant reminder in these debates that he is sorely missed by colleagues across the House.

I also take the opportunity to pay tribute to the legacy of our friend Jo Cox. Last month marked 10 years since her murder, and it is debates such as this one that prove the truth, in her words, that we

“have far more in common than that which divides us.”—[*Official Report*, 3 June 2015; Vol. 596, c. 675.]

I also reiterate my condolences, which I paid on behalf of myself, the Government and the House this morning, to the family and friends of Ann Widdecombe at this dreadful time.

Regardless of party affiliation, at the heart of our politics are people and their families. Moments such as this are a stark reminder of the seriousness with which we must treat the safety of those in public life, and of the significance of how we speak to and treat each other. The tone that we take in this House matters. We set the standard of public discourse, and as this debate has shown, it is often made up of good-natured exchanges, beyond our party political differences.

At my count, we have heard from 29 Members today on a range of subjects, and I will refer to as many of them as I possibly can. However, I will start with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) and thank him both for organising this debate and for his work as the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee. He often brings constituency matters to our attention on the Floor of the House, but he is also a powerful spokesman on matters of faith and foreign affairs. I happen to regard him now as a force of soft power all of his own.

I turn to the other contributions—I am sorry if I cannot give detail of every one. I will approach my speech slightly differently and look at some of the themes that have emerged this afternoon. If our constituents tuned into this debate, and if this kind of debate were a bit more frequent, I wonder whether they might see a different side of MPs than is sometimes portrayed outside, particularly on social media. One constant theme of today is praise for volunteers in our local communities who have taken part in a range of community action, from parks to phone boxes. They were raised by the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) and my hon. Friends the Members for Stirling and Strathallan (Chris Kane), for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward) and for North Warwickshire and Bedworth (Rachel Taylor), as well as being a theme throughout many of the speeches.

At the heart of these debates, very often, is the importance of the campaigning constituency Member of Parliament. I am delighted that in my considerable time in this House, I have seen the role of MPs change and develop, with an expectation that they are constituency-based and that their constituencies inform their work, which they then bring to this House. I will mention just some of the MPs who spoke, but again, that was a constant theme.

My hon. Friends the Members for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Colchester (Pam Cox), for Sunderland Central (Lewis Atkinson) and for Luton North (Sarah Owen), the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), my hon. Friends the Members for Erewash (Adam Thompson) and for Carlisle (Ms Minns), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell) raised a range of individual issues that I do not have time to go into, but all of them showed the importance of campaigning MPs. I hope, and I believe, that constituents appreciate that.

Some Members have raised not just constituency matters, but the issues that most affect the kind of constituency that they represent. Two important contributions, from the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and my hon. Friend the Member for Southend

East and Rochford (Mr Alaba), concerned the significance of coastal communities—a matter dear to my heart, because my constituency is one. I encourage people to spend the rest of this fantastic summer in coastal communities; they might want to avoid Clacton until 13 August, but they will be welcome in places like Whitley Bay, in my constituency.

Slightly darker matters have also been raised. My hon. Friends the Members for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Alison Taylor) and for Hendon (David Pinto-Duschinsky) mentioned the sometimes dangerous context in which we conduct our affairs and, unfortunately, as the name of this debate tells us, the price that is sometimes paid.

A constant theme has been that behind a hard-working and successful MP is a hard-working office, which is very often the face of the Member of Parliament in a constituency. I thank my constituency office; they have persevered with me for a very, very long time. That theme was echoed by the hon. Member for North East Fife (Wendy Chamberlain), my hon. Friends the Members for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Adam Jogee) and for South Derbyshire (Samantha Niblett), the hon. Member for Torbay (Steve Darling), and my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy. I place on record our collective thanks to the people who work in our offices tirelessly; they often see lots of things that we would rather we did not see, and they just get on and deliver.

Members have raised the role of the Member of Parliament in working hand in hand with public bodies and public servants, and in holding them to account. Civil servants, NHS staff and teachers have been mentioned. My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne East and Wallsend (Mary Glindon) reminded us that when someone has spent their life working in the civil service, they expect that their pension is dealt with properly. She is absolutely right. My hon. Friend the Member for Sunderland Central raised the importance of teachers in our local community; we send them our thanks. My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) raised a sad case. We should put on record our thanks to elected councillors, who play a fantastic role in our local communities. Public sector workers and elected representatives are not often thanked, but I do so now.

We also heard from MPs who are best described as being in the great tradition of MPs as inquisitors. We had the inquisitor general, the right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis), who reminded us of the murky waters of the SNP. All I would say to anyone listening to him, particularly north of the border, is that he is more often right than wrong—so more strength to his arm in that particular cause.

We also had the financial inquisitor general, the right hon. Member for North East Cambridgeshire (Steve Barclay), who raised the issue of restoration and renewal. I say to him and to the deputy shadow Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), that Parliament will have an opportunity to consider the issue because, first and foremost, it is a matter for Parliament. It is true that taxpayers' money will be required to put this place right if that is what the House decides to do. There will be a decision for Parliament. However, I gently remind the right hon. Gentleman—he knows this—that it is not as if we can afford not to spend money and to keep things

as they are. We are spending a fortune now, and we are not seeing the kind of improvement that restoration and renewal will bring, even though it is costly.

We have also heard from inquisitors at a local level—I am not sure that is the right word for the people I am about to mention, but I mean the MP as an inquisitor, who picks up an individual case or cause. We heard moving cases from both my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington South (Sarah Hall) and the hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Dr Spencer); in my experience, those are often the most powerful stories, as we give a voice to the voiceless.

My hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) complained that she is running out of issues to campaign on because of the success of the Labour Government. I take a lot of pleasure in saying, “Long may that continue.”

We also had the important theme of international affairs, which is as important if not more important than it was before. I do not want to go through all the difficulties faced now, but they are numerous. Again, issues have been raised that give a voice to the voiceless. That came through powerfully in the contributions of my friend the hon. Member for North East Fife and the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn). I give him my undertaking that I will pick up the case he spoke about with the Home Office. But as far as his comments about the Prime Minister and our party are concerned, I saw the right hon. Gentleman coming in and thought he would be coming to this debate and maybe making those points. As I recall, he was sporting a new baseball cap. I would just say to him, if the cap fits, wear it.

In closing, I want to express my gratitude to House staff, including Doorkeepers, cleaners, Clerks, catering, security, broadcasting, Hansard, and those in visitor experience, as well as our staff and constituency teams, and the civil servants who come together to make this place function. I want to make a special mention—they have already been mentioned, but I do so from the Dispatch Box—of people such as Margaret Labulo, Godfrey Asare and Richard Pengelly who are leaving this House after many years of distinguished service. I thank them for all their years of service to the House—they will be greatly missed. Of course, our thanks go to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers. As we rise for the summer recess, I offer my best wishes to everyone here today and to those listening, and I hope that everyone has a restful and safe summer recess.

4.56 pm

Bob Blackman: I think that somewhere in the heavens, Sir David Amess will be looking down on this debate and saying thank you to the 32 Members who have participated. Everyone has brought great credit to this House by raising important matters before we rise for the summer recess. There is little more to be said, other than our best wishes for a long and happy retirement to those members of staff who are retiring, and for a peaceful recess for staff throughout the House, so that they are ready for us when we return for the debates that we will have.

I wish all Members and our staff, and you, Madam Deputy Speaker, Mr Speaker and the other Deputy Speakers—indeed, all of us—a happy recess. Let us

[Bob Blackman]

hope that people can get some rest and recuperation because we will need it for vigorous debate with the new Prime Minister and the new Cabinet on what they bring forward for the future of this country.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Adjournment.

PETITION

Repairs and refurbishment at Doncaster Royal Infirmary

4.58 pm

Sally Jameson (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): I present this petition about repairs and refurbishment at Doncaster Royal Infirmary. People in Doncaster deserve a hospital that is fit for the future and the needs of the growing population. The petitioners

“therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and work with Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to prioritise the delivery of repairs and refurbishment at Doncaster Royal Infirmary.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Doncaster Central,

Declares that Doncaster Royal Infirmary is in need of repair and refurbishment; and notes that Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust's bid for a new hospital under the New Hospitals Programme was unsuccessful.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take into account the concerns of the petitioners and work with Doncaster and Bassetlaw Teaching Hospitals NHS Foundation Trust to prioritise the delivery of repairs and refurbishment at Doncaster Royal Infirmary.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003228]

Thirlwall Inquiry Terms of Reference

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Gen Kitchen.*)

5 pm

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): This is my third debate on the general issue of Lucy Letby, and I remind the House of what I have said before: justice must never be sacrificed for institutional self-preservation. We are awaiting the publication of the Thirlwall inquiry's findings into the deaths at the Countess of Chester. When the inquiry was established, it was tasked with examining three areas: the experiences at the Countess of Chester and the parents named in the indictment; the conduct of the hospital's staff with regard to Lucy Letby; and the effectiveness of NHS management and culture in safeguarding babies, and recommendations for reform if relevant.

Every question stems from the assumption that Lucy Letby is guilty beyond doubt. Since her trial and conviction, a growing body of distinguished scientific opinion has challenged the supposed evidence on which they rest. Prominent experts—heads of royal societies and royal colleges, and leading voices in medicine, statistics and forensics—have raised concerns about Miss Letby's convictions. They have come forward in extraordinary numbers, calling for the inquiry's scope to be revised. If the case against Miss Letby is straightforward, why have so many people with nothing to gain, but their reputations to lose, publicly challenged it?

At the outset of the inquiry, I warned the chair that by failing to broaden its terms of reference to examine credible alternative hypotheses, we risk protecting a conclusion rather than conducting a forensic search for the truth. The Post Office Horizon scandal highlighted the institutional instinct to find a convenient scapegoat. Innocent people paid the price, while the institution sought to protect itself. If the Thirlwall inquiry asks too narrow a set of questions, systemic NHS failures will go unexamined. More innocent children will die, more innocent parents will be put through agony, and another hospital will find another scapegoat—that is the consequence of getting this wrong.

So what should the inquiry's terms of reference include? There are at least three lines of inquiry that deserve examination. Each is supported by substantial evidence. Each almost certainly contributed to what happened. Each risks being overlooked. The first is the staffing crises: this was a neonatal unit stretched beyond its limits and operating under relentless pressure. The second is poor clinical management: the unit was repeatedly tasked with caring for babies requiring the highest level of specialist capacity—capacity it did not have. The third is environmental risks: there were serious contamination problems within the hospital.

Two damning reviews of NHS maternity services more generally have now been published. The Ockenden report exposed failures at Nottingham University hospitals NHS trust that mirror those at the Countess of Chester: infections, overcrowding, under-resourcing, sustained pressure and overstretched staff—different hospitals, but strikingly similar failures. Baroness Amos has also published her final report on NHS maternity and neonatal

services. Its conclusions echo with remarkable consistency the concerns raised about the Countess of Chester. Baroness Amos concluded:

“the maternity and neonatal system is not set up to deliver consistently safe, high-quality and compassionate care... It is fragmented, overly complex and too slow to...improve.”

She highlighted “unsafe and unacceptable” hospital buildings, “excessive workload pressures” and staff who felt

“ignored... when they raised concerns about whether they could provide a safe or joined-up service”.

She also highlighted “dangerous clinical environments”, senior leaders who “were not accountable” and, of course, staff who were

“fearful of being blamed when things went wrong”.

If the Thirlwall inquiry was unwilling to heed the growing concerns of experts, it cannot dismiss the conclusions of two Government reviews.

As far back as 2004, senior neonatal staff at the Countess of Chester were warning management of a “staffing crisis which...shows no signs of abating”,

highlighting that the unit was operating 30% to 40% below the staffing levels recommended by the British Association of Perinatal Medicine. They described stress that “exceeded tolerable levels”, reinforcing that such conditions

“could increase the risk of unintentional professional negligence”.

But how did management respond? To cut costs they abolished the advanced neonatal nurse practitioners, the most highly trained specialists in their field, upon whom the entire safe working of the unit depended. One of the nurses let go later described it as “the decimation of the Nursing and Midwifery service”, adding that

“eight registered nurses...were replaced with nursery nurses...unqualified staff are replacing qualified staff”.

She described a trust blighted by

“inefficient managers...managers to manage managers, people to tick boxes...inefficient computer programmes”,

all

“at the expense of the registered nurse/midwife”.

If management’s response was to bury the problem, what does that tell us about the state of the Countess of Chester by 2015? A system repeatedly warned to be unsafe cannot merely be treated as the backdrop to the events of 2015 to 2016—it is at least part of the explanation.

By 2012 the hospital was recruiting newly qualified nurses, often straight from university. One of them was Lucy Letby. During the years Lucy Letby is alleged to have committed her crimes—specifically 2015 to 2016—the neonatal unit was still functioning under dangerous pressure. Notably, one nurse working on the unit during this period recalled:

“2015 and 2016 were horrendously busy... They were probably the worst years I can remember in more than twenty years... Everybody was absolutely stretched to the limit... You were expected to look after the maximum number that you could—sometimes over the number that you should.”

The inquiry ought to ask, if concerns had been raised for over a decade, to what extent did those unresolved staffing failures contribute to the tragedies that followed? Were those failures addressed before responsibility was placed on Letby?

There are three levels of care in neonatal units, depending on the complexity of care that a unit is equipped to provide. Appropriate grading of a neonatal unit is fundamental to patient safety. Level 1 units accept babies with low care needs. Level 3 units accept babies needing the highest level of medical care. The Countess of Chester was a level 3 unit throughout the early 2000s, but in 2005 it was downgraded to level 2, an admittance that the unit could not handle level 3 babies.

But the unit continued to operate under immense strain, worsened by management’s decision to get rid of its hugely experienced advanced neonatal nurse practitioners. Years later, when Lucy Letby started at the Countess in 2012, conditions remained poor. There was little space, cots and incubators were stored in corridors, and mothers struggled to find somewhere to breastfeed their babies. Susan Gilby, the hospital’s chief executive between 2018 and 2022, later described the unit as “dark, dingy and cramped”, providing a “less than ideal” environment to work in. Remember, this was a level 2 neonatal unit tasked with providing short-term intensive care for fragile babies.

Indeed, the deficiencies were so serious that the trust launched a £3 million public fundraising campaign to pay for a new neonatal unit because the necessary capital funding was not available through the NHS. This was an acknowledgment that the unit was not fit for purpose. The inquiry ought to ask: was the unit being asked to deliver a level of care that it was not capable of providing?

Staff at the time certainly thought so. One nurse warned the unit manager,

“something awful is going to happen here...we can’t carry on like this”.

In late 2015, one consultant said the unit was so busy that it was running out of vital equipment, adding:

“This is now our normal working pattern and it is not safe. Things are...at breaking point. When things snap, the casualties will either be children’s lives or the...health of our staff.”

The spike in baby deaths was that breaking point.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health report from November 2016 confirmed that the unit was

“non-compliant on nurse and medical staffing levels”

when assessed against service standards for a level 2 unit. It ought to have been downgraded further, to a level 1. Indeed, it is often claimed that babies on the unit stopped dying as soon as Letby was removed from the ward. That assertion ignores perhaps the most critical fact. In July 2016, when Letby was removed from the ward, the neonatal unit was finally downgraded to a level 1.

In that moment, the risk profile changed. Fewer of the sickest babies were admitted at the Countess. The 2016 Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health report is clear that since the redesignation from level 2 to level 1, the pressure

“has reduced and the unit is operating more in line with BAPM staffing standards. The consultants also reported that in the two months since the change infants have been sick but recovered as expected.”

The report highlighted deficiencies in staffing levels, leadership and communication, but, in the trial, it was not shown to the jury—they knew nothing of it. In July 2016, the unit was downgraded and Lucy Letby left

[David Davis]

the ward. It is irrational to assume that one of those two events was entirely responsible for the sharp reduction in deaths without testing the other event properly. The inquiry must examine both changes to determine which made the difference.

During 2015 and 2016, when the neonatal mortality rates spiked, the hospital faced infection control problems. One nurse described the unit as her “worst nightmare”. *Pseudomonas aeruginosa* had colonised taps in the nurseries of the neonatal unit. *Pseudomonas* forms a biofilm—a layer that allows the bacteria to spread within a water system—and can kill newborns. In 2012, at Belfast’s Royal Jubilee maternity hospital, three premature babies died from it. In an effort to mitigate the risks of *Pseudomonas*, the Countess of Chester installed filters on the taps, but the filters kept falling off. Another of the babies Letby is said to have murdered was found to have *Stenotrophomonas maltophilia* in their breathing tube—a bug responsible for some of the deaths at Glasgow’s scandal-hit Queen Elizabeth University hospital.

Of the 17 babies Lucy Letby is said to have murdered or attempted to murder, at least 14 babies either had an infection or were suspected to have an infection. Professor Shoo Lee’s panel identified that 10 infants were receiving antibiotics, and court proceedings identified another three. The fact that at least 13 babies were treated with antibiotics suggests that the clinicians considered infection to be a real possibility in these cases. On top of that, MRSA, *C. difficile* and MSSA were detected across the trust; it is not known whether they were present in the neonatal intensive care unit.

While giving evidence at her own trial, Miss Letby told jurors that the neonatal unit had problems with “raw sewage” coming from sinks. That was not an invention in the hopes of abdicating responsibility; contemporaneous messages between staff show that these concerns were raised at the time. Remember: this was a neonatal intensive care unit. One nurse suggested that an infection on the unit could be to blame. Letby agreed, describing sewage coming from the sink and overflowing toilets. She added:

“The unit needs properly assessing, I don’t think the equipment gets cleaned properly...we haven’t got the space, facilities...to maintain hygiene.”

Those messages predate any criminal investigation, and the hospital’s plumber confirmed under oath that human waste was backing up into handwashing basins. On top of the other microbiological concerns, human waste contains *E. coli*—another hazard to vulnerable new-born babies. Professor David Livermore, a professor of medical microbiology, is right to say:

“Infection was such an obvious cause of a spike in deaths. What investigation did they do [into this?] I’m yet to see any clarity on this.”

Even the parents themselves had initially assumed that if something had gone wrong, it was likely because of the hospital’s failings. One mother giving evidence against Lucy Letby during her trial admitted that

“I thought, the hospital’s old, it’s not very nice. It was dirty, and I thought it was along the lines of medical negligence. It never entered my mind that there was somebody intentionally harming babies”.

That is the hospital we are talking about—old, not very nice, dirty—and it does not look as though the medical management of the hospital did anything to mitigate

the risk arising from those problems. A mother of three triplets who moved to Liverpool Women’s Hospital said she

“noticed a different level of cleanliness compared to the Countess” as there were “clear hygiene protocols” at Liverpool, where, she said:

“We were told to wash our hands before entering the Unit and then again before entering the room”,

which was not the case at the Countess of Chester.

One father of a baby born at the Countess of Chester in May 2016 described the unit as “chaotic” and “failing”. He described an atmosphere of tension where “it wouldn’t take much more”

for the unit “to blow up.” His daughter had had a difficult delivery and could not breathe at birth. He and his wife discovered three years later that she had been the sickest baby on the unit for over 24 hours. Not a single doctor spoke to them about this, while nurses repeatedly told them that their baby was “fine”. Against that backdrop, he recalls that Lucy Letby stood out as the only staff member who took time to explain his baby’s condition. The hospital itself later told him that Lucy had “saved” his daughter’s life and had gone “above and beyond the call of duty.”

He stated bluntly that the jury in Miss Letby’s trial was not given the full picture—the systemic problems, lack of communication and overall disorder.

History judges institutions not by how confidently they defend themselves, but by whether they had the courage to confront uncomfortable truths. The Thirlwall inquiry now faces that test. An inquiry that refuses to ask difficult questions is not fearless—it is formulaic. An inquiry that overlooks credible evidence is not comprehensive—it is compromised. A major failure of the trial was that the jury was not shown evidence from authoritative sources such as the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health that offered a credible alternative explanation for the spike in deaths. The inquiry must not replicate that failure, and it must not lend its authority to what may be a major miscarriage of justice. It owes the parents who lost their babies, and future parents of future babies at risk, the absolute truth. It must follow the evidence and fear no conclusion.

If facts are left unexamined, lessons are left unlearned. The inquiry should heed the warnings of Ockenden and Amos, and the countless voices emerging in Miss Letby’s defence. Structural failure, institutional failure, and medical incompetence or even malevolence—every one of those explanations must be dragged into the light, and the unvarnished truth exposed.

5.17 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Preet Kaur Gill): It is an honour to respond for the Government in the last debate until September. I extend my thanks to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, as well as to the other Deputy Speakers and Mr Speaker, for your stewardship of this House, and to everyone who works here in Parliament and in our constituency offices. I also thank all our NHS staff, who are keeping the service going despite record demand over the summer.

The right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington (David Davis) has raised an extremely serious matter. I want to start by expressing my heartfelt sympathy to

all the families who were affected by the terrible events at the Countess of Chester hospital—as a mother of two daughters, I cannot begin to imagine what they are going through. On top of their grief, they have been subject to a level of press scrutiny that would match anything we have faced as Members of this place. They have been left in limbo, waiting for answers. As someone who advocates for constituents at my own trust, I know that this will take an additional toll on their mental health, and all of us in this Chamber can agree that they deserve closure.

The previous Government established the Thirlwall inquiry in October 2023 to examine the events at the Countess of Chester hospital NHS foundation trust. Its terms of reference are available online. Lady Justice Thirlwall's recommendations will help us to understand what went so wrong at the Countess of Chester. Her inquiry has now finished hearing evidence, and the final report will be published at the earliest practical date.

Lucy Letby was found guilty by her peers, following two criminal trials. She is currently serving 15 whole-life sentences for murder and attempted murder, and her convictions were upheld by the Court of Appeal. This is an independent judicial process, and it is not for the Government to comment on judicial decisions or appeals.

The right hon. Gentleman has called for the inquiry's terms of reference to be amended or expanded to reflect the ongoing public debate around the safety of Miss Letby's convictions, but the point of the inquiry is not to rehearse Lucy Letby's trial; it is to focus on how people within the trust responded based on what they knew, or should have known, at the time of the events. The inquiry is now in the report-writing stage, and I have every confidence that the chair will consider all the evidence when drawing conclusions and writing her report and recommendations. I do not consider that there is a case to either amend or expand the terms of reference, based on the information currently available.

There is a separate process going through the Criminal Cases Review Commission, which received a full application in relation to Miss Letby's case in April 2025. The merits of the application are solely for the CCRC to consider and, if appropriate, to refer the case for further consideration to the Court of Appeal. An application to the CCRC does not in itself indicate that the convictions are, or are likely to be, unsafe. Again, the right hon. Gentleman will understand that this is an independent process, and it is not for the Government to comment on, nor intervene in, individual applications.

I am aware that the right hon. Gentleman has also called for the inquiry to be paused or suspended while the CCRC is reviewing Miss Letby's application. An application was made by legal teams for Miss Letby and former executives at the trust to the inquiry chair to consider exercising her powers to pause the inquiry under section 17 of the Inquiries Act 2005. An application was made in parallel by the same legal teams to the then Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), to suspend the inquiry under section 13 of that Act. The basis for both applications was that the inquiry should be halted until the CCRC had determined Letby's application.

In March 2025, the chair refused the application and set out her reasons in detail. For transparency, that has been made available online. In her judgment, the chair considered, among other things, the question of fairness,

and she was satisfied that the inquiry process had been fair and would not become unfair because there is a possibility that all the convictions were unsafe. My right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North agreed with that reasoning.

It would not be appropriate for the Government to speculate on the outcome of the CCRC's determination, and we should take into account that the families have not supported any pause or suspension of the inquiry either. Even if, hypothetically, we did take that unprecedented step, I concur with my right hon. Friend that any suspension would create unnecessary delays and become a barrier to the families receiving the answers they deserve.

There has been no new information that would make us think twice about this decision, nor change the terms of reference, and there is a strong public interest in the inquiry being concluded as soon as possible. That is why this Government shall not suspend the inquiry pending the outcome of Miss Letby's application to the CCRC to review her convictions.

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): The Countess of Chester hospital is the local hospital for me and for many of my constituents. They will rightly want to know the outcome of the inquiry. On top of these historical matters, last year the CQC rated the Countess of Chester hospital's urgent and emergency care services inadequate and found that the overall hospital requires improvement. While I recognise the work that the trust is doing to deliver against its improvement plan, and I thank it for its communication with me, there is still vital work to be done. Can the Minister set out what she is doing to ensure that it makes those improvements, so that my constituents can be reassured that they will be getting access to the best possible healthcare, as they deserve?

Preet Kaur Gill: The hon. Member makes some important, valid points. Of course, the Countess of Chester hospital will want to know the outcome of the inquiry. As she rightly says, the CQC has been in and has made lots of recommendations, especially because of the inadequate rating.

I have asked for a submission from the CQC to understand what progress has been made. I have been informed that there has been some progress, but equally there are lots of areas in which there has not been progress. I am making sure that I am receiving regular updates, because, as the hon. Lady rightly says, every parent wants to see change. In the end, this is about so many lives. Parents have had to go through such heartbreaking situations just to get to justice, and they do deserve disclosure. I therefore really do thank her for her intervention.

Where the inquiry identifies lessons on safeguarding vulnerable patients or on how management responds to patient safety concerns, the Government will examine them rigorously and take forward all recommendations that are deliverable, justified and in the public interest.

There is a huge amount of interest, inside and outside the Chamber, about the professional regulation of managers in the NHS. We all know that the NHS needs and deserves the best leaders. We are committed to supporting their development and professionalism, and to strengthening

[*Preet Kaur Gill*]

accountability where they fall short. Work is already under way to develop an NHS college of leadership and management to support and develop NHS leaders.

In addition, we will legislate in this Parliament to enable the Health and Care Professions Council to begin to operate a statutory barring system for senior managers. The mechanism will enable the Health and Care Professions Council to prevent senior NHS leaders whose conduct is unacceptable from working again in senior roles. The Government have also launched the maternity and neonatal taskforce, personally chaired by my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State, which will translate Baroness Amos's recommendations into action.

The right hon. Member for Goole and Pocklington has campaigned against Government overreach his entire career; I respect him for that. I know that he will agree

with me that our democracy rests on a separation of powers, and I trust our independent judiciary to get on with the job. There are well-established criminal processes and procedures for how expert evidence is used at criminal trials. In our democracy, there are also routes for people to challenge convictions if they protest their innocence—even for Lucy Letby.

It is not for me or the Government to undermine those processes. Our attention should remain on the families and parents impacted by the case and on continuing to work towards providing answers and closure for them. That is what the Government are focused on, and we trust the Thirlwall inquiry to give us those answers.

Question put and agreed to.

5.27 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 16 July 2026

[SIR DESMOND SWAYNE *in the Chair*]

Protecting Built Heritage

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT COMMITTEE

Select Committee statement

1.30 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): We will begin with the Select Committee statement. Jo Platt will speak on the publication of the third report of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, “Protecting built heritage”, HC 144, for up to 10 minutes, during which time no interventions will be taken. At the conclusion of this statement, I will call Members to put questions on the subject of the statement and call Jo Platt to respond to them in turn. Questions should be brief and Members may ask only one question each.

I call Jo Platt to give the statement on behalf of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Jo Platt (Leigh and Atherton) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Sir Desmond. I am pleased to be here to present the Culture, Media and Sport Committee’s report “Protecting built heritage” and I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for allocating time for this statement. I also thank the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), for handing on the baton to a fellow Committee member.

The Committee launched its inquiry into the state of our built heritage back in December 2024. Over 12 months, we held five sessions, heard from 26 witnesses and received 113 pieces of written evidence. We also visited the National Gallery, the Southbank Centre, Buckingham Palace and V&A East Storehouse. I thank all those who gave evidence and welcomed us on visits. Our report, published on Monday, is the product of extensive evidence from heritage organisations, local authorities, faith groups, businesses, community organisations and individuals from across the country.

This inquiry is particularly important to me. Before returning to Parliament, I oversaw Leigh Spinners Mill, a grade II* listed former cotton mill in the heart of Leigh in my constituency. There I saw at first hand both the challenges and the opportunities that come with preserving historic buildings. I was involved in efforts to restore and repurpose the site so that it could support heritage, enterprise, arts and culture while serving our great community. That experience reinforced my belief that our historic buildings are not simply reminders of the past, but assets that can contribute to our future prosperity and wellbeing. Built by previous generations with confidence in the future of their towns, they should continue to be valued, preserved and invested in as part of our future.

That is one of the central messages of this report. Built heritage plays a vital role in the identity of our towns, villages and cities. Historic buildings support

tourism, provide community spaces, create opportunities for economic growth and contribute to a sense of place and belonging. However, we heard concerning evidence that many of these assets are under growing pressure from rising costs, workforce shortages and a planning system that is too often inconsistent and difficult to navigate.

Yet alongside those challenges lies a tremendous opportunity. Historic England estimates that up to 670,000 homes could be created through the reuse of vacant or underused historic buildings. That is almost half of the Government’s 1.5 million homes target. We were struck by an initiative in Italy where homes can be sold for as little as €1, so long as they are neglected heritage assets that are successfully transformed into homes. We should demonstrate similar ambition. Too often, policy treats reuse as an afterthought rather than a priority. Our report argues that that must change. We therefore recommended the development of a national “heritage-to-housing” approach, and a broader strategy that puts the reuse and adaptation of existing buildings at the heart of regeneration policy.

We also believe that there is merit in establishing a dedicated programme to support the repurposing of underused town centre and high street buildings, helping local authorities to unlock opportunities for housing and economic development. Our Committee also found that a one-size-fits-all approach to high street regeneration does not work. Communities face different challenges and opportunities. We therefore recommend better tools and frameworks to help local authorities to identify the interventions that are most likely to succeed in their area, and to ensure that investment is targeted effectively.

The Committee also heard consistent concerns about the operation of the planning system. Owners, developers and community organisations told us that lengthy waits for planning and listed building consent can discourage investment and delay projects that would otherwise bring historic buildings back into use. We heard evidence that many listed building consent applications are ultimately approved, but decisions are often delayed, creating uncertainty and additional costs. Although recent reforms are welcome, the Government must go further to streamline processes, encourage the wider use of the local listed building consent orders, strengthen conservation capacity in local authorities and promote earlier engagement between applicants and planning authorities.

Financial barriers remain a major obstacle to the preservation of built heritage. Witnesses repeatedly highlighted the fact that the current VAT regime often makes repairing and reusing existing buildings more expensive than demolishing them and starting again. While works on residential buildings and some conversions are zero-rated for VAT, owners of listed buildings are still required to pay VAT at 20% on construction and alteration works. We found that that creates a difficult incentive that runs counter to heritage protection and wider environmental objectives. We also heard of the pressures that that regime places on historic high streets and the businesses that occupy heritage buildings. We therefore urge the Government to review and reform that tax framework so that it better supports retrofit and reuse, conservation and the future of our high streets.

We also heard compelling evidence about the challenges facing churches and other listed places of worship. England has over 370,000 listed buildings, almost 15,000 of which

[Jo Platt]

are churches and religious buildings. Many are not only important heritage assets but vital community spaces, providing support, activities and services far beyond their primary religious function. However, many of those buildings face significant financial pressures. Witnesses raised concerns about the reduction in support previously available through the listed places of worship grant scheme, and the potential impact of its replacement with a new grant scheme, the places of worship renewal fund.

Although targeting funding at areas facing the greatest challenge is an understandable objective, we concluded that there is a real risk that places of worship of exceptional historic and architectural significance could be disadvantaged if heritage value is not given sufficient weight. We therefore call on the Government to ensure that the new funding arrangements provide adequate support for repair and conservation works and properly recognise the national and local importance of those irreplaceable buildings. The loss of an historic church is not simply the loss of a place of worship; it is often the loss of a key part of a community's history, identity and shared heritage.

The future of built heritage depends on people. One major risk identified in our inquiry was the shortage of specialist skills across the sector. From traditional crafts and conservation skills to planning, expertise and heritage management, there is an urgent need to attract and train the next generation. I was particularly impressed by an innovative heritage skills programme in the north-west, offered by the Hopwood Foundation and implemented at His Majesty's Prison Thorn Cross, which can create pathways into employment while helping to address workforce shortages. The Government should build on those successes and work with the sector to expand opportunities for training and careers.

We also heard that many small and specialist heritage buildings struggle to make full use of existing arrangements, despite being responsible for passing on many of the traditional skills that the sector relies on. Greater flexibility in the apprenticeship system would allow businesses to pool apprentices, share training costs and collaborate more effectively. If we are serious about safeguarding our built heritage, we must ensure that the next generation of stonemasons, joiners, roofers, conservators and heritage specialists have clear pathways into these careers.

Ultimately, our report makes a simple argument. Heritage should not be viewed as a constraint on growth; it should be recognised as an enabler of growth. The Government now have an opportunity to adopt a more ambitious approach that will secure both the protection and potential of our built heritage for generations to come.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): My constituency has loads of fantastic built heritage, including Knaresborough House, Knaresborough castle, Starbeck Baths and much more. I really enjoyed reading the report and noted the recommendation about safe harbour, where trusted bodies could temporarily take control of at-risk assets to stabilise them. The report does not mention town councils such as Knaresborough town council or Harrogate town council. Does the hon. Lady agree that they would be best placed to look after some of our much-loved built heritage?

Jo Platt: The hon. Member is absolutely right to mention councils and local authorities, which are trying to do so much work in the country. The report points out that every place will be different; it is about pulling on the expertise of local authorities and town councils to find what fits within particular areas. The hon. Gentleman has made a good point, and it is now up to the Government to read the report and look at best practice throughout the UK.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for presenting this excellent report. In Stoke-on-Trent, we have declared a heritage emergency, but the restoration of our historic buildings is repeatedly held back by fragmented funding and the need to negotiate separately with numerous funding bodies. Does she agree that the Government should bring together the main Departments and heritage funders around one table in places such as Stoke-on-Trent, so that we can turn our beautiful yet endangered buildings into engines of regeneration?

Jo Platt: My hon. Friend makes an important point, which goes back to the previous question. The report has highlighted schemes that have worked for particular areas, such as the community ownership fund and heritage action zones, something we had in my area. These things pull on the expertise of partners, including local authorities and the community, by getting them around the table. Getting everyone around the table to make sure that funding goes where it is needed is an important factor that we are trying to lead on with this report.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I commend the hon. Lady for her clear and excellent presentation of this report. Sadly, there is not time for me to list all the very many great heritage assets in East Hampshire. The hon. Lady talked about the importance of heritage to tourism and the possibility of using some underused heritage assets for housing. Does she think there is also a case to be made for looking at how we can best use some of those assets for hotel and holiday accommodation?

Jo Platt: The right hon. Gentleman is a great contributor to the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, and it is an honour to sit alongside him there. I agree that there is significant scope for heritage buildings to play a bigger role in providing such things as hotel accommodation. One of our findings was that the best way to protect many historic buildings is to ensure that they remain occupied, economically viable and actively used. The report focuses on a reuse-first approach, rather than a housing-only approach. Where hotel accommodation can provide a sustainable future for historic buildings, it can support tourism and create local jobs and is an excellent way of bringing our heritage back into use.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I echo the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), my fellow Committee member, in praising my hon. Friend for doing such a brilliant job of presenting this report on behalf of all of us on the Committee. I also thank the excellent Committee staff, who helped me when I had to speak at the Night Time Economy Summit in Liverpool in February. There was a panel on this very subject—protecting heritage buildings—

in a city that had UNESCO world heritage site status between 2004 and 2021. My question is really about the changing nature of these things; Liverpool's status was taken away when the new Everton stadium spoilt the skyline.

How can we future-proof some of these things? The Committee staff helped me with my remarks at that Liverpool conference, where my right hon. Friend the Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham), my hon. Friend's new constituency neighbour and the future Prime Minister, also spoke, as did my right hon. Friend the Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner), the former Deputy Prime Minister. I was being lobbied at the summit, and the point being made to me was that the United Nations also has something called intangible cultural heritage: stuff like human traditions and practices—

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order. Questions should be short.

Dr Huq: My question requires a lot of context, Sir Desmond. I am springing it on my hon. Friend, so I do not want to just say, "Do you approve of this?"; I need to explain. Sorry—I am getting to the point.

Does my hon. Friend agree that there could be a way of knitting together heritage buildings and the intangible cultural aspects of value? For example, what about Wigan Casino and Northern Soul music? Could we find a way of mixing up the two?

Jo Platt: It is also an honour to sit alongside my hon. Friend on the Culture, Media and Sport Committee. She makes an important point, one that I referred to in my earlier remarks. The mill that I worked on was used for cultural and creative value, and there is a bit in the report about how we can connect those up. The report sparks the conversation about what fits in our individual towns, villages and cities. I look forward to working alongside her to continue that conversation.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Lady and her Select Committee for their many positive recommendations when it comes to the repair and conservation of shared heritage. Previous schemes have retained and restored churches and other shared heritage across the Province of Northern Ireland, including in my constituency. The listed places of worship grant scheme can do so much more. What discussions has the Select Committee had with the Northern Ireland Assembly to develop and deliver that much valued and important scheme?

Jo Platt: That was a major part of the report and the inquiry. I have visited two derelict churches over the last few weeks, including Sacred Heart only last week. We know that places of worship are among the most significant heritage assets in our communities. The Committee heard concerns about funding pressures and the impact of changes to the grant scheme. The Government have decided to replace the scheme with a new fund that prioritises areas in most need. However, there is a risk that that could disadvantage churches of real historical significance, as the report highlights. The Government need to make sure that funding is at least as generous under the new scheme as under the old one, and that religious buildings are continually prioritised.

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

National Planning Policy Framework

1.50 pm

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the impact of changes to the National Planning Policy Framework.

I am pleased to see you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I am grateful for the time to introduce this debate on the impact of the changes to the national planning policy framework. I called for this debate following a decision affecting the village of Yatton in the north of the Wells and Mendip Hills constituency, with 190 homes set to be built on a site known as Rectory Farm, Yatton Batch. Yatton Batch is in flood zone 3a, which is the highest level of risk, according to the Environment Agency. The consequences of this decision affect not just the people of Yatton, as I believe it sets a precedent for every other community living with flood risk across this country.

I will give the Minister some context to the geography of my constituency, which matters enormously. Wells and Mendip Hills falls roughly in two parts. One part comprises the limestone Mendip hills and the rest, the majority of the constituency, is wetlands and coastal plains: the Somerset levels and the North Somerset levels. Fifty-one per cent of my constituency is less than 20 metres above sea level.

I will send the Minister a map, on which he will see that the Somerset levels are a man-made landscape. The monks, led by the Abbot of Glastonbury, drained the land hundreds of years ago by digging what locally we call "rhynes", which is why the map shows the waterways as straight lines in my part of the world. It does not take a PhD in geography to work out that low-lying coastal wetlands are prone to flooding. It has taken centuries of careful management and regular maintenance of the local waterways to keep this land habitable at all.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): On the subject of keeping land habitable, the hon. Lady will be familiar with the fact that the Lincolnshire fens, and particularly South Holland and The Deepings, are entirely flat, without even the undulation equivalent to the Mendip hills. Our land is drained, and much of it is reclaimed from the sea, yet there are perpetual attempts to put critical infrastructure on it, including solar, pylons and suchlike. That is incompatible, and those things cannot be reconciled. I entirely endorse what the hon. Lady says about the character of the land, its propensity to flood and what we should do with it.

Tessa Munt: I take the right hon. Gentleman's point. I will suggest to the Minister that, if he wishes to pursue a policy of building on land that will almost certainly flood, we need to put those buildings on stilts. That is not impossible, and there is certainly one very beautiful house on the levels that sits on stilts.

Yatton, the village subject to the decision, sits within the North Somerset levels, barely 2 km from the Bristol channel. On Friday 12 June, the High Court handed down its judgment permitting the development of 190 homes in this flood-prone area, on a site that failed

[*Tessa Munt*]

the flood risk sequential test. The judgment follows the NPPF exactly, as the judge had to, and prioritised building homes over protection from flooding. It imperils not only the new homes—I should explain that the judge said that homeowners threatened by flooding had sufficient time to vacate their houses before the floodwater reached them—but the homes and businesses in and around the Yatton site. The impact of flooding does not disappear just because people can get away safely. This is about property as well as people. The damage to wellbeing and mental health takes its toll on those affected, as does the damage to property, which can take months and sometimes years to remedy and replace.

I would not want the Minister to think that this is a case of nimbyism and anti-development sentiment by those in rural areas. My Lib Dem colleagues and I agree with the Government's desire to meet the huge need for housing across the country. There are 12,800 people on the Homefinder list in Somerset, which covers 66% of my patch, and a similar proportion on the North Somerset list.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary group on flooding and flooded communities. Many of our discussions centre on the Flood Re scheme, which was a great initiative that meant insurers could cover flooding claims and the premiums for home insurance in high flood risk areas were not astronomical. The scheme comes to an end in 2039, and the Government have been very clear that it will not be extended. As set out in legislation, homes built after 2009 are not covered by the scheme. As we get closer to that 2039 date, more and more homes built in high flood risk areas are not covered by the scheme and so risk becoming uninsurable and consequently unmortgageable. The consequences for developers and those who have already bought the homes will be awful. And the Yatton decision compounds the problems with the NPPF in allowing the need for home building to override common sense.

To press the point, it is very likely that residents of new homes built on floodplains, such as those in Yatton, will face flooding damage in the coming years. Not only will they not be able to make an insurance claim, but any new buyers will likely struggle to access a mortgage. Residents may well end up trapped, unable to sell a home that might cost them thousands of pounds in repairs every winter. The Minister knows the weather experts say that what we are experiencing now is the most stable weather that we are ever going to see.

I mentioned that the current neighbours would also be affected due to the simple fact that the floodwater must go somewhere. If developers choose to build up the land on which they wish to develop, the floodwater may well not hit those homes precisely, but will cause the existing homes and businesses in the area to be flooded more greatly. I have a lovely set of photographs of the land I am speaking about, which I will send to the Minister, showing exactly how it floods every year.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for the ambition she has put forward. Does she not agree that there is a risk of severe regulatory divergence? If the English planning system undergoes massive deregulation and introduces a faster, rules-based yes by default to major projects, capital will do what it

always does and flow through the path of least resistance. The Government and the Minister need to ensure that the possibility she outlines for her constituents does not happen elsewhere.

Tessa Munt: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. The point I would like to make to the Minister is that, if developers choose to raise the level of the land on which they wish to build, we make a complete mockery of the Environment Agency's work in relation to the LiDAR data that it uses to measure flood risk. There will be little pockets that are no longer in flood zone 3a, for example, but everybody else is then in a more problematic area for flooding. The current neighbours would be affected, because floodwater has to go somewhere. In the event of flooding, if the properties are lifted above sea level by raising the land, the displaced water goes straight into existing homes and businesses.

The Association of British Insurers has been clear that, while it supports the Government's ambition to deliver 1.5 million homes, it has serious concerns about allowing developers to bypass the flood risk sequential test in areas at high risk of surface water flooding, which is precisely the kind of decision we have seen play out in Yatton. The scale of the risk to which it points is sobering.

The Environment Agency's national assessment of flood and coastal erosion risk shows that 6.3 million homes in England are already at risk of flooding, 4.6 million of them from surface water alone. In just the first quarter of this year, insurers paid out £846 million in property claims, with the average weather-related claim reaching £6,040—the highest first quarter figure on record. Subsidence claims, often linked to the same extreme weather, rose 9% year on year to £17,820. Research commissioned by Aviva suggests that 11% of new homes built between 2022 and 2024 are already at risk of flooding, and that figure is projected to rise to one in seven by 2050, once climate change is factored in.

That is why I believe the Association of British Insurers, together with UK Finance and flood campaigners, has written directly to the Secretaries of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and for Housing, Communities and Local Government to raise the alarm. The message is simple: rather than weakening the sequential test, the Government should mandate sustainable drainage systems, finally implementing schedule 3 to the Flood and Water Management Act 2010. That legislation has been in the ether, unimplemented, for nearly 16 years. It is telling that 66% of the public already say that they do not believe the country or their local area is prepared for future flooding. Ignoring the industry that pays out when floods happen is really not the way to change people's minds.

I put it to the Minister that Somerset council is required to deliver 75,000 new homes in the next 20 years, and I believe that North Somerset has to produce nearly 25,000 new homes in the next 15 years. To repeat something that one of my colleagues on Somerset council says, it has taken since the dawn of time for the population of the Somerset council area—not including the North Somerset council area—to reach 560,000. I am keen to know why the Minister and his Government believe that the population will grow by more than 75,000 people in the next 20 years. That is a 13% increase, when it has taken centuries to get to 560,000. It is a ridiculous

population increase, and it is not realistic in the slightest. For context, the Office for National Statistics projects that the entire population of the United Kingdom will grow from around 70 million to around 72 million over the same period—a rise of just 2.8%.

I am the first to recognise that Wells and Mendip Hills is a lovely place to live—actually the best—but, even allowing for that huge appeal, I struggle to understand why the Government believe that such a disproportionately rural area will see growth at almost five times the national rate. The NPPF changes will affect much more than just flood risk—our area and its green spaces will be under pressure.

It seems especially disproportionate when I look at Bristol, my local city, which I love dearly. Its population is projected to grow by about 10%, which is again above the national average. It seems that those in Somerset and North Somerset will be asked to take a huge number of new residents. I do not know where they are coming from, and I cannot quite see how the Government have come to those figures. I would be grateful if the Minister could write to me on how his team has come to that assumption.

The last matter I would like to raise is that farmers run factories. Those factories are the agricultural land—it is just that we do not have roofs on them. That is no different from any other part of the country that has some sort of manufacturing. Farmers use fields, and they do not have roofs, so it is quite hard for people to spot the fact that they are food factories. In the interests of an honest debate, I acknowledge that many in the farming community welcome what is set out in the new NPPF, but that comes with real caveats. It is worth the House hearing what they are.

A lot of our greenhouses are more than 40 years old and in urgent need of modernisation, yet large glasshouse developments are still routinely treated as major infrastructure projects, which triggers huge delays that again undermine our domestic food production. My colleagues will need no second invitation on this point: food security is national security. I am really glad that the Government recognised that in February. Ensuring that our farmers can produce the food this country needs is of critical importance in what is a very unstable world.

Will the Minister consider the points that I have made and write to me about the population figures? I want to make absolutely certain that he does not misunderstand me; this is not a sentimental case for nature and green spaces. It is very realistic damage that is happening to Somerset.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order. I impose a four-minute time limit on speeches.

2.6 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I declare an interest as chair of the all-party parliamentary group on council and social housing. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) on securing this very important debate.

On a personal basis, a debate on national planning policy feels like a very fitting bookend to the outgoing Administration. The issue of what gets built where defines our daily lives like no other issue, and I have found my first two years in this place defined by those debates. Without wanting to cast myself as a latter-day Cassandra, I shared early on my view that, try though Ministers might, there would be no appeasing the developer lobby—no amount of deregulation will ever satisfy them—and so it has proven, with the clamour for relaxed fire safety standards and the weakening of environmental policies, and for there to be less opportunity for ordinary people to influence decisions in the planning system, as loud as ever.

However, my views on the subject have changed. Today, I am not joining this debate to raise a series of detailed concerns about the latest redrafting of the NPPF—although I do still have such concerns, especially in relation to possible changes to the sequential test on surface water flooding and limits being imposed on local authorities to pursue more ambitious policies on climate and nature restoration. The point I really want to make today is that I believe we have reached a point where national planning policy is completely broken and the NPPF is beyond reform. After decades of deregulation, the genius of Labour's post-war democratic settlement has been degraded and reduced to a system of fiendishly complex processes, combined with overwhelmingly negative outcomes, which, for all the world, seems to have been designed by an evil genius to drive all those involved mad.

When Lewis Silkin created the planning system that rebuilt this country from the ashes of world war two, he described the distinctly Labour vision for a policy that would meet “actual needs, democratically expressed.” Yet what the NPPF has achieved for years—I am afraid the latest iteration will be little different—is almost the precise opposite of Silkin's idealism. Pretty much ever since the first version of the NPPF in 2012, what we have seen is the proliferation of speculative development across the country, with democratically produced local plans ridden roughshod over and housing built first and foremost for profit, not for people.

In fact, a national planning policy framework is not even an accurate name for what we have. There can be no plan-led system when national policy introduces the overwhelming likelihood of caveats to local plans through an ever stronger and equally inaccurately named presumption in favour of sustainable development, which in reality functions as a passport to permission for all but the very worst speculative schemes. This is not planning in any reasonable sense of the word—it is merely reacting.

Under the NPPF system, more and more of the initiative, the influence and the advantage lies with the vested interests of land promoters and major developers, whose private profit will never accord with the public good. And thus we have a national system in which the notion of affordable housing is a running joke, and in which the environment that politicians so often protest their love for is repeatedly trashed as a secondary matter compared to the unequally distributed benefits of growth. It is a national planning policy framework that overwhelmingly produces outcomes that lock us into car-dependent, unsustainable lifestyles, with polluted air that chokes the lungs of our children and costs the NHS billions, and utterly fails to secure public consent

[Chris Hinchliff]

for the development we very desperately require to meet the needs of those stuck in temporary accommodation and in cramped, crowded and unsanitary conditions.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Lab): I apologise to the Minister; I am hopping between two different debates in two different Chambers. I told my constituents that I would make this point about planning policy in my area, which has fought for decades to protect the green belt. The introduction of the concept of the grey belt means that developers are now turning green belt into grey belt by dumping, cutting down trees and despoiling the area, and then applying for planning permission for development. The concept of grey belt has undermined all that we have spent decades campaigning for.

Chris Hinchliff: I agree with those concerns. As I understand it, many of the applications for grey belt are in fact on greenfield sites, and that needs to be addressed.

For all its labyrinthine processes, the NPPF makes a mockery of local democracy, which breeds disillusion and contempt for politics in this country. The system we have created through the NPPF traps communities in a never-ending cycle of adversarial confrontations with corporations that see our local landscapes as easy pickings and cream off much of the wealth of new developments, while leaving the public to carry the majority of the costs. The section 106 mechanism they rely on is not only obscure, but demonstrably incapable of securing the investment in the infrastructure—GPs, schools, sports grounds and public transport—necessary to keep pace with population growth, when hundreds of new houses are bolted on to towns that have already seen almost all their facilities closed.

The housing the NPPF produces is often both miserabilist and identikit. It is seemingly designed to erase local identity and shorn of local traditions, with no space for community and with a built environment that is best described as unhappiness given physical form. All in all, the damage that successive iterations of the NPPF have done to our country is difficult to forgive. Now is the time to consign the NPPF to the dustbin of history where it belongs and start afresh instead of making further amendments.

The one positive note I can strike is that it is not difficult to imagine something far, far better. We need to return to Labour's democratic principles, stop treating the public as a problem to be silenced and embrace them as a source of optimistic solutions for meeting the needs of the future. It is time to replace the constant nonsense that traduces our constituents as nimbys, and to put power in their hands so that they can decide where and how to meet the housing needs of their communities in a way that expresses their hopes and priorities for the future. It is time to bring back architects in every local planning authority, working with each community to shape plans for future development on an appropriate scale for each settlement, and with a renaissance in the local vernacular that strengthens and reinvigorates the culture and identity of each unique town, village and city. In short, it is time to ditch the NPPF and build a new system that puts power in the hands of the people and allows planners to genuinely plan with communities.

2.12 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt). I will try to cover four aspects of the NPPF in just short of four minutes. The first is what the NPPF says on intentional unauthorised development. I welcome the move towards stronger wording in that area. I should stress that I am not talking about a house extension or somebody accidentally not complying with regulations, but entire new dwellings and wilful non-compliance. I welcome the move from material consideration, as it is known, to substantial weight, but I fear it does not go far enough. As I said in my submission to the consultation, it should be set out very clearly that

“wilfully ignoring planning consent requirements will not result in retrospective planning permissions being granted”,

and that this cannot in normal circumstances be overridden by personal circumstance arguments. Other things could be done in support, such as making sure that stop notices are easier to issue, and restrictions on things like delivery of construction materials and mobile homes to unlawful sites.

The Minister and I have discussed the NPPF housing formula many times across this Floor. He is a very diligent Minister and, although he always robustly defends the Government line, which is kind of annoying, he always does it with great courtesy. I thank him for that. The problem is that this formula has meant a massive increase in housing numbers for the countryside. It is not a north-south thing; it is an urban to countryside shift. Whereas the numbers have gone up by 50% for the country overall, in East Hampshire they have doubled. When that happens overnight, no one has a five-year land supply that can deal with it, so we get speculative developments.

That has been brought into sharp relief by the issue of water supply, which has particularly come to prominence since South East Water's submission to the Basingstoke and Deane local plan. The Basingstoke area that it talks about—zone 4, as it is known—extends to Alton and around my constituency. The Environment Agency has stopped the extension of the abstraction licence at Greywell Fen because of the degradation of that globally rare site of special scientific interest. I met South East Water recently to discuss this. There are questions outstanding, particularly regarding parts of my constituency. Clearly, action should have happened before now, but a doubling of the housing target hugely exacerbates the issue. Large-scale development should not go ahead unless and until this issue is resolved.

Jim Shannon: I commend the right hon. Gentleman on his speech. I know that the Minister is not responsible for my constituency across the water, but does the right hon. Gentleman feel that recommendations and good things learned on the mainland should be shared with us back home to ensure that we do not have the same problems that seem to be repeating over and over again here?

Damian Hinds: I agree. There is no practical limit on what we can learn from one another in the home nations of the United Kingdom.

I want to come on to what is known as policy L3, which concerns the minimum density requirements for areas around train stations. I have written about this in

my submission to the consultation. I fear that a policy that is, on the face of it, sensible—“Let’s have people living close to train stations where they can commute to work or whatever it might be”—is really designed for urban town areas. But it will also have an impact on market towns in places like East Hampshire and in villages that just happen to have a train station. The sorts of densities discussed in the NPPF would be wholly inappropriate for market towns like Alton in East Hampshire and rural villages like Bentley or Rowland’s Castle.

Finally, I want to address how the NPPF interacts with local government reorganisation. I am totally opposed to the Government’s top-down reorganisation of Hampshire local government for multiple reasons, including the fact that it splits up an area with an identity—namely, East Hampshire. It puts the lower parts into a new Portsmouth super-council area and the rest of East Hampshire into this vast new Mid Hants unitary. Local plans have been built around existing district council geographies. For councils that are part-way through the process and about to have this enormous reorganisation thrust upon them, what is the guidance from the Government on how they should proceed?

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Three-minute limit!

2.17 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for securing a debate on this important topic very much in the spirit of end-of-term relaxation.

I want to start with some of the positives of the new draft NPPF. My district councils locally have welcomed its structure, usability and the good aim, at least, of a more streamlined planning system and reduction of duplication. They also welcome the separation of plan making and decision-making guidance. Overall, the aim of speeding up the plan-making process to 13 months is welcome. Local plans take many years to be produced and involve a huge amount of resource. I am certainly interested to hear from the Minister whether he feels that the Planning Inspectorate has the resources to cope with an increase in the number of plans to examine and assess. The right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) made a very important point about the implications of local government reorganisation.

Significant concerns remain about how the Government seem to be moving away from local decision making and community empowerment. As this new scheme of delegation will reduce the input of elected councillors in planning decisions, involving communities and needs specific to local geography become even more important, yet there are concerns that spatial development strategies will be agreed to far away from communities.

More could be done to clarify the planning system and permissions for houses in multiple occupation. Such properties are often associated with parking and waste issues and, unlike larger HMOs, they may not be subject to requirements on parking provision, room sizes or amenity space, potentially resulting in poorer living conditions. Requiring planning permission for all HMOs for a single use class could help address those issues by ensuring consistent standards.

The environment is a big concern. The NPPF has insufficient focus on our climate and environmental obligations, and certainly not enough on flood and extreme temperature resilience and standards for homes. As highlighted by Wildlife and Countryside Link, the draft NPPF would limit local ambition and powers by preventing local planning authorities from requiring biodiversity net gain above the statutory 10% minimum. That seems like a retrograde step.

Finally, my biggest concern is one I have raised with the Minister many times and in many different forums: the Government’s ambitious housing targets are not being supported by the same focus on the infrastructure and public services that will be needed, which makes it harder to get local communities invested in the importance of more housing. In Oxfordshire, where the rate of housing growth has been extremely fast, the challenge is ensuring that infrastructure such as doctors, schools, public transport and affordable housing is available to support our growing population.

Development should remain plan-led and be guided by evidence of local need, not by market forces alone. That is my biggest concern about both Government policy in general and the NPPF in particular. I hope the Minister will add to his previous comments on what the Government will do to ensure that our house building targets and population growth are supported by infrastructure and public services.

2.20 pm

Brian Mathew (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for securing this important debate. Planning and local development is one of the most commonly raised issues in my email inbox, as I am sure is the case for many others in the room.

First, I would like to make it clear that I am completely aware of the dire need for housing in this country. Many young people have expressed to me their fears that they will never get a foot on the property ladder, or that they are having to move away from the communities they know and love to find affordable places to rent. Affordable housing is a need, not a luxury.

However, new homes do not need to come at the cost of the community that is already there, and nor should they be placed on flood plains. Local people and local elected officials should have a role in deciding the future of their area, because they best understand it. When local people are given the opportunity to help shape their future, it can be a roaring success. In the village of Holt, in my constituency, a neighbourhood plan shaped the development of a derelict, unused tannery site into an award-winning mixed-use development, combining homes and new commercial space, while still preserving the village’s distinct character and acknowledging its history. Meanwhile, in Seend, near Devizes, the village’s community land trust has delivered affordable homes for local residents, built to the highest passive house standards of energy efficiency. That demonstrates what rural communities can achieve by working with partners, such as local councils and Homes England, for the benefit of residents and the environment.

Although there is a lot of good in the framework, I am particularly concerned that it fails to commit to new homes being zero-carbon or held to the highest

[*Brian Mathew*]

energy efficiency standards, as was shown to be possible by the development in Seend. It also contains no clear commitment to deliver actually affordable homes, and it risks encouraging more executive housing to make more money for developers, while failing to tackle the housing crisis.

I welcome the proposed presumption in favour of development near railway stations. Transport-oriented development is precisely the kind of planning approach needed to move away from car-dependent housing estates located far from town centres.

Tessa Munt: It is a very good idea to have development near railway stations. However, I have another application on the horizon in Yatton, which is the village I was discussing earlier, that involves a plan to build on the railway station car park. Does my hon. Friend think that that is a good idea?

Brian Mathew: It does sound most odd, if I may say so.

That principle lies at the heart of the Bath and Wiltshire metro proposal, which I support. It has the potential to unlock brownfield regeneration in Melksham town centre, revitalise the riverside and strengthen the high street through sustainable, rail-connected growth. However, if that ambition is to be realised, local areas must have access to the resources needed to develop robust transport business cases, masterplans and infrastructure programmes. I am therefore concerned that the removal of funding for sub-national transport bodies risks creating a significant obstacle to the station upgrades, service improvements and strategic transport planning required to support the housing and regeneration opportunities that the policy seeks to encourage. Without adequate investment in the transport network itself, the benefits of transport-oriented development may be difficult to deliver in much of the country.

2.24 pm

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. First, I thank the Minister for his assistance in progressing the local plan in my constituency. Horsham faced a unique problem with water neutrality, which the previous Government showed no sign of ever grappling with, and I am grateful for his personal involvement in that.

However, when it comes to the national house building strategy, I have to be critical. Difficulty with obtaining planning permission is only one, and no longer even the most important, of the many obstacles to house building, so why do we obsess over it to the exclusion of all else? Local targets are set through a compulsory process called the standard method, under which an area that has high local house prices, but only modest local wages, will have steeper housing targets. That formula is a terrible way to assess local housing need in practice, but its worst aspect is how it destroys local authorities' negotiating power against developers.

Like most planning authorities, Horsham district council builds very few council houses directly, so the vast majority of its new housing stock must come from private developers. Developers are not stupid; they know that if a council has a target to build 1,800 homes each

and every year—a target that Horsham may face—it will have to say yes to practically every site put in front of it, no matter whether a site was rejected the year before. Try explaining that to residents.

Developers with options for the land bid against each other, with a price based on the highest possible outcome, but achieving that price means them having to build zero social rent homes and lots of highly priced, executive homes. That is a bizarre case of competition only ever driving prices up, not down. Incredibly, in Horsham, we would be better off if we negotiated a monopoly for a single company to develop the whole district. That is why we have the paradox of having a chronic housing shortage at the same time as 1.5 million unbuilt houses with planning permission.

Meanwhile, as collateral damage in this process, we are ripping apart local democracy. Councils are forced, with zero local consent, to approve sites that are deficient in transport and water supply and that are mostly on greenfield sites. Local authorities have to take the word of statutory consultees as gospel; even where authorities know perfectly well that land will flood, if the Environment Agency says it will not, that is the end of it.

I know that the Minister is committed to solving the national housing problem, and I wholeheartedly support him in that, but the current situation is all sacrifice with no benefit. The sites we approve today will sit on the housing market like a dead-weight for years to come. High land prices are being locked in for wasteful schemes that take up three times the land that they need to. We need a reset, so I hope the Minister will agree to meet me to consider alternative solutions.

2.27 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for securing this debate.

It is clearly essential to build homes. One reason why I am sitting in this place is my work to support victims of domestic abuse. For those, often with children, who are on a six-month stay in a refuge while fleeing the most dreadful violence, a secure home is the first step towards a new, safe future. However, the Government have introduced no targets for council or social housing, despite the Liberal Democrats making many calls for them to do so. The dreadful shortage left as the legacy of successive Conservative Governments is, at the very least, not being remedied by this Labour Government. That problem needs fixing, and the NPPF changes not only do not address it, but open up a raft of other problems.

The Conservative Administrations that previously ran Hart district council and Basingstoke and Deane borough council failed to produce local plans. That left those areas subject to speculative development granted on appeal, resulting in the building of large housing estates on the edges of our towns and villages, with no accompanying infrastructure. To make the best of a bad situation, the Liberal Democrats on Hart district council introduced a local plan, which, crucially, meant that houses were built sustainably on brownfield land. When the Lib Dems took joint control of Basingstoke and Deane borough council, a local plan was prioritised and progressed.

However, this Government's new housing targets have rendered those new plans all but redundant. Those council areas are now easy targets for entirely inappropriate housing developments. When the balance tips in favour of appeal, it is not the people but the developers who benefit. In Basingstoke and Deane, planning permission for around 6,000 new homes has already been granted. In Hart, the major developer working on the biggest housing project has slowed down building: instead of building and selling 200 houses at a time, it is now building 50 to protect its profits. The new houses are no more affordable—in fact, properties in North East Hampshire are some of the most expensive outside London—but under the Government's housing policies, developers are being allowed to land-bank: to push through application after application, despite the lack of infrastructure, and to hold on to land for years or decades as it increases in value.

Applications come in for a raft of inappropriate places, and all the while, there is no statutory consultee for our most important resource. Water is our biggest concern, and it is absent from the Government's plans. South East Water, which supplies fresh water to most of North East Hampshire, produced a five-year plan in autumn 2024 that is largely a work of fiction, citing a new pipeline that would supply new and existing homes that would come online in spring 2025. Nobody believed that that could be completed in six months, but Ofwat has no powers to compel South East Water to publish a plan that is in any way based in reality.

The consequences of this regulatory and legislative failure sit with local people and the environment. Failure to supply local fresh water has obvious consequences, but the environment also suffers. We have heard already about how the Environment Agency has cancelled the supply of water in Greywell, yet South East Water continues to abstract from the site.

2.30 pm

Claire Young (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for securing this debate.

My constituency is large and rural, containing the towns of Thornbury, Yate and Chipping Sodbury, as well as numerous villages and hamlets, and stretches from the internationally designated Severn estuary all the way to the Cotswold escarpment. A large part of the countryside that surrounds those communities is designated green belt, with all the protections that that used to bring, but now that protection is under threat.

Before I go further, I will provide some context. Under the current administration, South Gloucestershire council recognises the need for new housing and has developed a plan to deliver its housing need, which recently went through its examination in public. More than that, the council recognises the importance of homes for social rent and has been punching above its weight in their provision. With around 0.6% of the population of England outside London, it delivered 1.6% of total new social rent completions last year.

However, there is an implicit deal with local people in that local plan, which delivers homes while protecting the remaining countryside from speculative development. The Government's grey belt policy fundamentally threatens

that. Green belt land will now be parcelled up into cells for assessment, and it will be difficult to show an individual cell's contribution.

The changes to the framework around the grey belt essentially make purposes C and E void, and particularly C, which protects countryside from encroachment. The danger is that pockets of land will be considered in isolation and be judged only to contribute to purpose C. Indeed, the 2022 West of England combined authority report, in the local plan evidence, showed that the primary reason for just about all the land in the local green belt is purpose C.

However, the cumulative impact of developing those pockets of land would degrade the green belt as a whole. Some of our green belt is very narrow, and it will only become more so if this is allowed to happen. Our towns and villages will slowly be swallowed up by Bristol, and the distinctiveness of our communities will be lost. My constituents do not want that, and I suspect that the good people of Bristol do not want it either, although some hon. Members may think otherwise.

The Government rightly want to speed up housing delivery, but indiscriminate housing built by big developers with no regard for the environment or the people living nearby is not the answer. Ironically, far from increasing the speed of housing delivery, as the Government claim it will, in my area the grey belt changes the level of risk, creating more delays by distracting planning officers from the planned sites and from the Government's new town proposal. Time will be wasted arguing with speculative developers about what constitutes grey belt, when it could be spent delivering local housing need through the local plan.

I urge the Minister to listen to hon. Members across the Chamber, who are rightly raising concerns, and to advise the new Cabinet and the incoming Prime Minister that rural voices must be heard, and the NPPF revisited.

2.33 pm

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) on securing the debate, and all other Members for their excellent contributions, which I strongly endorse. I particularly wish to highlight the contribution of the hon. Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff), which I hope was a bid to catapult him into becoming Secretary of State under the new regime—I would certainly strongly support the approach he is taking.

A lot of people have referred to the inequity and inappropriateness of the way in which the Government have introduced national targets and the manner in which they have imposed them, through the national planning policy framework. It certainly reinforces the weakness of the whole system, because it is based on a delusion that private developers will collude with the Government in driving down the price of their finished product.

During my nine-year sabbatical from this place, I was chief executive of a registered social landlord—a community land trust—and tried to deliver in those circumstances, so I am certainly aware of the difficulties in trying to meet the need for affordable homes. My primary point is that the national planning policy framework has fundamentally weakened the rural exception policy,

[*Andrew George*]

which was introduced in the early '90s under planning policy guidance 3. That was the first time that planning had switched in principle from “planning use” to “user”, and took the user into account so it was meeting local housing need. That has been productive in a number of areas, especially in Cornwall, where it has for many years been the primary source for the delivery of affordable homes within the duchy.

The problem is that because of the way in which the framework has been brought in and because local authorities can no longer demonstrate that they can meet their five-year land supply, all areas that previously could be designated as rural exception sites to meet affordable housing needs can no longer be designated as such. A lot of them have been converted to open-market housing developments. I think that impact was unintended by the Minister, but it is entirely counterproductive, because in many rural areas, the primary means by which affordable housing could be delivered is now not being used. The planning system is fuelled by greed rather than need, and as long as we have weaknesses like that in the system, we cannot meet housing need.

2.36 pm

Gideon Amos (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) and all the hon. Members who have contributed today, including my hon. Friends the Members for St Ives (Andrew George), for Thornbury and Yate (Claire Young), for Horsham (John Milne), for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover), for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) and for Melksham and Devizes (Brian Mathew).

One of the abiding themes of the debate is that water and other infrastructure seem to escape the demanding targets that are applied to the delivery of housing. We need an infrastructure-first approach in which infrastructure is as prioritised as housing. The Liberal Democrats welcome the ambition to deliver more homes, particularly the 150,000 social and council rent homes that the country needs, which we established as a target in our manifesto. But the right way to deliver those homes is by working with local communities and trusting them, not through more centralisation into Whitehall. Housing targets, for us, should be established firmly in a community-led process.

The incoming Prime Minister has talked a lot about devolution and giving power back to local communities, and he is right to do so. Communities know what works for their area, but this proposed framework does the opposite, stripping power away from local decision makers rather than handing it to them.

The proposed framework comes off the back of the recent regulations and direction that mean that decisions, both small and large, are now removed from local councillors, so that they have no power or control over those decisions. It also means that proposed developments such as those at Orchard Portman near Taunton—where 1,100 acres of farms were sold off by the Crown Estate to a house builder without the usual return of payments to the public purse being required in the event of planning permission—could be decided in Whitehall, not by our elected counsellors in Somerset.

For all applications now, the draft NPPF, which was recently out for consultation, is filled with policies that weaken local plans and community involvement. It is a power grab by central Government. Across the proposed new framework document, that centralising instinct repeats itself, starting with the presumption in favour of sustainable development. Today, that presumption is a backstop, applying only where the local plan is absent or out of date, or where there is no five-year land supply. That rewards communities for investing in an up to date local plan. That presumption in favour of sustainable development is now to be abolished; instead, policies S3, S4 and S5 would impose a de facto presumption in favour of development in every circumstance for certain kinds of development. That begs the question: will councils continue to invest all their time and effort in local plan preparation?

The same instinct runs through proposals on the weight to be given to different policy considerations, giving the same weight to housing, economic development, and heritage and landscape, leaving Historic England to raise concerns about how those will be balanced. It could mean that the historic setting of the Wellington monument on Oldway Road in my constituency, currently subject to appeal, could be another victim of these proposed policies. That approach could also be in contravention of the well-known wording in the Planning (Listed Buildings and Conservation Areas) Act 1990 that “special regard” will be paid to preserving heritage.

Nowhere is the centralisation of such decisions in Whitehall's grasp going further than in the green belt. The Town and Country Planning Association has called the framework “unprecedentedly permissive” for good reason. Three elements combine to have that effect. First, the standard method, where 0.8% of the existing housing stock is applied as a multiplier and then a further multiplier is applied according to areas of high house prices. By definition, green belts constrain supply; that is their purpose. Therefore, they are areas of higher prices. In short, the standard method takes the consequence of protecting a place as a justification for building more on it. That cannot be logical or acceptable.

Rural councils have therefore been subject to much higher housing targets. For example, in Somerset, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills put across very well, the 75,000 new dwellings will come as a surprise in terms of population growth compared with what has ever been achieved in the past. Urban areas where regeneration is needed have seen their targets reduced.

The second element driving development in rural green fields is green belt policy GB7. In short, that means that a developer can secure consent anywhere in the green belt, regardless of what the local plan says, on condition that it is near a town with a railway station. Ironically, an area with no green belt might be better protected because it is not subject to those policies to allow development around railway stations.

The third and final part of the policy that leads to this greenfield development is GB2 for the grey belt. Few of us, and certainly not the Liberal Democrats, would object to local communities deciding that underused green belt land is degraded and could be released for development. But this policy overrides that local plan process, and disapplies protections against encroachment on the countryside, removing villages from the green-belt protections that they have had for decades and generations.

Andrew George: As my hon. Friend is aware, I am very fortunate to have secured a place in the ballot for private Members' Bills, and my Bill will be on affordable homes. The details have not been written, so there is an opportunity to work on that with him, and indeed with the Secretary of State. I am very keen to do so and to adapt a number of those policies so that it provides a framework within which the Government can work with Parliament to improve and adjust planning policy to achieve the desirable aims.

Gideon Amos: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. He reminds me that, frankly, I struggle with the fact that such a momentous and significant policy instrument is going through Parliament without a vote. It can hardly be right that these major policy changes, which will unleash development all over the country and reverse decades-old planning policies, will not be subject to a vote, considering that we quite rightly spend weeks and months going through Bills.

I am very grateful that my hon. Friend has chosen to prioritise these issues and is bringing them forward in his private Member's Bill. I wish him well. I know that the Minister always works constructively across the House, and his work is appreciated for that. I know the Minister will work with my hon. Friend the Member for St Ives on his private Member's Bill, as of course will I.

Together, the existing and proposed frameworks begin to look like a greenfield-first approach. The golden rules, which would rightly require more affordable and social housing where green belt is released, are absolutely right. But the Government have consulted on allowing viability assessments to potentially undermine that. I encourage the Minister to say something on whether land should escape the golden rules requiring more social housing just because it has been previously developed. The binning of the garden city principles in the draft is equally damaging. They are the very foundation of what made the new post-war towns, such as Milton Keynes with its famous 22 million trees, some of the best places to live. That is no doubt a bit of drafting by those who know the cost of everything and the value of nothing.

Similar centralising is proposed on nature and climate. National development management policies, along with constraints on local standard setting, will stop councils exceeding the statutory 10% of biodiversity net gain. Again, proposed policy PM13 will prevent councils from setting more ambitious energy targets. We saw the folly of that under the previous Government, who refused to continue with the zero-carbon homes programme. If they had continued that, and we had had solar panels on every house built since then, we could have avoided the need for an entire 900 MW power station—perhaps a small nuclear reactor or a gas-fired power station.

Finally, as my hon. Friend the Member for Wells and Mendip Hills pointed out, policy F5, paragraph 2(b)(ii), would create a new exemption from the sequential test for sites at risk of surface water flooding. As my hon. Friend said, the insurance industry has pointed out that there could be as many as 400,000 mortgage prisoners in the future, unable to afford insurance as a result of these kinds of policies.

To conclude, the Liberal Democrats are firmly committed to delivering the housing that we and our communities need, but placing all the emphasis on increasing permissions for private sector homes that few can afford is not the

answer. We know that that will not reduce—and has not reduced—prices to make homes affordable. New homes are only 5% of the market, after all. With 13,000 homes with planning permission unbuilt in Somerset and 359,000 empty homes in the country, we should be redoubling our efforts to deliver on both of those fronts first.

What a community-led approach really means—and this framework lacks almost anything about community involvement—is homes that people can afford: council and social rent homes, alongside rent-to-own to help people get on to the housing ladder. The environment, our people and our communities are not the blockers of development; they are—or at least should be—the reason for development, and we can enhance the life chances of both if we get it right.

2.46 pm

Gareth Bacon (Orpington) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond, and to take part in this debate about the impact of changes to the national planning policy framework. At the outset, I thank the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) for securing this important debate. She made a strong speech, particularly focused on the danger of building in areas prone to flooding. I also thank the 10 hon. and right hon. Members who have made speeches—and the three who have made interventions—so far in this debate.

The NPPF is the rulebook by which our planning system is guided. It is an extensive and comprehensive statement of the Government of the day's policy direction, and perhaps the clearest signal to developers, local authorities and local people about how a Government will approach changes to their surrounding built environment. It covers everything from roads to housing, local communities to land use, and provides the overarching checks, balances and direction in the planning system. We are not in blanket opposition to everything that the Government are seeking to do with the NPPF. However, we do have significant concerns about some aspects of it, and I will focus on those in my remarks today.

Since coming to power two years ago, this Government have twice proposed revisions to the NPPF, both times with severe consequences for our green spaces, rural towns and villages, and local democratic voices. In their first revisions, made just before Christmas 2024, the Government's policy direction was clear. Unfortunately, what was on offer was an unwelcome gift of urban sprawl. That was because the Government made it easier for local authorities to release green-belt land for development in more ways than one.

The first, and most obvious, was the announcement that new golden rules would need to be met to expand on to the green belt. That effectively invited developers to test the waters by highlighting that the NPPF stated that, where a development complied with the golden rules, local authorities should give "significant weight in favour" of approving the scheme.

The second release came from the Government's spurious grey belt designation. Concocted in the bowels of Marsham Street, "grey belt" is a disingenuous label. The Prime Minister has told us that it means low-quality land made up of "disused car parks", but that is far from the truth, because, for too many sites, grey belt is simply a façade for releasing green-belt sites for urban sprawl and overdevelopment.

[Gareth Bacon]

That is backed by research in December 2025 by the Campaign to Protect Rural England, which showed that, a year after the first NPPF reforms, of the 13 developments of 10 or more homes approved by Government planning inspectors on so-called grey-belt land, 88% of those 1,250 homes

“will be built on previously undeveloped countryside”—

not disused petrol stations, low-quality land or any other trumped-up example taken straight from a Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government press release, just our countryside. Worse, those developments make up more than 90% of homes granted planning permission on grey-belt sites by inspectors; a further 21 smaller schemes, totalling no more than 91 homes, comprised the remainder.

That is not the only attack on our green spaces. The 2024 NPPF revisions also reintroduced mandatory top-down housing targets across England by removing the word “advisory” from the relevant paragraph concerning housing targets, alongside references to exceptional circumstances for alternative approaches to determining local housing targets.

As other Members have said, that came alongside a new standard method for housing targets. The hon. Members for Horsham (John Milne) and for Wells and Mendip Hills highlighted some of the bizarre assumptions underpinning the housing targets generated by the new standard method, alongside some of its counterproductive outcomes. When examined together, those disproportionately redistributed top-down housing targets on to rural areas from urban areas. For example, under the Government’s targets, housing numbers were cut by 11% in London, 38% in Birmingham and 55% in Coventry, while increasing by 106% in the New Forest, 199% in North Yorkshire and 487% in Westmorland and Furness.

That is particularly concerning given that major cities—and not least here in central London—have the infrastructure needed to support development. However, even in Greater London, although the collective target has been reduced by 11%, that has been achieved by sharp drops in urban inner London, whereas in the more rural outer-London areas, huge increases have been imposed. For example, in my London borough of Bromley, which is the largest borough in Greater London and is mostly rural, the target has been increased by 400%.

The conclusion is inescapable. The NPPF changes show very clearly that this Government are determined to build all over the green belt. What has been the result of these reforms? It certainly has not been large amounts of extra housing. As I pointed out in this place yesterday, the Government’s own figures show that the number of net new additional dwellings in England was just 208,600 in Labour’s first year in power—a 6% drop from 2023-24 under the last Conservative Government’s final year in office. Indeed, the Government admitted that they will not hit the target through their own net additional dwelling forecasts, predicting that by 2029 they will have fallen well short.

It does not have to be this way. The Opposition recognise the need to build more homes, and we made it clear from the start of this Parliament that we are broadly

supportive of the ambition to build many more homes. However, the Government’s actions, through some of their revisions to the NPPF, are the wrong way to go about it. A future Conservative Government will employ a genuine brownfield-first approach rather than releasing swathes of green belt or relabelling it under the murky and disingenuous designation of “grey belt”. We will not just pay lip service to brownfield development, but prioritise it and make it easier. That can and will be done.

The CPRE reported that a large proportion of England’s housing could be swiftly met using brownfield land that already has planning permission, without encroaching on undeveloped greenfield or green belt land. It estimates that there is enough brownfield land to build 1.41 million homes in England, based on the most up-to-date data from local planning authorities’ brownfield land registers up to 2024. That amounts to 93% of the Government’s parliamentary target. Furthermore, it has shown that England’s brownfield sites are increasing in number, land area and minimum net dwellings—up 54%, 6% and 34% respectively between 2018 and 2024.

That is why, not for the first time, I press the Minister to go further and faster in helping local authorities and developers to access brownfield sites rather than freeing up our green belt and steamrolling over local democracy, local voices and local communities. Recent history shows that this approach can work. If the Government want to see urban regeneration or densification done right, they can follow Conservative examples and pursue brownfield-first and not greenfield-first. We will not only abandon the Government’s offensive on our green spaces, but harmonise supply and demand-side policies.

I will finish with a small note on that point. As the Government continue to tweak the NPPF, they are doing nothing to back first-time buyers, families and downsizers by axing demand-side schemes and cutting stamp duty relief. There is no point in delivering supply-side reforms if the demand is not there to make it worth while.

To conclude, it is evident from the speeches here today and the evidence before us that the impact of recent reforms to the national planning policy framework has failed to deliver more homes, failed to protect our green belt, failed to support the housing market, failed to make brownfield sites viable and failed to deliver for voters. Regardless of the outcome of that, the Minister is a man I have a great deal of respect for. I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) that he is a decent and thoughtful man, and I sincerely wish him well in the pending reshuffle. Regardless of its outcome, he has the chance to raise this with whomever his new boss will be after next week’s coronation. I hope that he grasps the opportunity with alacrity and delivers the right homes in the right places and with the right infrastructure—just as the country deserves.

2.54 pm

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) on securing this important debate, and I thank the Backbench Business Committee for granting it. I also thank all hon. Members who have participated in this wide-ranging debate, and the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) and the hon. Member for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) for

their contributions. The degree of praise that I received from Opposition Members is slightly damning of my chances in any upcoming reshuffle, but I thank them for their kind words.

Members raised a wide range of concerns and asked many questions. In the time available to me, I will respond to as many as possible, but I will concentrate on those relating to the national planning policy framework. Issues such as the national scheme of delegation of planning functions—our modernisation of planning committees—are outside the framework, but I am more than happy to have a conversation with my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Chris Hinchliff) and others about them.

The national planning policy framework sets out the Government's planning policies for England and how they should be applied. It makes it clear that the purpose of the planning system is to contribute to the achievement of sustainable development. Accordingly, it provides a framework within which locally prepared plans can provide for homes, commercial development and supporting infrastructure in a sustainable manner. As hon. Members know, the framework must be taken into account in preparing local plans and is a material consideration in planning decisions.

The Government's manifesto included a clear commitment to immediately update the NPPF. Within three weeks of taking office, we consulted on changes to the framework, finalising them in December 2024. Among the many changes made in the initial revision of the framework were the restoration and raising of mandatory housing targets—the Conservatives abolished them when they were in government, which contributed to the low number of net additional completions in our first year in office—a new standard method for assessing housing need, which is aligned to our 1.5 million new homes target; greater support for social and affordable housing provision; a strengthening of policy relating to brownfield land development; a modernised strategic approach to green-belt land designation and release; and support for key economic sectors and clean energy infrastructure.

As hon. Members know, in December 2025, we published a fuller and more definitive overhaul of the NPPF for consultation. The proposed new framework represented the culmination of a sustained effort over the first 17 months of this Parliament to revamp our planning system so that it meets housing need in full and unleashes economic growth. It represents the most significant reform to national planning policy since the original NPPF was introduced more than a decade ago.

The new NPPF that we consulted on is wholly restructured. It maintains and builds on the initial revisions that we made in December 2024. It includes a range of new measures to support key economic sectors. As hon. Members have noted, it incorporates new, clear, rules-based national policies for plan and decision making. The proposals will make the NPPF easier to navigate for communities, local authorities and developers alike.

The new decision-making policies in the framework published in 2025 are designed to make development management more certain, consistent and streamlined; to standardise policies that apply across the whole of England, particularly where we have national standards in place and do not need that degree of local variation any longer; and to reduce duplication and avoid unjustified local deviation from national policy in local plans as

they are being prepared. To ensure that those changes made an immediate difference, the Government proposed that the new national decision-making policies effectively override conflicting policies in local plans from day one.

As part of that overall change to the framework, we also proposed new policies to boost housing supply and unlock economic growth in the years ahead. They include, as has been noted, a permanent presumption in favour of suitably located development; the establishment of in-principle support for suitable proposals that develop land around rail stations within existing settlements, and around well-connected train stations outside settlements, including on green-belt land; and policies designed to drive urban and suburban densification to secure a diverse mix of homes, including stronger support for rural, social and affordable housing and setting clear expectations for accessible housing to meet the needs of older and disabled people. Our proposals also include policies that embed a vision-led approach to transport, further embedding the changes that we made in December 2024; policies that better address climate change mitigation and adaptation; and policies designed to ensure that we are better conserving and enhancing the natural environment, including changes to reflect local nature recovery strategies, to recognise landscape character and conserve and enhance existing natural features, to incorporate swift bricks, and to provide guidance on sites of local importance for nature.

Andrew George: The Minister says that the purpose of the policy is, among other things, to drive the desperate need for affordable homes. Does he accept that, in rural areas, he is also driving affordable homes off rural exception sites and making them unaffordable? The setting of targets means that local plans are no longer viable and appropriate, and therefore developers can come in and simply insist that their developments should be permitted because they are delivering the housing numbers.

Matthew Pennycook: We have had this debate many times. I will come on to housing targets and the fact that if there is an up-to-date local plan in place, the housing targets do not need to be immediately revised. On the specific point about rural affordable housing, the framework makes it easier for rural exception sites to come forward through clearer national policy. It makes it far easier for rural authorities to require affordable housing on smaller sites, including removing the need for legislative designation.

We have received over 20,000 responses to the consultation. We have made very good progress in analysing the responses and making final policy decisions, but unfortunately, as a result of the announcement made by the Prime Minister on 22 June that he was resigning as Prime Minister and leader of the Labour Party and the associated constraints on Government business in the period ahead of the summer recess, including the prohibition on initiating new policy commitments, it has not been possible to respond to the consultation and publish the final framework before the summer recess. We will seek to do so in due course.

The issue of flooding, which was raised by the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills, is of particular concern in her constituency, as she made clear. The NPPF outlines a sequential approach to flood risk management, requiring inappropriate development to be directed away

[*Matthew Pennycook*]

from areas at highest risk and providing strong safeguards where development is necessary in those areas. In plan making, a sequential approach should be employed. That involves applying the sequential test and, if needed, the exception test. In decision making, where necessary, planning authorities also apply the sequential test and, if needed, the exception test to ensure that flood risk is minimised and appropriately addressed.

Tessa Munt: I wonder how the High Court came to its decision over the site in Yatton. What the Minister says sounds good to me, but it can be swept away because the NPPF is what the judge decreed was the way to go and, because there is a need for homes, the sequential test can be completely ignored.

Matthew Pennycook: That is not quite my reading of the Yatton judgment. The judge confirmed that even if a site fails the formal sequential test for flood risk, elements of the exception test remain valid material considerations that can outweigh flood risk under the tilted balance in paragraph 11(d). The High Court made a judgment in that case on the application of the policy, but it applies, as I have set out—[*Interruption.*] I will give way briefly, but I do want to cover the other issues raised in the debate.

Tessa Munt: Will the Minister meet me and those in my constituency who are particularly concerned about this to discuss it?

Matthew Pennycook: If I remain in post after the summer recess, I will be more than happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Where the sequential and exception tests have been applied as necessary and are not met, the framework is clear that development should not be allowed. I want to push back gently on the assertions made by the hon. Lady and the Liberal Democrat spokesman, the hon. Member for Taunton and Wellington, that we have weakened the sequential test. We have not weakened the sequential test in any way. We have clarified through changes to the PPG the triggers for the sequential test as well as its application, but we have not weakened it. If it is found necessary to build homes in areas of flood risk, the statutory guidance accompanying the building regulations promotes flood-resilient building work in flood-prone areas through approved document C, and the framework makes it clear that developments of all sizes should use sustainable drainage techniques where the development could have drainage impacts.

The draft NPPF that we have consulted on includes a dedicated chapter on planning for flood risk and coastal change. This seeks to clarify how existing policies should operate and aligns the NPPF with recent updates to planning guidance. It also included policies incorporating a new requirement that sustainable drainage systems should be designed in accordance with the national standards for sustainable drainage systems to provide a consistent basis for improving their design.

On the presumption in favour of sustainable development, we are trying to drive up the coverage of up-to-date local plans. Several hon. Members have spoken today who represent areas that do not have up-to-date

local plans and five-year housing land supplies. We are making great progress in driving up plan coverage. Over 60% more local plans are at examination now than at this time last year, but it will take time to boost coverage. It is important, where policies are not up to date or where there is an insufficient supply of land, that there is a fallback to encourage planning permission to be granted, and that is what the presumption provides for.

However, the NPPF we published in December 2024 not only improved the operation of the presumption by clarifying the circumstances in which it applies, but introduced new safeguards to make it clear that its application cannot justify poor-quality development. Under the revised draft presumption published for consultation last year, the default support in principle is turned off in certain situations, including where the development would conflict with sites allocated for specific uses or would use parks and open space or land identified for flood risk management. It would also be disallowed where development does not achieve acceptable standards in relation to harm to nature, heritage assets, flood risk, design and being an effective use of land.

I have only a short time available to me and a wide range of other issues were raised. I will touch on each briefly. On our housing target and the standard method we have introduced, in our view the new method better responds to affordability pressures by using a higher affordability adjustment in its calculation. That recognises the importance of housing affordability in assessing housing need and helps direct more homes to where they are most needed and least affordable. It also provides greater certainty to the sector through more stable and predictable housing numbers, compared with the previous approach that relied on out-of-date demographic predictions and unevidenced and arbitrary judgments.

On brownfield, grey-belt and green-belt land, the hon. Member for Orpington knows full well that we strengthened the policy in the December 2024 NPPF on brownfield land. We have gone further in the draft framework that is out for consultation. It is not the case that there is enough brownfield land, particularly not viable land in the right locations on brownfield land registers across the country. In certain exceptional circumstances, local authorities need to release green-belt land. We ask them when they do so to explore all options in maximising brownfield land, working with neighbouring authorities and where necessary reviewing their green belt.

The definition of grey belt is set out in the glossary of the NPPF. There is no confusion about what it means. Where grey belt is being brought forward, it cannot fundamentally undermine the policies of the green belt across the wider plan area; we included that safeguard in the framework.

On train stations, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds) was right that we want more development to come forward in sustainable locations around train stations. We obviously took a different approach to all stations, as opposed to well-connected stations, where we are looking for higher minimum densities to come forward. I must be clear that the proposals do not grant automatic permission on suitable sites or remove appropriate local oversight of the development control process. They add weight to what needs to be considered as part of an overall planning judgment, as is the case with all material considerations.

I will not dwell on rural or urban housing targets. I have said before and say again that across city regions the new standard method increases targets by 20% and, through that, housing growth is directed to a wider range of urban areas and smaller cities as well as our larger city areas.

I commend the hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills and the Backbench Business Committee for giving the House an opportunity to debate these important matters. Over the past two years, the Government have sought to revamp the planning system to ensure that it will facilitate the delivery of high and sustainable rates of house building and high-quality infrastructure in the years ahead. To the point on infrastructure, the new NPPF strengthens expectations in that area as well.

More needs to be done to transform the failing housing system we inherited, but the revised NPPF we published in December 2024 and the wholly restructured framework we will publish in due course are integral to our plans to improve housing availability, affordability and quality in this Parliament. I thank all hon. Members for their considered contributions today and wish them all, and you, Sir Desmond, an enjoyable and productive summer recess.

3.8 pm

Tessa Munt: I am grateful to you, Sir Desmond, and to the Minister for everything he has said. I very much hope that he stays in his place because we would like to carry on the conversation; I want him to stay exactly where he is. I know that the Government are not in favour of leaving notes, but if in a ghastly moment the Minister decides that something is not right and moves on, will he leave a long note for his successor?

I do not particularly wish to argue in the last moments of the debate, but as I understand it the national planning policy guidance permits surface water flooding sequential tests to be disappplied. I need to continue that conversation with the Minister, if I may. I point out that our local plans are up to date until such time as the housing numbers change, and then of course the local plans will not be in date any longer. In Somerset alone—I am not talking about North Somerset—18,000 new homes have passed planning but have not been built, which all relates to phosphate stuff. Those homes do not seem to be taken into account at all, given that we have another 75,000 on top of those, which seems inappropriate. I note the Minister's comments about station parking; I really hope that we do not build on station car parks, as that would be mad. There are a number of other points that I would have liked to make—

Sir Desmond Swayne (in the Chair): Order.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).

Changing Places Toilets: Capital Funding

[SIR ALEC SHELBRooke in the Chair]

3.10 pm

Daniel Francis (Bexleyheath and Crayford) (Lab) [R]: I beg to move,

That this House has considered capital funding for Changing Places toilets.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for granting this debate. At the outset, I declare an interest as the chair of the all-party parliamentary groups for access to disability equipment and for wheelchair users, and I am also the parent of a child with quadriplegic cerebral palsy who relies on Changing Places toilets.

Changing Places toilets are designed for people with profound and multiple disabilities and their carers, who need space and equipment—such as ceiling track hoists and height-adjustable, adult-sized changing beds—that a standard accessible toilet would not provide. Almost 250,000 people in the United Kingdom need personal assistance to use the toilet or change incontinence pads, including people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, spinal injuries and a number of other complex needs.

Currently, the number of active and registered Changing Places toilets stands at 2,665, which has greatly increased from the 140 available back in 2007. Last year, there were 99 registrations of new Changing Places toilets across the UK, including in Madame Tussauds here in London, in five Lloyds Banking Group locations and at three National Trust locations.

Back in 2005, the Changing Places consortium was established as a group of individuals and organisations that support the rights of people with disabilities. At the heart of the consortium's members is PAMIS, a voluntary organisation based in Dundee that supports parents of children and adults with profound and multiple learning disabilities, alongside the Centre for Accessible Environments.

I pay tribute to the late Loretta Lamb, the founder and chief executive officer of PAMIS, along with the team of staff and volunteers behind Changing Places toilets, led by Jenny, Karen and Fiona. I also want to highlight Changing Places Awareness Day, which is this coming Sunday 19 July. Campaigners have worked tirelessly to raise awareness and push for greater inclusion for disabled people, their families and carers.

Changing Places toilets have been vital for my family. I am the father of twins, and one of our daughters has quadriplegic cerebral palsy. She is a wheelchair user and unable to tell us when she needs the toilet; she is still in nappies at almost 13 years of age. Given her height and weight, a changing bed is essential to changing her with dignity. Prior to the roll-out of Changing Places toilets in recent years, I had the indignity of changing my child on a bench, behind a bush or on the floor of our wheelchair-accessible van; unfortunately, it occasionally still happens today. Changing Places toilets are vital to giving her some dignity.

The roll-out of Changing Places toilets and the Changing Places map facility allows families like ours to plan their days out, trips and travel arrangements, knowing where there will be a toilet. As a result of additional funding

[Daniel Francis]

from the Department for Transport, a new journey planner feature has been launched as part of the Changing Places toilet map, which allows increased functionality for planning, saving and downloading travel routes with Changing Places toilets. Both the map and the journey planner have been life-changing for many families, allowing them access to places and days out and enabling them to plan routes around availability at service stations, which has greatly increased in the last 10 years, train stations, seaside destinations or museums. They allow both my children to have the same dignity and respect as other children out there.

When I held an Adjournment debate on this subject last July, I reported that the number of registered facilities at that point was 2,609. It is positive that that number continues to grow, but that growth is slowing. Much as I support my party and my Government, that is in many respects because of the end of the previous scheme in March 2025. That is why I continue to call for a form of funding, through the reintroduction of a capital grant, to be brought forward to allow organisations, companies and charities to install new Changing Places toilets and to bring existing Changing Places toilets up to current standard. In this building, our Changing Places toilet is really not up to a modern standard. I used it a few weeks ago with my daughter—it is a back-breaker.

An expansion of capital funding for Changing Places toilets would lead to people with profound disabilities accessing more opportunities and more families and individuals contributing to our hospitality businesses, theme parks, leisure facilities and sports grounds—the list goes on.

There was, of course, a previous fund. In 2019, the then Conservative Government ran a consultation on the proposal to increase the provision of Changing Places toilets. Following that consultation, the Government announced that the provision of Changing Places toilets in new public buildings above a certain size would be compulsory, and that was brought into force on 1 January 2021. I am very grateful that the then local government Minister, the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), has joined us this afternoon. I absolutely accept that he was fundamental in getting the law changed and ensuring that the consultation was held.

In July 2021, the then Government launched a £30.5 million fund to expand the provision of Changing Places toilets. From that fund, almost 500 new facilities were installed. I know from experience that there has been a profound change in the last 10 years that has made travelling up and down the country much easier. Near where we are standing today, people can access Changing Places toilets at the National Portrait Gallery, the National Gallery, Ikea in Oxford Street or Waterloo Station, which did not have them 10 years ago.

The fund closed in March 2025. Although I acknowledge that changes to building regulations ensure that facilities continue to be installed in new buildings, I retain concerns that older buildings would greatly benefit from having a Changing Places toilet installed. For example, in April this year, one of those older buildings—St Paul's cathedral—opened a Changing Places facility, giving visitors who require specialist toilets the ability to access them.

I understand that there is now such a facility at Blackburn cathedral and that there will shortly be one at Lambeth Palace.

I go back to what I said about motorways. In November 2018, the DFT announced that it was partnering with Muscular Dystrophy UK to expand the provision of Changing Places toilets at service stations. We now have 54 Changing Places toilets at service stations across the UK. That has been a huge step forward in allowing families like mine more freedom and options when planning their journeys up and down the country.

I am calling for an official Changing Places app. Currently, people can access a map on the main Changing Places Consortium website, but an official Changing Places app with identification mapping would allow users to quickly identify where toilets are while on journeys. I have said this many times during the passage of the Railways Bill and many times in the Chamber: I believe that Great British Railways should bring forward a national transport accessibility app that shows the availability of level access, station accessibility, live travel lift information, as the TfL Go app has, and locations of Changing Places toilets.

A new form of capital funding would give businesses and local authorities the opportunity and encouragement to bring forward more Changing Places facilities. A number of hon. Friends have identified locations where they believe Changing Places toilets could be installed. For instance, my hon. Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (James Naish), who sadly cannot be with us this afternoon, has spoken to me at length about support for a national fund. In his local authority, Rushcliffe borough council, he has been looking for two years to install a Changing Places toilet facility in West Bridgford, the town centre, and is struggling to locate the funding to do so. I ask the Minister to outline what consideration the Department has given to the merits of bringing forward a new capital fund.

I turn now to the importance of maintaining Changing Places toilets. I mentioned last year that, in Bexleyheath town centre, we had to close a Changing Places toilet because of the vandalism it was receiving, with people living in it and dealing drugs in it. I will continue to call for a greater system beyond the current radar key system. Radar keys are openly available in shops and on the internet and there are too many occasions when Changing Places toilets are vandalised as a result of misuse.

I thank the Chamber engagement team for their hard work in organising a survey for the public to share their experiences of using Changing Places toilets and the impact on people's lives. I thank the more than 100 people who have taken the time to answer the survey over the last week. I wanted to read a few of the responses. One respondent said:

"My daughter is severely disabled. Our first experience of Changing Places toilets was at Center Parcs...I was amazed and overwhelmed with emotions when I saw how I could finally change my daughter comfortably and how excited she was when she realised this was made for people like her."

Another said:

"My son's opportunities to go to new places or anywhere over a certain distance is dependent on the availability of Changing Places...We work hard all week and want the same opportunities other families have to go out as a family and do interesting things. Without Changing Places we're trapped at home."

Other respondents' experiences highlighted that there is still a lack of available and well-maintained facilities across the country. One said:

"Without access to an appropriate facility, I am left with impossible choices: ending outings early, avoiding certain venues altogether, or changing my daughter on the floor of an accessible toilet, which is neither hygienic, safe nor dignified."

I have read through the responses to the survey, and there was a lot of appreciation for Changing Places toilets and the benefits they bring to the lives of severely disabled people and their families. There are also, however, a number of horror stories of people's experiences where facilities were not available or where they have not been maintained to a suitable standard. I have shared one from my constituency; I could tell of others that have been vandalised or locked. On one occasion, in Brighton city centre, a toilet was locked after 4 pm in the winter. On another occasion, a seaside town locked it from October to March—but people still visit then.

A new round of funding would ensure that Changing Places toilets are maintained and held to a good standard, that training is provided, and that new facilities are opened across the country. Every family deserves to be able to go on days out and partake in everyday activities.

I want to talk about the Scottish Government. They have a fund managed by Inspiring Scotland in partnership with PAMIS that is part of a £10 million investment in the last and current financial years into planning and installing 150 additional facilities across Scotland. I understand that the fund continues to be open for applications, which can be found on the Inspiring Scotland website. I look forward to seeing more facilities opening, benefiting the people and economy of Scotland.

I want briefly to talk about hospitals, although I know that that is not in the Minister's remit. Changing Places toilets are important for people when they are out and about, but also for people in hospital. My daughter is served by four different London hospitals. In a hospital setting, one would expect to have people with a profound disability who need to use such facilities, but there is variable information about which hospitals do and do not provide them and where they are located within those hospitals.

I submitted a written question to inquire about the number of Changing Places hospitals. Unfortunately, no assessment has been made and the Department of Health does not hold that information, so it appears that more work needs to be done on that. There is national guidance provided to the NHS on designated sanitary spaces in healthcare settings and designed facilities to meet the needs of disabled people—but without clear provision of toilets, needs are not met for people accessing hospital appointments. In 2019, it was estimated that the average cost of installing a Changing Places toilet in a hospital was between £25,000 and £35,000. I ask that the Minister continue conversations across Government so that we can look at installation in hospitals.

I would like to ask the Minister to respond to five points. Will the Government look at introducing a new capital fund for older and smaller venues? Regulations that require a new stadium or shopping centre over a certain size to have a Changing Places toilet have been brought in. I am looking long and hard at finding a facility for a Changing Places toilet in Crayford, the secondary town in my constituency. The second largest Sainsbury's in the country is in Crayford, so I am trying

to work with Sainsbury's to provide one there. In many town centres, hon. Members may be able to find a venue, but they cannot always find the funding.

Will the Minister work with the Changing Places consortium to upgrade facilities of the older standard, such as the one in the Members' Lobby, to the current one? Will she commit to working with other Government Departments not only for hospitals, but for railway stations? The nationalisation of the railways presents us with a real opportunity to look at our larger railway stations. As we now have a Changing Places toilet at London Waterloo, I hope we will get one at London Charing Cross very soon. There are opportunities there for people's travel options.

How are we monitoring larger planning applications under the regulations passed by the previous Government to ensure that the facilities are correctly installed and maintained? Will the Government continue to work with the Changing Places consortium on more modern software, so that we can have an app and make it easier for people to plan their journeys and identify where Changing Places toilets are located? I look forward to hearing colleagues' contributions and the Minister's comments on those points.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): Colleagues may be aware that our next speaker is recovering from an operation. I am content for the right hon. Member to deliver his speech from a sedentary position, if he would like to do so.

3.27 pm

Rishi Sunak (Richmond and Northallerton) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I will do my best to keep standing—if nothing else, it will make me speak for a lot less time than I might otherwise, which will be a relief to everyone. I both congratulate the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) and thank him for securing this important debate. He speaks from personal experience, and he spoke very movingly and powerfully about the situation we are discussing today. I am grateful to him for giving us the opportunity to discuss this important topic.

Politics is often about addressing the great matters of state. We often talk about war and peace in this House. However, politics is also about making people's everyday lives that little bit easier. One of the things all MPs discover is that we learn a lot from our constituents—certainly if those constituents are from Yorkshire, as the Chairman will appreciate. I was profoundly moved after a meeting I had with a group of my constituents in 2017. I had called in at the Dales School in Morton-on-Swale near Northallerton, and a group of parents of the most severely disabled children at the school wanted to talk to me. They told me about the difficulties they faced as families when they went out, and explained how a lack of suitable toilets and changing facilities meant that visiting the majority of leisure attractions and destinations across the country on a day out, which most families would take for granted, was nigh-on impossible for them.

I vividly remember one mum putting in front of me a magazine with all the events and attractions happening across the region in the summer holidays. She had gone

[Rishi Sunak]

through them and crossed out 99% because they did not have the facilities that her child required. As a parent myself, I looked at that list, saw all the places she had crossed out and realised that those were the very places I had taken my two young daughters to, to help them fall in love with Yorkshire after we first moved there. I reflected on the huge unfairness of that situation and how it compounded the difficulties that that family and many others faced—difficulties that most of us will never encounter—and how most of those places were just off limits for them. As I sat there, I felt that the situation was just not right.

Another parent, Andrew, spoke—similarly to the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford—of the physical difficulty and the indignity of having on occasion to change his 10-year-old daughter Aniela on rough ground behind a shed or on the dirty floor of a public bathroom, because those were the only places available to them in the circumstances. I admit that, going into my meeting with those parents, I had complacently assumed that we had largely resolved the issue of access to and provision of disabled toilets in this country. I had not realised, until I met and listened to them, that for young children or adults who require the help of a carer to use a toilet, a disabled toilet is not sufficient. They need a Changing Places facility with a bench, a hoist and a privacy screen.

After that meeting, I vowed to those parents that I would do whatever I could to raise and highlight the issue, which I began to do as a Back-Bench MP in Parliament. Fortuitously, a year later, I was lucky to be appointed Minister for Local Government. In that role, I was inspired by my predecessor as Member of Parliament for Richmond (Yorks), William Hague. As Minister for disabled people, which was one of his first ministerial jobs, he was instrumental in bringing into law, under John Major's Government, the Disability Discrimination Act 1995. That legislation enshrined in law the principle that institutions must make reasonable adjustments to ensure equality of opportunity for disabled people.

Twenty years after the introduction of the 1995 Act, I felt that we needed to renew that spirit to address the issue of Changing Places. As a junior Minister, I therefore set about changing building regulations to make it mandatory to install Changing Places facilities in new large public buildings such as shopping centres, cinemas and theme parks.

At about that time, I happened to meet Zack Kerr, a young campaigner with cerebral palsy—I am sure the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford knows him well. Zack told me then:

“Life can be difficult enough in many ways, but when there are no accessible toilet facilities where I can be hoisted safely from my wheelchair and changed in privacy and with dignity, I face the choice between staying at home or restricting my social life because of my needs...that's just not fair.”

Zack rightly also pointed out the need for Changing Places facilities at motorway service stations, so that families could travel freely across the country. I am glad that, when the Conservatives were in Government, we made £4 million available not just to install Changing Places at motorway service stations, but to make a better start on installing them in NHS hospitals.

In 2020—fortuitously or not, depending on your point of view—I then became Chancellor of the Exchequer. In my first Budget, I launched the £30 million Changing Places fund, which match funded the cost of installing the toilets in existing buildings, where the need is, as we have heard, significant. I am delighted that over the subsequent years, the fund has made possible almost 500 different Changing Places facilities across the nation, including in Leyburn and at the Dales Countryside Museum in Hawes in my constituency.

As we have heard, more than 2,500 Changing Places are now installed across the country. We should take a moment to reflect that that is three times as many as there were a decade or so ago, when I first became aware of the issue. Now landmark attractions such as Alton Towers, Madame Tussauds and the Tower of London, as well as most Premier League stadiums and cinemas and shopping centres right across the country, all have that vital facility in place. Of course, the job is not done. We need more Changing Places facilities; almost a quarter of a million people rely on them.

We have made real progress, and it is worth taking a moment to thank the people who deserve praise for that. The consortium, as we have heard, is now run by PAMIS and the Centre for Accessible Environments, but previously, when I was in post, it was run by Mencap and Muscular Dystrophy UK, supported by many others. They deserve enormous credit for their co-ordination and campaigning on this issue. So do the tireless campaigners up and down the country—families with severely disabled children and other family members, like dad Andrew Newton and his daughter Aniela, who came to see me all those years ago.

Certainly for my part, as I reflect on my political career, it will remain one of my proudest achievements to have played a small part in supporting all their efforts. Every time a parent gets in touch to say they have been able to enjoy a family day out that most of us take for granted, I feel a real sense of pride. We all know there is much wrong with our politics, but this issue shows the value of our constituency system: communities are able to raise issues directly with their elected representatives and see them turned into action. It also shows the benefit of working across party lines over years to make changes, and to make people's lives that bit easier.

I associate myself with the powerful speech by the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford. I know the Minister will have listened hard to what he said about the need for capital funding for existing buildings, and I am sure she will do what she can to make colleagues in Government aware of that issue, and to make representations to them. I know she will do that because all of us here are deeply committed to ensuring that these families can enjoy more opportunities and the better quality of life that they deserve, and most importantly, have the chance to live with dignity.

3.37 pm

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) for securing the debate and for all his work in championing the rights of disabled people. He is tireless in what he does. I also put on record that Changing Places toilets

were first introduced in Nottingham, where my constituency of Broxtowe is. I am proud that Nottinghamshire carries that legacy of innovation.

In previous roles, I have been a champion for disabled people, and many people have spoken to me about the need for Changing Places toilets. Many people with profound, multiple and severe disabilities and neurological conditions have complex needs, and a standard accessible toilet is insufficient. Many require a Changing Places facility equipped with a hoist, an adult-sized changing bench and adequate space for carers to provide sufficient support safely and with dignity.

Without those facilities, everyday activities that many of us take for granted become impossible—a family day out, a trip to the high street, visiting a museum, going shopping or meeting friends. Many of us take those things for granted, but those ordinary experiences are denied to too many people because they do not feel confident that their needs will be met once they leave home.

According to the Office for National Statistics, there are 10,000 disabled people in my constituency of Broxtowe who require a Changing Places facility, but there are only two such facilities there, meaning that people in Eastwood, Awsworth, Stapleford and Beeston do not have access to suitable provision. Only one of those facilities is modern enough and regularly open.

Disability rights charities and organisations across the country talk about disabled people and their carers restricting their journeys or avoiding going out altogether because they cannot find suitable toilet facilities or be certain that facilities will be open and accessible. Isolation, loneliness and poor mental health are often attributed to low social interaction, which can lead to anxiety and depression—that is what such facilities being missing can mean for disabled people. Parents of disabled children frequently report to me avoiding going out on outings altogether, not because they want their children to be excluded but because they cannot be certain that they will find a changing facility.

As a result, people become isolated from their communities and excluded from socialising. No child should be excluded from public spaces because there is nowhere suitable for them to change when necessary; no parent should have to choose between taking their child out and preserving their dignity; and no adult should be prevented from participating in social activities because the basic infrastructure that they require is absent.

The last Government rightly addressed some of this by making changes to building regulations that will increase Changing Places provision in new, large non-dwelling buildings. That is a welcome step and will improve access over the long term. However, disabled people cannot wait for a future development to solve today's problems. Capital funding is needed now. The reality is that there are still large gaps in provision across the country, particularly in our transport corridors, town centres, tourist destinations and rural communities.

I urge the Government to look at how Changing Places provision can be embedded with current and future urban planning and within the Government's high street strategy, with capital funding attributed to it. Accessible toilet facilities should form part of any strategy to create genuinely accessible high streets, ensuring that disabled people can confidently visit their towns, cities

and public attractions without fear of being left without appropriate facilities. Capital investment in Changing Places toilets is not simply an investment in buildings or facilities themselves; it is an investment in an inclusive society where disabled people can enjoy the same opportunities, freedoms and quality of life as anyone else.

3.41 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) for introducing a topic that, as he said and as we all know, touches the very core of human dignity, equality and basic compassion. It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell) as well; I thank her for her contribution.

It was also a pleasure to hear the story told by the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) of how he was approached by his constituents and how, as he rose up the ministerial ladder, he used his position to ensure that the very things that his constituents had asked for were delivered. I wish to put on record my thanks to him for using his position for his constituents and all our people, because ultimately, we all benefit from that £50 million to which he referred.

It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in her place. I am not sure what is going on, but whenever she turns up, I seem to turn up as well. Westminster Hall has been well used this week on numerous occasions by both of us, and by many others as well. However, we seem to be featuring in similar debates.

When it comes to the welfare of vulnerable people, I will knock on any door and speak in any Chamber to ensure that they are not forgotten. That is why today is so important. I secured a debate just a few weeks ago about stoma care facilities and public toilets, but today we are talking about something slightly different: Changing Places toilets. We are not talking about standard disabled toilets; we are talking about life-changing essential facilities that provide an adult-sized, height-adjustable changing bench, a tracking hoist system, a centrally placed toilet and room for two carers—the physical room for them to be able to help.

Without those facilities, thousands of our fellow citizens cannot leave their homes for more than a couple of hours without facing the horrific, unsanitary and utterly degrading reality of being changed on a dirty public toilet floor. I would not like that, which is why I am here to speak up. I thank the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford for his moving contribution and his personal story. We all agree that personal stories carry weight. Today, he shared his with us all, and I thank him for doing so.

The Government previously announced magnificent capital funding pots for Changing Places toilets across England. But as the Member for Strangford, I will tell the story from Northern Ireland—it is not a great story but a disappointing one; maybe not for my constituency but certainly across Northern Ireland—to ensure that capital funding reaches the places that are falling desperately behind.

An estimated 7,000 people across our province rely entirely on Changing Places facilities to live a normal life, yet the figures show that Northern Ireland has historically been one of the worst-performing regions in the entire United Kingdom for provision, with a shocking

[Jim Shannon]

lack of options outside major city hubs. Campaign groups have highlighted that four out of five hospitals in Northern Ireland—it almost makes me cringe to say this—still have no registered Changing Places facilities, leaving vulnerable patients, staff and visitors completely stranded in the very places that are meant to care for them, which leaves me incredulous. I followed up with the Northern Ireland Minister in relation to the stoma debate, and I will do the same now to reinforce the need for change.

I am very fortunate that my constituency of Strangford and the borough of Ards and North Down have been able to record the data: out of nearly 40 publicly available toilets across the borough, only about a dozen are standard accessible toilets. When looking for true, fully compliant and registered Changing Places toilets, the list shrinks even further. I commend—and I mean this, because I know that it has been doing many things—Ards and North Down borough council. I had the distinct honour of serving on it for some 26 years, and it has shown real leadership: it was the first council in Northern Ireland to ensure that all council accessible toilets were stoma-friendly. That is the good news story I shared in the stoma debate in this place about four weeks ago.

The council has successfully put standard Changing Places facilities into key hubs like the Bangor Aurora Aquatic and Leisure Complex, the Comber Leisure Centre and the magnificent Ards Blair Mayne Wellbeing and Leisure Complex. My council has moved mountains to make sure that those things happened, but local councils cannot carry the weight alone on strained ratepayers' money.

If a family want to enjoy the beautiful shores of the Ards peninsula where I live, or visit Ballyhalbert, Portavogie or Cloughey, the facilities simply do not exist. Those places are nearly off-limits for those who, as the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford said, want to take their family out, even if it is only two hours down the road and back again. Families are forced to cut their days short and rush back to Newtownards or Bangor just so a loved one can use a bathroom in a dignified manner—we are talking about dignity here—which is a crying shame in this day and age.

While Northern Ireland has introduced legislative changes to building regulations in recent years to mandate these toilets in any new major public buildings such as shopping centres—the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford referred to that—the Department of Health and local authorities back home are facing severe financial constraints and have explicitly stated that they lack the central capital budget to retrofit existing hospitals, transport hubs and some town centres.

I am ever-mindful of the Minister's responsibilities and that she always tries to give helpful answers to our questions, but will she take up this cause with the Chancellor and the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that regional capital funding formulas allow for dedicated, ringfenced resources to expand their Changing Places network? The right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton can tell me whether I am right or wrong, but I presume that the £50 million earmarked for the project had Barnett consequentials.

Rishi Sunak *indicated assent.*

Jim Shannon: So we got some, but we need that to be ringfenced. Minister, if moneys are coming through Barnett consequentials, let us ensure that they are used for those purposes. We need central capital funding that can be accessed by local councils like Ards and North Down borough council to retrofit our coastal towns, tourist hotspots and community centres; I believe that many are ready.

A civilised society is always judged by how it treats the most vulnerable. This is not a political issue—we all know that—it is about personal dignity, equality and what is right. It is about independence, inclusion and the basic right to go out for a cup of tea or a walk by the sea without losing your dignity. I urge the Minister to work hand in hand with the devolved Administration to ensure that capital funding flows to where it is needed the most, so that no child or adult in Northern Ireland is ever forced to use a public toilet floor again.

3.50 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Sir Alec. I congratulate the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) on securing this very important debate, and I thank him for sharing his personal story. Lived experience is always most moving and powerful, but it is often difficult to share, because so many emotions come with it. No parent, and indeed no child, should be faced with the indignity of changing a loved one on the floor of a toilet or behind a shed. I feel very much for him and his experience. This problem is not something that has been resolved everywhere. It continues, which is why we are debating it.

The issue before us is simple: if a person cannot safely use the toilet when they are away from home, they do not have equal access to public life. For most people, planning a day out means deciding where to go and how to get there. For many disabled people and their families, it means checking whether the journey is accessible, whether the venue can accommodate them and, crucially, whether there will be a toilet they can use. Too often, the answer to the last question is no. That means cutting a day out short, turning down an invitation, avoiding a long journey or simply staying at home. No one should be excluded from everyday life because the facilities they need have not been adequately provided.

As we have heard, Changing Places toilets are not the same as standard accessible toilets. They include an adult-sized changing bench, a ceiling track hoist and enough space for carers to provide support safely. Without those facilities, some disabled people are left with completely unacceptable choices. They may have to be changed on a toilet floor. Their families or carers may have to attempt unsafe lifting. Some people restrict what they eat or drink before going out, because they are worried that there will be nowhere suitable for them to use. That is undignified, unsafe and entirely avoidable.

As legislators, we often talk in this place about inclusion, independence and equal access, but those principles must mean something in practice—they must not be just talk. A building is not truly accessible if a disabled person can enter it but cannot safely use the toilet while they are there. There has been progress. There are now 2,665 registered Changing Places toilets across the United Kingdom, compared with around 140 in 2007—that is good. The previous Government's £30 million Changing

Places toilets fund supported the installation of nearly 500 new facilities across England, but the fund is no longer active. That funding made a genuine difference and shows what can be achieved when the Government provide the right support. The fund was closed in March 2025, but the job is not finished. There are still too many town centres, transport hubs, parks, hospitals, tourist attractions and community venues without a Changing Places toilet.

Provision is also very uneven. There might be a Changing Places toilet within a local authority area, but that does not mean it is in the right place, open at the right time or easily accessible to the people who need it. The changes to building regulations are welcome, but they are not enough on their own. They mainly help when new buildings are constructed or when major developments take place; they do little to address the large number of existing public buildings and venues that disabled people use every day. We cannot wait decades for those gaps to be filled gradually during redevelopment.

Cost is often the main barrier. Installing a Changing Places toilet can cost tens of thousands of pounds, which may be a relatively small part of the overall budget for a major development, but it can be impossible for a charity, community venue, small visitor attraction or local council to afford without additional support. Local authorities are already under severe financial pressure, as we all know, due to the growing cost of social care, temporary accommodation and special educational needs provision. Councils may want to improve accessibility, but without dedicated capital funding, projects are delayed or even abandoned.

That is why the Liberal Democrats are calling on the Government to review the long-term capital funding available for Changing Places toilets. We need a proper assessment of where the gaps are, and the Government should work with disabled people, families, carers, local authorities and the Changing Places consortium to identify the areas and venues where provision is most urgently needed. That assessment should lead to a properly funded, long-term programme.

Local authorities and community organisations should not have to rely on occasional short-term pots of money, and they should not have to compete against one another for limited funding. Changing Places toilets should also be included from the beginning in major transport projects, town centre regeneration schemes and investment in public buildings. It is far easier and less expensive to design these facilities into a project than it is to add them afterwards. Funding and guidance must take account of maintenance, signage, staffing and opening hours.

I would therefore like to ask the Minister three questions. First, does she accept that changes to building regulations alone will not deliver the number of Changing Places toilets that disabled people and their families need? Secondly, will the Government carry out a national assessment of gaps in provision, working directly with disabled people and the organisations that represent them? Thirdly, will the Government establish a successor to the previous capital fund, with long-term and predictable funding for local authorities and community organisations?

Changing Places toilets are essential infrastructure. We would not describe an accessible entrance, ramp or lift as an optional extra, so we should not treat appropriate toilet facilities differently. Everyone should be able to go

shopping, travel, attend an appointment, visit a park or attraction and have a good time with their family without having to worry about whether their most basic needs can be met. The previous funding programme showed that progress is possible, and the Government must now build on that work. I hope the Minister is listening to the cross-party consensus on this issue.

3.56 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I start by thanking the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) for securing this important debate, and for sharing his family's experience. I recognise the vital work of the Changing Places consortium, established in 2005, in continuing to ensure that the issue is raised in this place, the Chamber, town halls and across Whitehall. I also pay tribute to the former Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak), who began so much of the work on this topic when he served as a Minister in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

We have heard from Members today how vital Changing Places toilets are in our cities, towns and villages for those in need of their larger and more accessible facilities. The debate has featured powerful testimonies from constituents on how their lives are impacted every day by the inaccessibility of many public toilets, and how this affects them both physically and mentally. I would like to add one more example from my Chester South and Eddisbury constituency.

Although it has already been mentioned, it is worth reinforcing how vital Changing Places facilities are for older disabled children and adults. My constituents Radhika and Shyam told me that a standard accessible toilet simply does not meet the needs of their son, Idnaat. Without appropriate facilities, as we have heard, families can face the undignified and distressing choice of changing a loved one on a toilet floor, or having to cut short a day out. No family should ever have to make that choice.

That is why I also want to recognise the work of Chester zoo. Radhika and Shyam told me what a difference the zoo's Changing Places toilet has made to their family. It meant that Idnaat could be changed safely and with dignity, allowing them to enjoy a day out together like any other family. That is exactly the sort of forward-thinking approach we should be encouraging. Accessible public toilets are not a luxury or convenience; they are an essential part of ensuring that everyone, regardless of age or disability, can participate in life with dignity. I am therefore delighted that Chester zoo is looking at increasing the number of Changing Places toilets on site.

Changing Places toilets provide an indispensable private space for people with profound and multiple learning disabilities, as well as people with other physical disabilities such as spinal injuries, muscular dystrophy and multiple sclerosis. They include essential equipment that can make daily life that bit easier for an estimated 250,000 people. Changing Places toilet users have found it invaluable to have this equipment, which includes height-adjustable, adult-sized changing benches; ceiling track hoists; a peninsular WC with room either side; a safe and clean

[Aphra Brandreth]

environment, including tear-off paper to cover the bench; a large waste bin; a non-slip floor; and space for multiple carers. That is crucial because, for too many people, more typical public toilet spaces are not just inconvenient but not fit for purpose, rendering the space effectively unusable. As we know, many disabilities may not be visible, which can lead to an unfortunate and exasperating ignorance of the issues facing people in need of Changing Places toilets.

The toilets allow those with needs that make a regular lavatory inaccessible to find the privacy, dignity, liberty and safety required. That has long been keenly recognised on this side of the House. That is why I was proud to see the previous Conservative Government make Changing Places toilets compulsory in new public buildings. That change, made in 2020, has allowed more people to have greater access to public places by providing the essential facilities to make such everyday trips viable.

It is also why I was proud to see the previous Conservative Government launch the Changing Places toilets fund, which was worth £30.5 million. The fund enabled local authorities to increase the number of Changing Places toilets in England, meaning that there are now around 2,665 registered active Changing Places toilets across the country. That is up from just 140 in 2007.

Thanks to local campaigners and the previous Conservative Government, as we heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond and Northallerton, we as a nation have gone up from just one Changing Places toilet per 1,786 users to one per 94 users. That is a remarkable steer down the road to equality, and it is vital that the Government continue driving progress in the right direction.

The 2019 consultation showed that the vast majority of the individuals and organisations that responded believed that an increase in the number of Changing Places toilets would give individuals with multiple or complex disabilities, as well as their carers and families, greater ability to leave home and visit different places. They believed it would remove the risk of unsafe lifting by carers, offer a dignified space for users and be more suitable than simple wheelchair-accessible unisex toilets.

The £30.5 million provided to local authorities by the Conservative Government was divided into two funding rounds: an initial round of £23.5 million allocated to 191 English local authorities, followed by the remaining £7 million, which was spread to 64 local authorities. After the fund closed, the current Labour Government were petitioned on this matter in December last year. They concluded that local authorities are best placed to assess and manage toilet provision. As Members will know, local authorities have valuable local knowledge of where to provide essential services in their area, which highlights why the previous Conservative Government's Changing Places toilets fund was allocated to local leaders to decide how and where best to spend the vital funds for these life-changing spaces.

Will the Minister set out how the Government's current view appears to be a U-turn from their policy in opposition? During the passage of the Levelling-up and Regeneration Act 2022, the then shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley

(Alex Norris), proposed an amendment for a review of public conveniences that, as the Conservative Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State noted,

"would require the appointment of a commissioner to consider the level of need for conveniences".—[*Official Report, Levelling-up and Regeneration Public Bill Committee*, 20 October 2022; c. 876.]

The former Government felt that such a change would risk increasing bureaucracy while decreasing the importance of local decision making. It was felt that it would be disproportionate for the Government of the day to legislate on such a fundamentally local issue, as many local authorities already operate local community toilet schemes. Is it now the Government's policy for such a commissioner to be appointed to review public conveniences, or do they agree that the best placed authorities are local authorities?

I hope the Minister will address that and confirm what plans the Government have for any future support for Changing Places toilets now that the funding I mentioned has concluded. That is essential for those watching the Government and waiting for answers. It is essential for those who must live every day with disabilities—some of which are debilitating, incapacitating and severe—hoping to have the necessary basic facilities to change leaving the house from being something daunting into something routine.

4.4 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Nesil Caliskan): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. This is the second or third time we have been in the same debate this week, so Members are in competition with me. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis) for securing this important debate and for his ongoing efforts to speak up for issues that matter not only to him but to so many of our constituents across the country. He has been a committed advocate for Changing Places toilets and so many issues that others find difficult to talk about. He is the voice of many constituents around the country.

I welcome the opportunity to respond on behalf of the Government to this important debate, which comes on the back of another important debate about public toilets for people with stomas, which some Members in this debate took part in. I thank all Members, including the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), for their contributions and their thoughtful, emotional and challenging speeches. Often these are the sorts of debates that have a real impact on policy change.

As Members have pointed out, for many people the availability of an accessible public toilet that is clean and safe can be the deciding factor in whether they feel able to visit a town centre, a high street, a local attraction, their park, or just something they want to do that weekend. Such facilities support dignity and independence for people with disabilities and accessibility needs. There is also an impact on the families that support those with a disability.

However, for some individuals with profound and multiple disabilities, or other conditions that severely limit mobility, standard accessible toilets might not provide the support they need. Such toilets might lack

essential features such as adult-sized changing benches, hoists and enough space for a disabled person and one or more carers. As hon. Members have highlighted, that is exactly why Changing Places toilets are so important. They provide the space, equipment and dignity that standard provision simply cannot provide. I know that from my own experience as a Member of Parliament who has visited a lot of special educational needs provision and spoken to many parents about their own lived experience and the need for the gap to be fixed.

The Government want people to be able to live well, work, enjoy days out, shop and socialise, and we recognise that access to appropriate public facilities can be an important part of enabling that. Reasonable adjustments, as has already been mentioned, are instrumental to changing lives and allowing everybody to live fulfilled lives.

As hon. Members have acknowledged, in recognition of the importance of the issue, the Government delivered over £30 million for the Changing Places toilets programme, and I am delighted that the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) joined the debate. The programme has supported the targeted installation of well over 400 new disabled toilet facilities in areas where they were most needed across England. Although that programme closed last year, changes were made in January 2021 to the statutory guidance accompanying building regulations.

Wera Hobhouse: The Minister just acknowledged that the fund was closed, although I am not sure whether all the money was spent. We all agree that the fund provided and delivered a very important human dignity facility, as we have all talked about. Can she please explain why a fund that provided for human dignity was cut?

Nesil Caliskan: I thank the hon. Member for her passionate advocacy. Since the fund was allocated, we have had a significant spending review through which moneys were allocated to local government. I will make the case for why decisions around spending are best made locally, but that does not mean I do not recognise the important cases that have been made. I also recognise that the moneys that had been allocated to Changing Places toilets delivered change on the ground with facilities across the country.

I also absolutely accept the important point that my hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford made about the speed at which additional facilities are being provided. There has clearly been a reduction in the speed of provision across the country—I am not in the business of rejecting the evidence in front of us—but the Government's important spending review included a record spending settlement for local government, and spending decisions should be taken locally.

The 2021 regulations were significant. I remember them well; as a council leader, I followed building regulation changes, which have an impact on local government budgets. As a result of the 2021 regulations, all building works must meet the functional requirements of the 2010 building regulations, including part M, which addresses accessibility. In addition, at the 2025 spending review the Government committed more than £5 billion in new grant funding over three years for essential local services, including public toilets.

We continue to provide 100% mandatory business rates relief for separately accessible toilets. I accept that that is a slightly different conversation, but I want to give a sense of the Government's broader commitment to ensuring that there are accessible toilets for everybody in our communities. Taken together, those measures are intended to increase the availability of these vital facilities over time and ensure that accessibility is treated as a mainstream consideration as we plan and build our public spaces.

I hear and accept the powerful cases that hon. Members have made. I acknowledge the calls for a new capital fund pot for Changing Places but, as Members will appreciate, it is a little beyond my ability to make a spending commitment, although I am reminded that Ministers in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government have gone on to hold offices that have the power to make such commitments. Members will take the point that I am making.

The Government believe that local authorities are best placed to understand where facilities need to be, so our approach to funding them is important. We encourage them to allocate the funding necessary to deliver public toilet provision. Decisions are best made locally.

Wera Hobhouse: I understand the money argument, but will the Minister acknowledge that local authorities are stuck when it comes to providing mandatory services? They have to provide children's and adult social care, but public toilets are optional. That is the dilemma. Local authorities cannot make that money available, as we have discussed.

Nesil Caliskan: I thank the hon. Lady for making that point. My hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford and I have spent a long time in local government, so we know all too well that statutory services are under huge pressure and that choices have to be made. I accept the argument that if funding is not ringfenced, things sometimes do not get done. However, this Government are committed to funding local authorities well, and we have done that through the spending review.

We are also committed to saying to local authorities, "You are best placed to make decisions for your area and assess what is needed. We will support you and encourage you to make the right decisions." It is a balancing act, but debates like this give us an opportunity to reinforce the important message from Government that access to facilities and public toilets for all who need them is a crucial part of what local government should be doing.

Daniel Francis: As the Minister said, we were friends for many years in London local government prior to being elected to this place. I want to make two points. First, there is the issue of the Changing Places that have been provided in recent years and the amount of information out there about them. In the last week, I have written to a number of providers about cases where the money was provided or the facilities were set up under the new regulations, yet nobody has advertised that they exist, or they have not been made available. Would the Minister commit to working with me to write to local authorities to remind them to get that information out there?

[Daniel Francis]

Secondly, on cross working, as I said earlier, that needs to be provided not just by local government but by the Department of Health and Social Care and the Department for Transport as well. I very much hope the Minister is in the same position next week, working to secure a meeting for me to see how we can continue that spend across Departments.

Nesil Caliskan: My hon. Friend is right to highlight the important point he made earlier. I was coming on to say that of course I absolutely welcome a dialogue with him, but also with the consortium that has been referenced in the debate, which does such good work already. I am happy to meet with the consortium myself, but I am also confident that MHCLG and all current or future Ministers would welcome that engagement and dialogue. My hon. Friend is right that these sorts of facilities are successfully delivered only if there is a cross-governmental commitment.

Regulation and funding are part of that challenge, but we also need a joint recognition of the challenges in our communities to be able to see things delivered. The consortium is clearly playing a valuable role in articulating those challenges. It is absolutely right that MHCLG has that engagement and I am confident that it will go forward. I am happy to discuss with my hon. Friend any letters, correspondence or meetings that we need to have as a Department in the coming weeks and months to make sure that we can continue to make the case for these facilities.

Let me address the point about specific Government Departments and the opportunities that we face now because of Government initiatives and changes, which we do not want to lose, so that we can improve facilities for those who have needs. I was shocked to hear that so many NHS hospitals do not have the provision that we are talking about. That is not acceptable, and I think that all our constituents would be surprised to hear that. I am very happy to take that away and speak to colleagues in other Departments; I think they, too, will be surprised. It is a good example of where we need cross-governmental working, and I welcome the input from Members on how we might be able to do that.

I recognise the important points made about transport. The Government's commitment to accessible transport is demonstrated in the spending that we have committed to the railways. Because of that, there is an opportunity to make sure they are accessible, and our transport hubs will play a key part in that. I will take those two specific points away.

I recognise the point that my hon. Friend made on modernising software and maps. A needs map, if you will, feels like quite an obvious thing that we could do, which would really make a difference to constituents across the country who simply do not know if there is a facility. An ability to map out the gaps could also give the necessary encouragement to Government and local authorities to allocate the moneys that are required to set up facilities.

I recognise the strength of feeling across the House in this very important debate on ensuring that public spaces are accessible, inclusive and supportive of people's dignity and independence. I pay tribute to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford.

The very best of politics are people who just get things done. I saw that for many years in local government, when he got things done, and he gets things done as a Member of Parliament too, but nobody who knows him will say that he is a soft touch in any way. He is formidable and effective. He is my hon. Friend, but he will tell me if we are doing something wrong as a Government, as he has.

Rishi Sunak: I add my thanks and congratulations to the hon. Member for Bexleyheath and Crayford (Daniel Francis). Before the Minister wraps up, I thank her for a very considered, informed and thoughtful response to the debate. Whatever happens next week, I very much hope that she is in a position to continue being a champion of this cause in Government, because I think she would do it very well.

Nesil Caliskan: That is very generous of the right hon. Member. I again thank all Members for their contributions and provide my reassurance that MHCLG will be committed to doing everything it can to meet the challenges that our constituents face.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): To put the fear of God into the Minister, I call Daniel Francis to wind up.

4.20 pm

Daniel Francis: As the Minister knows, I will hold her to account on this issue and continue to pursue it. I thank her very much for the commitments that she has given today that we can continue to pursue. I thank the hon. Members for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell) and the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) for their contributions and for outlining family experiences that I know only too well. This is an issue that I knew very little about 10 years ago; but when you start on that path as the parent of a disabled child, you find out these things.

I became a campaigner on this cause during my time in local government and will continue to campaign all the time that I am in this House. We are very thankful in this country for the progress that we have made on this matter; we need to remember that there are more Changing Places toilets in this country than in the whole of the European Union. If people travel abroad, the real progress that we have made is apparent. Certainly, in some of our neighbouring countries, it is possible to count on one hand how many Changing Places there are in the entire country. We have made great progress, but there is still more to be done.

I thank the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton for paying tribute to Zack Kerr. I know that he continues to lobby my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith), in whose constituency he lives, on this matter. He and I have written to each other on this issue, and I know about his great involvement in the campaign on motorway service stations and the great credit that he rightly should be taking for that. I again thank all Members for their contributions today.

There is that piece of work to do. The Changing Places Consortium has a map, and it is looking at how we roll that out. However, there are also gaps in provision,

particularly for those in more rural constituencies. If my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Sarah Russell) had been here today, she would have spoken about the real gaps in her rural constituency.

There is also the issue of how we bring that information together; in terms of accessibility today, much more so than 10 years ago, we can do that. I will push for us to sit down and look at how we bring Government Departments together. I will also go back to local government across the country and make sure that it is doing all it can, not only to provide new facilities, but to advertise those that it already has.

Sir Alec Shelbrooke (in the Chair): I will take this opportunity to wish all hon. and right hon. Members, along with departmental staff, Doorkeepers, Clerks and Hansard Reporters, a very pleasant recess.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered capital funding for Changing Places toilets.

4.23 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 16 July 2026

BUSINESS AND TRADE

British Steel

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Chris McDonald): I wish to make a statement on British Steel.

The public interest test

The Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Act 2026 grants powers to allow the Secretary of State to bring a steel company into public ownership where it is necessary in the public interest. Ministers must carefully consider the public interest test and the likely costs prior to exercising the powers. In the case of British Steel Ltd, it has important capability in the production of several essential steel products, which are integral to the construction and maintenance of our critical national infrastructure.

Given the financial challenges that the company is facing and has faced for some time, the Government's assessment is that, without taking it into public ownership, where a plan could be developed for a sustainable future, there is a significant risk that it would fail and this capability would be lost. Such an outcome would directly disrupt the national rail network and increase supply chain risk for industry, including major infrastructure projects. It would reduce UK steelmaking capacity to around half of the requirements anticipated by 2035, leaving the UK vulnerable to volatility in international markets and international supply chains. All of these outcomes would be significant and difficult to reverse.

The Government's assessment, based on the relevant factors, including cost considerations, is that it is necessary in the public interest to nationalise British Steel Ltd. We have not taken this decision lightly but we consider that it is the only viable route forward in these circumstances.

Nationalisation

The Government have nationalised British Steel Ltd. Its transfer to public ownership took place this morning, using powers granted by the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Act 2026.

Steel underpins the growth-driving sectors of the Government's industrial strategy, and British Steel is among the largest steel producers in the UK. The decisive action taken today secures its immediate future, secures steelmaking in support of our steel strategy, and supports the jobs and steelmaking communities that have underpinned the business for decades.

Nationalisation brings to an end the temporary special measures that were applied under the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025, which secured the continued operations of Scunthorpe's blast furnaces. The Government would like to place on record our appreciation for the continued dedication and professionalism of the company's workers and management throughout this period of uncertainty.

Nationalisation brings stability to the firm and its workforce, and allows it to look forward, making steel in the national interest, owned by the people of this country. All business, jobs, customers and suppliers continue as normal through the transfer into public ownership.

Company governance

British Steel is now a Government-owned company and public non-financial corporation, with the Secretary of State as its sole shareholder. The Government are putting in place a new board of directors who will bring extensive commercial and industrial expertise to support the company and management in stabilising operations and moving the firm on from its current poor commercial position. The board will prioritise the health and safety of the firm's workforce. The board will be set clear objectives by Ministers, and will include representatives from UK Government Investments and the Department for Business and Trade to support the Government's shareholder interests.

The board will be responsible for developing a plan to transform British Steel into a commercially and environmentally sustainable steelmaking enterprise, and for exploring possible options for private sector investment. The board will also be tasked with ensuring that the voice of workers is at the heart of the company, working with management, employees and trade unions, including worker representation on the board.

Compensation

The Government recognise that this is a significant intervention. The Government have and will always respect and adhere to our legal obligations under domestic and international law.

The former owner of British Steel Ltd was Jingye Group. The Government held commercial negotiations with the group over the potential acquisition by Government of British Steel, but unfortunately it was not possible to reach an agreement that represented value to the taxpayer. The Government's view is that the commercial value today of the business, given its history of loss making and its current poor financial position, is nil.

Following nationalisation, the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Act 2026 requires the Government to introduce a compensation scheme through regulations. These will be laid and debated by Parliament in the autumn. The regulations will provide for the appointment of an independent third-party valuer, who will assess what compensation, if any, is owed to the company. We will abide by the final outcome of this process and pay any compensation accordingly.

The compensation scheme regulations will include a right to appeal the determinations of the independent valuer to the upper tribunal. We expect that the independent valuer will invite submissions from the affected parties. The Government will publish the final determinations of the independent valuer and lay those before Parliament.

Throughout the negotiations mentioned above, the Government have engaged in good faith.

Financial assistance

The Government understand the interest from parliamentarians in the public funding offered to British Steel and the plan for its future.

All financial assistance offered to British Steel under the provisions in the Steel Industry (Nationalisation) Act 2026 will be reported in the ordinary way. In addition, the

Government will publish on a quarterly basis for at least one year, written ministerial statements to give contemporary information on financial assistance offered. These will replace the written ministerial statements offered pursuant to the Steel Industry (Special Measures) Act 2025, since the special measures applied under that Act have now been superseded by nationalisation.

The Government anticipate that the relevant committees in Parliament will take an interest in the company's annual report and strategic plans, and will be pleased to support its scrutiny of these.

The Government are ambitious for the future of British Steel and committed to working collectively with the workforce to achieve the best possible outcome for the business.

[HCWS273]

Fireworks Consultation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Kate Dearden): I am today informing Parliament of a consultation on fireworks which has just been launched.

Millions of people enjoy fireworks responsibly as part of cultural, religious and community celebrations. There is an existing legal framework in place to address situations where fireworks and other pyrotechnics are misused. However, I am also aware of the concerns raised by charities, parliamentarians and members of the public about the impact of fireworks.

Many people have been in touch with me to share their own experience of how fireworks have affected them, their family, their animals, or their wider community. I am grateful to them for taking the time to set out their concerns. These accounts add valuable context alongside the data provided by local authorities, emergency services, animal welfare organisations and the fireworks industry.

In response, I am launching this consultation which proposes reforms to fireworks legislation. These proposals focus on addressing the key harms raised, particularly noise from non-professional fireworks displays and the contribution of fireworks to antisocial behaviour, while continuing to allow people to enjoy fireworks safely and responsibly, including as part of important community and cultural celebrations. Specifically, the consultation seeks to gather evidence and capture a wide range of views on proposals to:

- Restrict the availability of the noisiest fireworks to the general public, with louder products only available to professional users.

- Add products deemed to be carrying unacceptable risks to the existing list of banned pyrotechnic products.

- Review the regulations for the broad range of fireworks and pyrotechnic products currently classified as lower risk, to better reflect the different levels of risk they pose.

The responses and evidence gathered will be used to refine these proposals, making sure that we keep public safety, and the impact on people, animals and property, central to this work. Please be assured that all perspectives and evidence will be considered carefully.

This consultation will run for 12 weeks, and a copy can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/fireworks-and-pyrotechnics-in-the-uk>

[HCWS275]

CABINET OFFICE

Special Advisers Annual Report

The Chief Secretary to the Prime Minister (Darren Jones): Special advisers are a critical part of the team supporting Ministers. They add a political dimension to the advice and assistance available to Ministers while reinforcing the impartiality of the permanent civil service by distinguishing the source of political advice and support.

Special advisers are temporary civil servants, and their costs are met by the Government Department in which they are based. Each year, the Cabinet Office publishes a report on the total cost and number of special advisers across Government. Today, the Cabinet Office will be publishing its report for the previous financial year (April 2025 to March 2026).

Departments also routinely publish data quarterly on special advisers' gifts, hospitality and meetings with senior media figures.

[HCWS289]

Covid-19 Inquiry Response Costs

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The UK covid-19 inquiry is examining the UK's response to and impact of the pandemic. The Government are fully committed to supporting the work of the covid-19 inquiry and to learning lessons from the covid-19 pandemic to ensure the UK is better prepared for a future pandemic.

The Government recognise the unprecedented and wholly exceptional circumstances of the pandemic. The inquiry is therefore unprecedented in its scope, complexity and profile.

The independent UK covid-19 inquiry publishes its own running costs quarterly. The chair is under a statutory obligation to avoid unnecessary costs in the inquiry's work and has been clear as to her intention to complete her work as quickly and efficiently as possible.

I would like to update the House on the costs to the UK Government associated with responding to the UK covid-19 inquiry.

Figures provided are based upon a selection of the most relevant Departments and are not based on a complete set of departmental figures, and different Departments organise their response teams in different ways, according to business need. As such, these are not precise figures for accounting purposes. Ensuring a comprehensive and timely response to the inquiry requires significant input from a number of key Government Departments, including, but not limited to, the Cabinet Office, the Department of Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency, the Home Office and HM Treasury, many of which are supported by the Government Legal Department. While every effort has been made to ensure a robust methodology, complexities remain in trying to quantify the time and costs dedicated to the inquiry alone.

It should be noted that alongside full time resource within Departments, inquiry response teams draw on expertise from across their organisations. These costs, including those associated with staff taking time to provide written or oral evidence, are not included in the costs below.

Breakdown of staff and costs 2025-26

The Government response to the UK covid-19 inquiry is led by inquiry response units across Departments. These associated staff costs for Q4 2025-26 are below and include retrospective adjustments for Q1-3.

Q4 number of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff—111 full-time equivalents.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Cumulative total for 2025-26
Cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff (including contingent labour costs)	£5,015,000	£4,299,000	£3,486,000	£2,345,000	£15,145,000
Number of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff (full-time equivalents)	248	207	167	111	N/A

Inquiry response unit legal costs 2025-26

Inquiry response units across Government Departments are supported by the Government Legal Department, co-partnering firms of solicitors, and legal counsel. These associated legal costs—excluding internal departmental advisory legal costs—for Q4 2025-26 are below and include retrospective adjustments for Q1-3.

Q4 legal costs—£1,226,000.

Financial year 2025-26 (Q1 + Q2 + Q3 + Q4), total legal costs—£16,346,000 (including retrospective adjustments for Q1-3).

Table: inquiry response unit legal costs 2025-26

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Cumulative total for 2025-26
Total legal costs	£4,993,000	£6,339,000	£3,788,000	£1,226,000	£16,346,000

[HCWS276]

ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

National Policy Statements for Nuclear Energy Infrastructure: Review

The Minister for Energy (Michael Shanks): My hon. Friend Lord Vallance of Balham, Minister of State for Science, Innovation, Research and Nuclear, has today made the following statement:

My Lords, the nuclear regulatory review set out a stark challenge for all of us: Government, regulators and industry.

The Government are meeting this challenge by taking forward all 47 recommendations. Delay has a cost, so we have committed to implementing these reforms by the end of 2027.

As part of this we have set out our plan to introduce the nuclear regulation Bill in this parliamentary Session.

We know that simply announcing reforms is not enough. I have chaired the first Nuclear Regulatory Implementation Panel.

This panel will hold industry, regulators and the Government to account for implementing the delivery plans for each recommendation and driving the culture change required to build our nuclear nation.

I am today informing the House of the Government’s intention to review and update the national policy statement for nuclear energy, EN-7, in response to the nuclear regulatory review. This statement is made in accordance with section 6(4A) of the Planning Act 2008, which requires the Secretary of State to lay a statement before Parliament announcing the review.

Q4 cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff—£2,345,000 (including contingent labour costs).

Financial year 2025-26 (Q1 + Q2 + Q3 + Q4), total cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff—£15,145,000 (including contingent labour costs, and retrospective adjustments for Q1-3).

Table: breakdown of staff and costs 2025-26

EN-7, designated in 2025, established the planning policy framework for nuclear energy infrastructure in England and Wales, and introduced a modular approach that enables targeted updates while providing regulatory certainty.

Since its designation, there have been developments in the regulatory and policy landscape, including the nuclear regulatory review, which identified opportunities to clarify and improve the operation of the regulatory and planning framework for nuclear infrastructure.

The Government therefore intend to review EN-7 at pace, making use of its modular structure to ensure that it continues to reflect these developments and remains effective. The Government expect to consult on any proposed updates in due course. Parliamentary scrutiny will take place as required once any amended national policy statement is laid before Parliament.

The Government intend to conclude the review by the end of 2026, with any updates to EN-7 published in 2027, subject to parliamentary scrutiny. The current form of EN-7 will continue to apply while the review is under way.

In parallel, the Government intend to initiate a review of the national policy statement on geological disposal infrastructure, and of the previous national policy statement on nuclear power, EN-6. This approach reflects the Secretary of State’s duty under section 6 of the Planning Act 2008 to keep national policy statements under review, including reviewing all current national policy statements by February 2028.

Only through ambitious reforms and cultural change can we deliver what is needed: less duplication, bureaucracy, and a process that is more appealing for investors.

[HCWS282]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Environmental Improvement Plan and Office for Environmental Protection Progress Reports

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): Over the last year we have taken significant action on nature recovery. In December 2025 we launched our revised environmental improvement plan to restore nature, move to a more circular economy and protect our environmental security. We know the scale of the challenge, and we are matching our ambition with action.

Today I am laying our annual progress report in delivering the EIP over the reporting period April 2025 to March 2026, as required by section 9 of the

Environment Act 2021. This includes progress towards achieving Environment Act targets, and the latest evidence of changes in the natural environment.

We have progressed a broad and ambitious programme of reform, investment and delivery over the reporting period. This includes:

- publication of the land use framework to transform decision making so that we use land more effectively
- securing over £7 billion for nature recovery through the farming budget, the largest investment into nature in history.
- setting a new vision for water and plan to reform our water sector and the wider water system through the water White Paper quadrupling water company investment under “Price Review 2024”, to clean up our rivers, lakes and seas announcing a ban on wet wipes containing plastics
- publication of the UK’s first ever perfluoroalkyl and polyfluoroalkyl substances plan
- committing £1.1 billion to improve local recycling services across England, enhancing waste management and community outcomes
- publication of the good food cycle strategy and delivery of priority outcomes for healthier, more affordable, sustainable and resilient 21st-century UK food system
- publication of the carbon budget growth delivery plan and methane action plan
- announcing that at least £10.5 billion will be invested by March 2036 to construct new flood and coastal erosion schemes and repair existing defences
- announcing investment of over £1 billion in the next stage of development of a new national biosecurity centre at Weybridge
- announcing two new national forests, in addition to the Western forest
- opening the King Charles III England coast path, the world’s longest managed coastal path, and delivering the first of nine new coastal paths, the Mersey valley way.

The revised EIP sets us on a clearer path to deliver Environment Act targets by setting ambitious yet achievable interim targets and publishing detailed delivery plans to drive progress. This will require sustained delivery at pace and scale over several years. The Government remain committed to delivering our environmental targets. We are making good progress in meeting the targets in some areas, while we face challenges in others. For several target areas, it is still too early to draw reliable trends on progress from the data, but we will continue to develop and improve environmental monitoring.

I am also laying the Government’s response to the Office for Environmental Protection annual assessment of progress for 2024 to 2025, well ahead of the statutory deadline in January 2027, to streamline the EIP reporting cycle and support the important role that the OEP plays in monitoring and reporting progress towards the EIP’s environmental targets. I have also laid a revised statement that explains the Government’s approach to monitoring, evaluating and reporting on the condition of the natural environment, in line with the requirements of section 16 of the Environment Act.

Together, these reports better enable external scrutiny and transparency of our progress and ensure that delivery planning is informed by monitoring and evaluation learning. The EIP is a long-term, whole-of-Government plan delivered in partnership across society. We are taking positive steps and strengthening our evidence base to support long-term environmental improvement. I am grateful to Parliament and stakeholders, including the Office for Environmental Protection, whose scrutiny helps to shape our approach.

[HCWS283]

Dartmoor Ponies

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Reynolds): I wish to update the House on the decisive action that we are taking to secure the long-term future of Dartmoor’s iconic pony populations through a package of new protections and financial support.

Dartmoor’s pony populations and environmental land management schemes

Dartmoor’s heritage rare breeds and semi-wild ponies are a much-cherished part of Dartmoor’s landscape and cultural heritage. They also play an important role in conserving protected environmental sites, including sites of special scientific interest, on the moor. This Government are committed to ensuring that their numbers do not fall below current levels

From today, we are going beyond recommendation 27 of the Fursdon review of protected site management on Dartmoor in 2023 to delink ponies and cattle for the calculation of agri-environment scheme stocking rates. Dartmoor’s ponies will be completely removed from stocking rate calculations in new environmental land management agreements, so that farmers do not face a choice between keeping ponies and maintaining sheep or cattle. Pony numbers will also be monitored across the moor to ensure that they remain at least at current levels. As part of the overall grazing management approach on protected sites in Dartmoor, I have asked Natural England only to consider where existing populations of ponies graze, rather than their overall numbers.

New ELM agreements on Dartmoor will be negotiated on an individual basis, reflecting the needs of the sites they are managing. I want to make it clear, however—by affirming our commitment to maintaining current pony populations on Dartmoor—that if any reductions in the existing pony populations were to occur, this will not release any capacity to increase levels of sheep or cattle grazing on the moor agreed under ELM schemes.

Dartmoor’s resident ponies will continue to remain exempt from being included in any seasonal livestock removal requirements in the shepherding actions within the sustainable farming incentive and the countryside stewardship higher tier—CSHT ELM—scheme offers.

We also intend to introduce a separate pony supplement into SFI and CSHT scheme offers to ensure that there is no economic incentive to reduce pony populations as a result of participating in DEFRA schemes and provide additional support to allow ponies to continue their vital conservation grazing role on the moor.

We will also review the native breed actions in these schemes to see whether the approach could enhance support for “at-risk” native breeds, working with interested parties.

Making a real change to the condition of protected sites on Dartmoor

Dartmoor is one of England’s most important and distinctive landscapes, home to internationally important habitats, wildlife and SSSIs, but large parts of Dartmoor are in long-term ecological decline. Achieving the right balance of grazing is essential to supporting both nature recovery and the long-term future of the moor’s farming communities.

There is broad agreement that grazing approaches on Dartmoor need to change to improve the condition of the valuable habitats found on Dartmoor. DEFRA remains committed to finding flexible and nuanced approaches to grazing on Dartmoor and to doing so through the work of the Dartmoor land use management group—DLUMG—set up following the Fursdon review.

The DLUMG is bringing together a land use framework for Dartmoor and undertaking trials to demonstrate what works to improve condition of its protected sites. Subject to agreement of a clear workplan for DLUMG work going forward, I have asked the group:

- to help ensure that their trials complement projects under development on Dartmoor through landscape recovery. I want this work to help to build the evidence base, test adaptive grazing approaches and inform improvement of protected site management.

- to develop a Dartmoor-wide management framework that allows for approval of a whole Dartmoor set of grazing principles for ponies, cattle and sheep. This framework will take time to develop but I see it as essential to enabling improvements to the environmental condition of the moor so that future generations can enjoy the wide diversity of species and habitats Dartmoor offers.

Agreeing proposals for ELM agreements on Dartmoor

Finally, I want to ensure that ongoing discussions around landscape recovery projects, new CS higher tier and continuing higher level stewardship agri-environment agreements on Dartmoor demonstrate an openness to flexible and adaptive approaches to grazing on the moor while we await the results of the DLUMG trials. With respect to ponies, these discussions will also be conducted fully in line with the principles set out above.

While we await results from the DLUMG trials, I have asked Natural England that any proposed changes to grazing on Dartmoor through ELM schemes should be approached sensitively. To support their negotiations, DEFRA will work closely with Natural England, with support from the DLUMG, to collectively agree:

- short term grazing management on Dartmoor under ELM schemes;

- any transitional approaches that might be required to bring existing stocking rate levels in expiring agreements to those required to support improvements in habitat condition under new CSHT agreements; and

- the evidence used to support grazing management, working with Defra's chief scientific adviser and her team.

Conclusion

I believe the approach I have set out here will help us ensure that collectively we are able to agree a balanced approach to help improve management of protected sites on Dartmoor, maintain pony populations and to support farmers and commoners who play a vital role on Dartmoor's landscape.

[HCWS274]

Water Company Resilience to Heatwaves

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): I wish to update the House on the action this Government are taking to strengthen water company resilience to heatwaves and sustained hot weather.

The Met Office outlook for July to September 2026 indicates that a hotter than usual three-month period is more likely than normal. Higher temperatures can place significant pressure on water resources and infrastructure,

increase customer demand, and heighten the risk of localised supply interruptions. It is therefore essential that water companies maintain robust plans to protect customers and sustain supplies during periods of severe and prolonged heat.

This year has already been challenging for water supplies. Some parts of the country have received lower than average rainfall this spring, such as the Anglian region where only 39% of expected rainfall fell. Combined with record spring temperatures, this has reduced reservoir and groundwater storage and river flows across a number of regions.

Alongside recent heatwaves, water companies have increased supply to meet rising demand. During the Met Office red heat warning, Thames Water supplied an additional 316 million litres of water per day compared with the previous year, while Anglian Water increased production by up to 30%, equivalent to supplying a county the size of Lincolnshire. Despite these pressures and some localised supply interruptions, the sector avoided widespread disruption and maintained supplies to the vast majority of customers.

On Thursday 2 July, I brought together the senior leadership of Water UK and those water companies most affected by the recent Met Office amber and red heat warnings to review the sector's response to the recent period of extreme heat, assess preparedness for the remainder of the summer, and agree the actions necessary to strengthen resilience and protect customers during any future periods of sustained hot weather. The meeting examined lessons from recent heatwaves and the actions needed to reduce future risks to customers.

Temporary use bans are in place across a number of regions in response to high levels of demand. TUBs are currently in place for South East Water customers in Kent, Southern Water customers in Hampshire and the Isle of Wight, South West Water customers in mid-Devon and parts of east Devon, and across the Anglian Water region. Cambridge Water and Affinity Water have also announced TUBs which will come into force shortly. Such measures can help manage demand and protect supplies during periods of sustained pressure.

Everyone has a role to play in using water wisely, particularly during periods of sustained hot weather. I expect water companies to provide customers with clear and timely information on the practical steps they can take to reduce the amount of water they use during periods of peak demand.

The Government will maintain close oversight of water sector resilience throughout the summer. My officials remain in regular contact with the sector, regulators and resilience partners to monitor demand, water resource availability, infrastructure resilience and incident preparedness. I expect all water companies to manage periods of exceptional demand, protect vulnerable customers and respond effectively to incidents. Where performance or preparedness falls short, I will not hesitate to take the action needed to minimise impacts on customers.

I welcome Ofwat's announcement of a £30.5 million redress package for South East Water for failures that left thousands of households without water for days. The package was developed following a joined-up approach between water regulators, targeting the best possible action to address SEW's failures. This is in line with the Government proposed water reforms, which will involve the new regulator taking a supervisory approach—enabling

a broader and better understanding of company performance, earlier intervention and prevention of further decline. The package also includes requirements to produce a performance improvement plan, setting out how the company will deliver sustained improvement in its performance, and an independent monitor to support Ofwat to assess progress against the plan.

A reliable supply of clean water is fundamental to public health, economic growth and community resilience. Alongside immediate action to prepare for summer pressures, this Government are delivering the long-term reforms needed to build a stronger and more resilient water sector.

Through our programme of water reform, we are strengthening regulation and accountability while ensuring companies deliver the investment needed to improve infrastructure and resilience. We will create a single, powerful regulator, giving Government and regulators, for the first time, a clear system-wide view of company performance and stronger tools to intervene where companies fall short. We will also introduce a water ombudsman, ensuring that customers have a stronger voice and clearer routes to redress when things go wrong.

This builds on the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, which introduced the toughest sentencing powers ever applied to lawbreaking water company executives and powers to ban unjustified executive bonuses. Together, these reforms will strengthen accountability and help restore public confidence in the water sector.

We will also introduce statutory resilience standards, improve asset mapping and strengthen oversight of critical infrastructure to help water companies prepare for climate change and more frequent periods of extreme heat.

[HCWS279]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Official Development Assistance Target

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): My noble Friend the Minister of State for International Development and Africa, the right hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington, has today made the following statement:

The FCDO's annual report and accounts 2025-26 reports that in 2025, on a provisional basis, the United Kingdom did not meet its target to spend the equivalent of 0.7% of gross national income on official development assistance.

The International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015 envisages situations in which a departure from meeting the target of spending 0.7% of GNI on ODA may be necessary, including due to economic circumstances, fiscal circumstances and circumstances arising outside the UK. The fiscal circumstances did not allow for ODA spending to be returned to 0.7% of GNI in 2025.

This Government are committed to restoring ODA spending at the level of 0.7% of GNI as soon as fiscal circumstances allow. The principles for a return will be met when, on a sustainable basis, the Government are not borrowing for day-to-day spending and underlying debt is falling. We will monitor future forecasts closely against these tests. The latest forecast from the Office for Budget Responsibility indicates that the tests will not be met in this Parliament. The Government are working hard to create the conditions to enable the ODA fiscal tests to be met by prioritising growth—stronger growth will help in time to get underlying debt down.

As required by section 2 of the 2015 Act, an Unnumbered Act Paper has been laid before Parliament and is in the same terms as this statement.

[HCWS288]

Afghanistan

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer): Today I am updating the House on the UK's ongoing humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan and setting out how the Government will continue to support the Afghan people in the years ahead.

Nearly five years after the Taliban takeover in August 2021, the humanitarian situation remains severe and at risk of further deterioration. Nearly 22 million people will require humanitarian assistance this year, including 17.4 million facing acute food insecurity. Afghanistan faces one of the highest global burdens of child and maternal malnutrition, with nearly 5 million women, girls and boys expected to require treatment in 2026. Recurrent climate shocks, including drought and flooding, continue to drive food insecurity and vulnerability, and ongoing structural challenges continue to impact access to essential health services. These pressures are compounded by regional instability, economic fragility and disrupted supply chains.

The Taliban's severe restrictions on women and girls, including on access to education, employment and participation in public life, continue to undermine fundamental freedoms and contribute to broader human rights concerns in Afghanistan. Women and girls should have equal access to opportunities and be able to participate fully in society. The ongoing denial of these rights presents a significant barrier to Afghanistan's long-term development, stability and prosperity.

As we enter a new spending review period, this is an opportunity to reaffirm and renew our long-standing commitment to supporting the people of Afghanistan. As set out today by the Minister of State for International Development and Africa in her written ministerial statement to Parliament, and in the FCDO's annual report and accounts published today, the UK will provide £105 million per year over the next three years—2026 to 29—to support the Afghan people. Afghanistan will remain one of the UK's largest official development assistance portfolios during this period, reflecting both the scale of need and our continued commitment.

This funding will continue to focus on addressing the most severe impacts of Afghanistan's protracted crisis. We will prioritise lifesaving services, including health and nutrition; support essential education; protect the most vulnerable at great risk of harm, abuse and discrimination; and strengthen livelihoods and climate resilience. We will also increase engagement with non-Taliban-affiliated Afghan partners to support locally led solutions, including assistance for Afghans returning to Afghanistan from neighbouring countries. Women and girls will remain central to this approach, as highlighted in the UK international strategic framework on women and girls 2026. Across UK-supported programmes, we will prioritise their rights and needs, and remain steadfast in our commitment that at least half of those reached by UK aid are women and girls.

We continue to engage third-party monitoring in addition to FCDO oversight, to ensure that aid is directed to those most in need. We expect to publish full results for 2025-26 in the summer. This will build on the 2024-25 FCDO bilateral ODA results, which supported at least 2.7 million people, including more than 1.7 million women and girls.

The UK continues to demonstrate solidarity with Afghan women. For example, we hosted events with the exiled Afghan women's refugee cricket team during their visit to the UK in the summer, including an audience with His Majesty the King and engagements with the Foreign Secretary and me. The UK will continue to provide platforms for Afghan women to advocate for their rights and ensure that their voices inform UK policy and programming. The Foreign Secretary's "All In" campaign, launched in December, reinforces the Government's commitment to tackling violence against women and girls globally. In addition, the UK special envoy to Afghanistan visited Kabul in May and met a wide range of Afghan women and civil society groups to hear directly about their situation and their requests of the UK Government, and UK humanitarian advisers travelled to Islam Qala to understand at first hand the situation for vulnerable Afghans returning from Iran.

We continue to use our leadership to ensure an effective humanitarian response across the international community. We are taking forward with donors and partners the joint commitments we developed in the London compact on food security and nutrition in Afghanistan in late 2025. We continue to use our bilateral investment and engagement to work with the World Bank and the Asian Development Bank to support vital financing of basic services, especially in health, where the international funding outlook remains challenging.

The UK will continue to stand with the people of Afghanistan, providing lifesaving assistance, supporting the rights of women and girls, and working with partners to sustain essential services and support longer-term resilience.

[HCWS293]

Macolin Convention

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Seema Malhotra): On 6 December 2018, the UK signed the Council of Europe convention on the manipulation of sports competitions (the Macolin convention).

The Government laid this convention in Parliament on 4 June 2026 in the Miscellaneous Series under Command Paper number CP 1595, accompanied by an explanatory memorandum.

In accordance with section 21 of the Constitutional Reform and Governance Act 2010 (CRAg), I wish to inform the House that the 21 sitting day period that relates to this convention pursuant to section 20(1) CRAg is to be extended. The 21 sitting day period is to be extended by 15 sitting days.

This extension follows a request from the House of Lords International Agreements Committee for further time to consider the convention.

[HCWS284]

Official Development Assistance: Programme Country and Regional Allocations

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Chris Elmore): The Minister of State for International Development and Africa, my noble Friend the right hon. Baroness Chapman of Darlington, has today made the following statement:

The FCDO official development assistance programme allocations that I set out on 19 March 2026 (HCWS1425) reflect how we are modernising and improving our approach to international development, following a year spent reviewing our priorities and redefining how we work.

In that statement, we did not publish individual country allocations. This was to allow our teams across the network to communicate with their host Governments before we published country allocations. Today I am updating the House with the FCDO's ODA programme country and regional allocations from 2026-27 to 2028-29.

As I set out in March, the world has changed dramatically in the last three decades. Crises and instability across the world undermine our security and prosperity at home, as we have seen play out in the strait of Hormuz. Poverty, insecurity and climate risks are increasingly concentrated in fragile and conflict-affected states. New actors are shaping global development, and the countries we work with today want genuine partnership, not the paternalism of the past.

In reaction to this, we are modernising and improving our approach to have the greatest impact abroad and secure the best value for money for taxpayers at home. We are sharpening our focus on priorities that align with partner needs, UK public interest, and where we can drive real change. The changes we are making are encapsulated in four shifts, as we move from donor to investor, from service delivery to systems strengthening, grants to expertise, and international intervention to local leadership. Our policy paper, published today on gov.uk, sets out our approach in greater detail.

Our bilateral programmes are being transformed. We will prioritise bilateral ODA where humanitarian needs are most acute, including fully protecting bilateral ODA allocations to Ukraine, Palestine and Sudan. The proportion of spending in FCAS will increase by around 13 percentage points to over 70% of all country and regional spending by 2028-29.

In other contexts, we will transition away from spending high levels of grant ODA, but our ambition and effort will remain high—our bilateral programmes will support partnerships with Governments to strengthen systems, leverage finance and move away from reliance on aid. Our work will be focused on areas that transform lives and build stability, and it will be demand-led, including: meeting the most basic need with lifesaving humanitarian assistance; supporting women and girls and helping them thrive; keeping children learning, even in conflict; upholding international humanitarian law and protecting vulnerable populations; strengthening health security; creating jobs and economic opportunity; and investing in climate action that protects people and prevents future crises.

We are limiting reductions of bilateral aid to humanitarian crises across the middle east and north Africa, and south Asia and Afghanistan, including in Afghanistan, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. We will phase out FCDO bilateral country allocations to G20 countries, except in Turkey, where we help to share the burden on account of their hosting of refugees.

We expect that well over £1 billion per year of UK multilateral ODA will go to sub-Saharan Africa, as measured by imputed multilateral share statistics. That is because of our choices to increase our contribution to the World Bank's International Development Association—which delivers around two-thirds of its work in Africa—and maintaining strong support for the African Development Fund. Factoring in imputed multilateral ODA and bilateral programmes that operate in sub-Saharan Africa but which are managed from the UK, we expect the share of FCDO ODA to sub-Saharan Africa to stay approximately the

same—at around one third—compared to recent years.¹ Moreover, British International Investment—the UK’s development finance institution—invests 60% of its portfolio in Africa. The UK’s new Africa approach recognises that delivering strong partnerships requires looking beyond aid, consistent with our modern international development approach. It is a shift towards modern, equal partnerships based on shared interests and using the full range of UK tools, not just ODA.

This reflects the broader shift that we are making to our bilateral partnerships. To support progress on shared global challenges, we need long-term, resilient partnerships. Stakeholders increasingly expect a more equal partnership with the UK. We need a systematic and coherent approach to build trust and credibility and to shift toward genuine, equitable partnership. We need to build partnerships beyond short-term transactions; partnerships that foster long-term co-operation based on ideas of mutuality—mutual respect, interest, accountability and learning.

Although we will prioritise funding where humanitarian needs are most acute, in other countries our ambition and effort will remain high—shifting to a demand-led partnership model that makes the most of what the whole UK has to offer. Our country network will have the flexibility and autonomy to deliver development interventions in the sectors that our partners want and need.

Our bilateral allocations will be complemented by a full spectrum of work. We are increasing the share of FCDO ODA we spend through multilaterals, targeted strategically towards the most effective multilateral organisations, such as the World Bank’s International Development Association, where each £1 we invest unlocks £4 of additional finance. BII’s £6.6 billion portfolio will help deliver the UK’s shift from donor to investor. Our international climate finance will balance support between mitigation and adaptation and maintain a focus on nature. A range of communities of expertise will work with countries to access trusted policy advice and strengthen systems.

Setting three years of ODA programme allocations provides teams with the predictability required to manage the transition to spending 0.3% of GNI on ODA. All plans are subject to revision as, by its nature, the Department’s work is dynamic. Programme allocations are continually reviewed to respond to changing global needs.

See table “FCDO country and regional ODA programme allocations 2026-27 to 2028-29”, which is available at: <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2026-07-16/HCWS287>

¹ Based on internal FCDO analysis forecasting FCDO region specific bilateral spend and UK imputed multilateral share data, compared to 2022-25 statistics on international development.

[HCWS287]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Adult Social Care:

Fair Pay Agreement and Workforce Pathway

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): Today, I am proud to inform the House that this Government are setting out the details of the adult social care fair pay agreement, a landmark reform that will turn the page on decades of low pay, insecurity, and the exploitation of adult social care workers. In doing so, we are one step closer to delivering on our manifesto commitment.

Backed by £500 million in funding in 2028-29, the fair pay agreement will introduce annual negotiations between employer and worker representatives to agree improvements to pay and conditions for the adult social care workforce for the first time.

Led by an independent negotiating body, the fair pay agreement will strengthen the voice of workers and employers, support recruitment and retention, and help build a stable, sustainable, and growing domestic workforce.

Our response to the consultation sets out how the system will operate in practice, including how negotiations will be conducted, how agreements will be reached and implemented, and the role of the independent chair in overseeing the process. The Government will appoint a chair in the autumn and negotiations will begin in 2027.

Alongside the consultation response, we are also publishing part 3 of the care workforce pathway. The pathway is the first time the adult care sector, a workforce of 1.5 million, has seen a universal career structure with consistent standards and expectations around the knowledge, skills, values and behaviours required to deliver high-quality, personalised care and support. By adding 10 new role categories we are expanding the pathway’s coverage to nearly all adult social care workforce roles that are not health or social work, recognising and celebrating the breadth and diversity of the sector. Using the pathway, staff looking for progression can plot a route for their career and existing staff with specialist skills can be recognised for what they do, such as enhanced care workers.

Since coming into office, this Government have passed the Employment Rights Act, strengthened sick pay, supported professionalisation and raised the minimum wage. These much-needed reforms will mean that care workers have better job security, take home higher pay, and see improved professional recognition for their work.

There is more to do, but these important steps will help us lay the foundations for the national care service and demonstrate this Government’s ongoing commitment to tackling the recruitment and retention of the adult social care workforce, by ensuring that there are opportunities to develop and progress, and that people feel recognised and rewarded for the vital work they do.

[HCWS281]

High-Caffeine Energy Drinks: Age Restrictions

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Mrs Sharon Hodgson): Today I am publishing the Government response to the consultation on banning the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children in England. The Government have decided to introduce legislation to ban the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children under 16 in England. This action will help create the healthiest generation of children ever and supports our shift from sickness to prevention.

The Government have a manifesto commitment to ban the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks to children in England. This has been subject to consultation which ran from 3 September to 26 November 2025. Having considered the consultation responses and the available evidence, this Government are taking this decisive action to support the health of our children.

The consultation received 1,095 responses from individuals and organisations, including businesses, public health organisations and enforcement bodies. Overall, there was significant support with the proposal to introduce an age restriction on the sale of high-caffeine energy drinks.

There is a large body of evidence consistently reporting an association between the consumption of high-caffeine energy drinks and a range of possible negative outcomes on children’s physical and mental health, as well as their education. We estimate that around 100,000 children consume high-caffeine energy drinks at least daily in England. Of particular concern, research highlights

that children living in more deprived areas and households are more likely to consume these drinks. This means the possible negative outcomes on health and education are likely to be felt unequally across society.

The Government have decided to introduce a statutory age restriction as an effective and proportionate way to reduce children's access to high-caffeine energy drinks.

The proposed legislation will:

Ban sales of high-caffeine energy drinks to children under 16 years.

Apply to drinks, other than tea or coffee, containing more than 150 mg caffeine per litre.

Apply in all retail settings both in-store and online, while excluding business-to-business sales

Ban sales of high-caffeine energy drinks through vending machines.

Provide a minimum implementation period of six months following the publication of the consultation outcome.

Be enforced by local authorities.

The Government will now take forward secondary legislation using powers contained in the Food Safety Act 1990. Subject to parliamentary approval, we intend for the ban to come into force in April 2027.

[HCWS292]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Undercover Policing Inquiry: Consultation

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): Today I am launching a consultation on the future of the undercover policing inquiry (UCPI). This Government are committed to delivering justice and to ensuring that public inquiries are able to provide answers, accountability and recommendations within a reasonable timeframe.

The UCPI was established in 2015 to examine undercover policing in England and Wales since 1968. Sir John Mitting, the current chair of the inquiry, will retire in 2027. His retirement provides an opportunity to consult those affected, core participants and others with an interest in the inquiry on how its remaining work should best be taken forward. I am grateful to him for his work on the inquiry.

The terms of reference of the inquiry are broad. In addition to examining the role of undercover policing in the prevention and detection of crime, the inquiry is required to examine the motivation for and scope of undercover police operations, their effect on individuals and the public, the extent of Government awareness of such operations, and the adequacy of the legal, policy and judicial framework governing undercover policing. The inquiry is also tasked with reviewing the extent of the duty of disclosure in criminal proceedings involving undercover police operations and the scope for miscarriages of justice where disclosure was inadequate.

The terms of reference envisaged the inquiry concluding within three years. It has made real progress in investigating the Metropolitan police's special demonstration squad and produced an interim report on tranche 1 of its work (relating to 1968-82) and will publish an interim report concluding its work on the special demonstration squad next year. More than a decade after it was established, the inquiry remains ongoing. As at the end of March 2026,

the inquiry has spent £137 million. Ministers remain concerned about the length and cost of the inquiry and the delay in providing outcomes to those affected.

The consultation will seek views on the future structure, scope and format of the work needed to bring to a conclusion the remaining matters that the inquiry is set to investigate. It is not a re-opening of evidence, nor a call for new factual material about undercover policing or individual cases. Respondents will be invited to focus on how the inquiry's remaining areas of work should be prioritised and delivered.

Respondents to the consultation might wish to share their views on alternative ways the inquiry might discharge its remaining areas of work. They might wish to consider fairness to victims and those who were affected by undercover policing, bearing in mind transparency and public confidence, proportionality of cost and duration as well as the ability of different approaches to deliver meaningful recommendations. The consultation has been published on the gov.uk website <https://www.homeofficesurveys.homeoffice.gov.uk/s/UCPI-consultation> and will close on Thursday 20 August 2026.

We plan to announce our decision on the future of the inquiry, informed by this consultation in autumn 2026.

[HCWS278]

Border Security Commander Annual Report 2025-26

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): Today I can announce that the first border security commander's annual report, for the period 2025 to 2026, is being laid before Parliament.

In our manifesto, this Government promised to create a new border security command to tackle the organised criminal gangs behind illegal channel crossings, with the ability to deliver a response befitting the scale and urgency of this challenge. As this report shows, it has had a significant impact since becoming operational in July 2024. In 2025 alone, we have invested an additional £100 million into the system through the BSC, with a commitment to invest an additional £280 million per year by 2028.

Over the past year, investments across the system have enabled a substantial uplift for National Crime Agency officers tackling OIC, as well as building and enhancing operational capabilities. The NCA has made tackling OIC its main effort and has heavily pivoted resource and capability to tackle the facilitators and enablers of people smuggling, leading to a 55% rise in OIC-related arrests. UK law enforcement has collectively delivered 46% more disruptions—29% of those major disruptions with a long-term impact—74% more arrests and the seizure of hundreds of boats and engines. This has been supported by the passing of the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Act 2025, which introduced new counter-terror-style powers and new offences to investigate and deter offending.

The BSAI Act also requires the border security commander to report on how they have exercised their functions over the previous financial year and set out their assessment of the performance of the border security system. This report outlines how the commander has strengthened, aligned and driven the system to deliver against clear strategic priorities to counter the threat we face.

The report also includes an evaluation of the collective contributions to outcomes and highlights the positive impact of the border security system in tackling illegal migration and reducing dangerous crossings, including increased investment in the border security command and across the system, strengthened co-operation with international and domestic partners, and a renewed international effort to disrupt organised immigration crime.

The public rightly expect us to control who and what enter this country. It is one of the most fundamental duties of the state and remains a top priority for me and the Government I serve in. This report sets out significant achievements which amount to a major upscaling of the UK's border security system. It has been a strong start, but further work is needed. We know that illegal migration remains one of the defining issues of our time. The BSC will be at the forefront of our continued efforts to meet that challenge.

I thank all partners and agencies, both domestically and internationally, for their continued efforts to tackle this threat and protect the United Kingdom.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office, and it will also be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS290]

Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office Report

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Shabana Mahmood): This statement updates the House on the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's investigation into how MI5 came to provide false evidence to the courts on whether or not it had confirmed the status of "Agent X" as a covert human intelligence source. This follows the then Home Secretary's written ministerial statement <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-07-03/hcws775> of 3 July 2025 and the Prime Minister's written ministerial statement <https://questions-statements.parliament.uk/written-statements/detail/2025-09-16/hcws928> of 16 September 2025.

Following the direction provided by the Prime Minister in September 2025, Sir John Goldring, the Deputy Investigatory Powers Commissioner, has conducted a comprehensive investigation into how MI5 came to fall short of its high standards, ultimately misleading the High Court, the Investigatory Powers Tribunal, the Investigatory Powers Commissioner and associated special advocates. This investigation has now concluded, and Sir John Goldring's report is complete. Its findings have been submitted to the Prime Minister and the courts.

I would like to thank Sir Brian Leveson, Sir John Goldring and the wider team at IPCO for the hard work that they have undertaken over recent months. I am grateful for their willingness to complete this investigation at the behest of the courts, which is outside the usual remit of IPCO's work.

Sir John's conclusions make stark reading. His report outlines a series of failings both individually and organisationally within MI5 that led to false evidence being included in its witness statements. The High Court and the Investigatory Powers Tribunal will now consider their next steps, and we will need to await the outcome of those judicial proceedings.

Nevertheless, I am taking decisive action to ensure that MI5 is held accountable for the failings identified in Sir John's report and to strengthen the assurance mechanisms by which I hold the director general to account for the actions of the Security Service. This includes a package of measures to enhance accountability, increase independent challenge, review key operational policies, and improve scrutiny of MI5's litigation strategy and practice. Specifically, I will:

Strengthen current structures where I hold the director general of MI5 to account. This will continue to sit alongside extensive wider assurance and oversight across Government, Parliament and the judiciary;

Increase independent senior-level challenge and external leadership and accountability of MI5's internal reform and improvement programmes;

Enhance work across legal teams to better understand and scrutinise MI5's approaches to litigation cases.

MI5 plays a critical role in keeping our country, and the public, safe. I am deeply grateful for the commitment and dedication of its staff. However, given the significance of its responsibilities, it is imperative that the service maintains the highest standards of integrity, accountability and rigour, particularly in its engagement with the courts. This case demonstrates the damage to public, parliamentary and judicial confidence in our security services when MI5 gets it wrong.

Over the last 12 months, MI5 has undertaken a comprehensive programme of work to learn from and rectify the errors exposed by Sir John's report, as well as previous independent reviews into this case, as has been recognised in the IPCO report. This work has made significant progress, but there is more to do, and MI5 must continue to learn and to hold itself fully to account. I believe the new measures this Government are taking to strengthen oversight will ensure it does.

A copy of the IPCO report will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will be available on IPCO's website <https://www.ipco.org.uk/>

[HCWS285]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Reorganisation

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Steve Reed): This Government are driving the most ambitious programme of local government reform in a generation, replacing the inefficient two-tier system with new unitary councils so that all parts of our country can access strong services, and are ready for devolution.

We need to devolve power out of Whitehall so that we can rebalance wealth, power, and opportunity across our country. This is the second richest country in Europe, and yet England has seven of the ten poorest regions in northern Europe. That is the case for change.

But devolution requires strong local councils delivering good public services, supporting economic growth, which are closely connected to the communities they serve.

Doing this right means recognising the unique contributions that different areas make to people's lives, as well as to the national economy. Some of our smaller cities are highly productive, but have been constrained by tight boundaries, set decades ago, which stop them

from building the homes they need. Others are more rural, with significant demand for social care services and affordable housing. Local government should be set up to address the unique circumstances of each area and design public services tailored to each community.

Reorganisation provides us with a once-in-a-generation opportunity to ensure that councils genuinely represent the communities they serve today and stand the test of time. We know that people care about their own villages, home towns, high streets and communities. But in many parts of the country, existing boundaries do not match local economies, public services, or local identities.

But we will not achieve effective devolution or enable effective place-based public services with outdated and misaligned structures that slow down delivery, fragmenting public services, hampering housebuilding and slowing down important decision making. We need to make sure that new councils are grounded in place and are genuinely connected to their communities.

Decisions

I am pleased to announce today further decisions for local government reorganisation, a key milestone for our ambitious programme. This follows the decisions previously announced on unitary government in Surrey, Essex, Hampshire, Norfolk and Suffolk.

Fourteen areas were invited to put forward proposals by 28 November 2025. From this, my Department received 52 proposals. I would like to thank councillors and officers for their hard work and collaboration on these proposals. As the House was informed on 5 February, all the proposals received were taken to consultation, which closed on 26 March 2026.

Further consultations were also undertaken across May and June 2026 in East Sussex and Brighton and Hove and West Sussex.

I considered each proposal carefully against the criteria set out in the invitation letter, alongside the responses to the consultation, all representations and all other relevant information to assess the proposals. Each decision was made on a case-by-case basis, based on the merits of each proposal, respecting local circumstances and taking into account the views of local people.

Today, I have written to the leaders of councils for all sixteen remaining areas. I have decided to implement the following proposals, subject to parliamentary approval, in these areas:

Derbyshire and Derby: Two-unitary option submitted by Chesterfield borough council, Derby city council, Erewash borough council and High Peak borough council. In implementing this option, I will exercise the power to modify the proposal submitted by South Derbyshire district council to achieve the boundary change councils requested.

Devon, Plymouth and Torbay: Four-unitary proposal submitted by Exeter city council and Plymouth city council. I will exercise the power to modify the proposal to achieve the boundary change Exeter city council and Plymouth city council requested alongside the proposal.

East Sussex and Brighton and Hove: Two-unitary proposal submitted by East Sussex county council, Eastbourne borough council, Hastings borough council, Lewes district council and Rother district council. I will exercise the power to modify the proposal to achieve the boundary change requested by Brighton and Hove city council, with the exception of Falmer parish.

Gloucestershire: One-unitary proposal submitted by Cotswold district council, Gloucestershire county council, Stroud district council, and Tewkesbury borough council.

Hertfordshire: Four-unitary proposal submitted by Broxbourne borough council, Dacorum borough council, Hertsmere borough council, North Hertfordshire district council, Stevenage borough council and Welwyn Hatfield borough council. I will exercise the power to modify the proposal to achieve the boundary change requested by the proposing councils, with the exception of Arbury ward.

Kent and Medway: Four-unitary proposal submitted by Dover district council, Swale borough council and Thanet district council.

Lancashire, Blackpool and Blackburn with Darwen: Four-unitary proposal submitted by Chorley borough council, Lancaster city council, Preston city council, Ribble Valley borough council, South Ribble borough council and West Lancashire borough council.

Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland: Two-unitary proposal submitted by Leicester city council. I will exercise the power to modify the proposal to achieve the boundary change Leicester city council requested alongside the proposal with the exception of the part parishes.

Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and north-east Lincolnshire: Four-unitary proposal submitted by the city of Lincoln council. I will exercise the power to modify the proposal to achieve the boundary change requested by the city of Lincoln council.

Nottinghamshire and Nottingham: Two-unitary option requested by Nottingham city council. In implementing this option, I will exercise the power to modify the two-unitary proposal submitted by Nottinghamshire county council and Rushcliffe borough council to achieve the boundary changes requested by Nottingham city council.

Oxfordshire: Three-unitary proposal submitted by Oxford city council, including the adjoining area of West Berkshire council. I will exercise the power to modify the proposal to achieve the boundary change Oxford city council requested alongside the proposal.

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent: Two-unitary proposal submitted by East Staffordshire borough council, Stafford borough council and Cannock Chase district council, and also by Stoke-on-Trent city council.

Warwickshire: Two-unitary proposal submitted by North Warwickshire borough council, Nuneaton & Bedworth borough council, Stratford-on-Avon district council and Warwick district council.

Worcestershire: Two-unitary proposal submitted by Bromsgrove district council, Malvern Hills district council, Redditch borough council, Worcester city council and Wychavon district council.

Further detail on the decisions for these areas is provided in letters to council leaders in the areas, which will be published on gov.uk later today. A summary of the responses to the consultations for proposals in these areas will also be published in due course.

In both Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and West Sussex, I am not announcing decisions, and I believe that further time is required as it is vital that we get these decisions right.

I remain committed to meeting the existing deadline, aiming for elections to new unitaries in 2027, with new councils going live in 2028.

Transition support

A broad support offer is in place for councils, including support to councils through our sector advisers and through funding to the Local Government Association for an enhanced support offer. We have already announced £63 million in capacity funding to support the reorganisation process, and I am pleased to provide further detail today on how this funding will be allocated.

Of the £63 million capacity funding, as well as the unprecedented £900,000 transition support to each new unitary already announced, we are committing up to £150,000 per each new unitary as supplementary funding for leadership capacity and continuity in children's services, adult social care and public health. This is part of a wider package of support worth up to £10 million for children's services, adult social care and public health leadership, which will also fund targeted development, mentoring and peer support for current, new and aspiring leaders.

In addition, up to £1 million of funding overall will be available to support the small number of areas with complex fire and rescue authority transitions.

Taken together, this means that areas undergoing local government reorganisation will receive more than £1 million per new unitary created. This is the first time reorganisation has been supported in this way and shows this Government are committed to supporting councils to get these reforms right. We will confirm details of these allocations in due course.

My Department will also continue to work closely with the Home Office, Department for Education, other Departments and agencies, as well as existing and new councils in Kent to continue vital work to support the unaccompanied asylum seeking children operations.

Next steps

Reorganisation is a shared endeavour between central and local government and we will need to continue collaborating closely to deliver it successfully. Everyone involved wants to see stronger local councils delivering better services, which will improve the lives of the people we serve.

We remain fully committed to the timetable already set out, with elections to the new unitary councils scheduled for May 2027, ahead of vesting day for the new councils to begin delivering services in April 2028.

I will place copies of the letter and the documents I have referred to in the House Library, and these will also be published on gov.uk today.

[HCWS286]

Local Planning Authority Capacity

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): It is essential that local planning authorities have the resources and skilled planners they need to provide a proactive, efficient planning service for local communities and support housing delivery, economic growth and the provision of infrastructure. Yet we know that planning departments across the country are experiencing challenges with resourcing, recruitment, retention, and skills gaps, and that in many cases these issues are having a negative impact on service delivery.

That is why the Government are investing heavily to boost local planning department capacity and capability. At the autumn Budget 2024, the Chancellor announced a £46 million package of investment into the planning system as a one-year settlement for 2025-26. At the Budget on 26 November 2025, the Chancellor announced a further £48 million of investment over three years to support local planning authorities to attract, retain and develop skilled planners over a sustained period.

However, we recognise that more must be done to better resource LPAs and drive better outcomes including faster determination times, improved service standards and stronger performance across the planning system. To address local planning department underfunding, we included in the Planning and Infrastructure Act 2025 powers that allow the Secretary of State to delegate planning-fee setting to local planning authorities, enabling them to recover costs and reinvest to provide a more efficient and responsive planning service.

To inform the implementation of this local variation model, the Government consulted earlier this year on a new national default fee schedule, based on 90% of estimated costs, and the wider framework for local fee setting.

I am today publishing the Government's response to that consultation, which can be found on gov.uk at <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/fees-for-planning-applications>. The response confirms that the Government will proceed with a national default fee based on 90% of estimated processing costs, providing a significant uplift in resources for local planning departments and establishing a robust national baseline ahead of the introduction of local fee setting powers. The regulations required to increase national planning application fees have been laid today.

The national default fee will remain in place and apply to all LPAs, unless an authority chooses to vary from the default fee for any or all application fee categories to reflect their own costs. Regulations and guidance for local fee setting will be taken forward in due course.

To justify a variation in fees, LPAs will need to evidence that the national schedule does not cover their costs. Having considered the feedback received, we have decided that LPAs should be able to set planning fees up to a maximum of 30% above the national default fee. This strikes an appropriate balance between supporting local flexibility and cost recovery, while providing applicants and developers with greater certainty about the extent of local fee variation.

We recognise that a small number of LPAs may face exceptional cost pressures that cannot reasonably be addressed within this limit. Where this the case, LPAs will be able to consult the Secretary of State with a view to providing robust evidence to justify a proposed fee level above the 30% cap. The operation of the cap, including the use of the approval mechanism and intervention powers, will be subject to further policy development and set out through future regulations.

Taken together, these changes will enable LPAs to secure the funding necessary to strengthen their capacity, invest in skilled staff, and deliver a more efficient, high-quality planning service, helping to unlock growth and accelerate the delivery of new homes.

It is vital that increased fees translate into improved performance. We will continue to monitor the speed and quality of LPA decision making and will take

action where performance does not meet expectations. We also intend to review the performance regime to identify opportunities to strengthen it further and drive sustained improvements.

Finally, we intend to undertake a further consultation before the end of the year on the detailed design and implementation of the proposed planning-fee surcharge, including how it should operate in practice and be linked to improved performance of statutory consultees.

[HCWS291]

JUSTICE

Wedding Law Reform: England and Wales

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Mr David Lammy): Marriage is one of our most enduring and important institutions. For many couples, their wedding day is one of the most significant moments of their lives: a public expression of enduring love and commitment, through which two people enter into a legal relationship with the expectation that it will last a lifetime. The Government are committed to supporting and protecting marriage.

The current law governing weddings in England and Wales is rooted in legislation from the 18th and 19th centuries. It has not kept pace with the social and cultural changes that have shaped modern Britain. The result is a framework that is complex, inconsistent and restrictive, limiting where and how some couples can marry. As a result, many couples are unable to marry in a way which reflects their beliefs or are unable to afford the ceremony they want.

In response to the Law Commission's report on marriage reform, the Government announced their intention to modernise weddings law in England and Wales. I am today publishing the consultation "Tying the Knot: Reforming weddings law in England and Wales" which seeks views on how these reforms should operate in practice.

The Government proposals are guided by four principles.

First, reforms will introduce a simple, fair and inclusive framework for all weddings. The consultation seeks views on a clearer and more consistent legal structure, with common rules applying to different types of ceremony. The proposals would also enable non-religious belief organisations, including humanists, to conduct legally binding weddings.

Second, the reforms will expand choice about how and where couples may marry. The consultation proposes moving away from a system based primarily on the building in which a wedding takes place, towards one focused on the officiant responsible for the ceremony. This would allow greater flexibility both over the location and the form of weddings, so that ceremonies can better reflect the couple's beliefs and backgrounds, allowing them to marry in settings that are more meaningful to them. For instance, couples will be able to marry in areas of natural beauty such as forests or beaches.

The third principle is the importance of upholding the dignity and significance of marriage. As greater freedoms are introduced, the Government are clear that a wedding day must always reflect the serious and lifelong commitment that is marriage. The consultation therefore proposes a "dignity framework" which would

set clear and consistent standards both for wedding ceremonies and locations and place a legal duty on officiants to ensure that weddings meet these standards.

The fourth and final principle is that reforms will strengthen the protections against forced, predatory and sham marriages. The consultation proposes modernising the preliminaries process that takes place before the wedding day, by introducing a digital system with more effective checks and greater visibility and transparency. These proposals seek to ensure that marriages are always entered into freely, with informed consent, and are not used to exploit vulnerable people or gain unfair advantage.

The consultation also seeks views on the role and regulation of officiants, including nominated officiants from religious and non-religious belief organisations, independent officiants and maritime officiants. It asks how officiants should be authorised, trained, monitored and held accountable and what role should be played by a central regulator.

Together, these proposals will make weddings cheaper, more inclusive and more accessible. This will allow more people who want to get married to do so in a way that is meaningful to them.

Next steps

The consultation will be open for 10 weeks and will close on 24 September. We welcome views from parliamentarians, religious and non-religious belief organisations, academics, charities, interest groups, independent celebrants, support organisations, local registration services and members of the public with an interest in the weddings law of England and Wales.

The Government will consider the findings of the consultation carefully before finalising our policy positions. Any finalised reforms would then be brought forward when parliamentary time allows.

Copies of the consultation will be available here: <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/tying-the-knot-reforming-weddings-law-in-england-and-wales>. A Welsh language version and accessible versions will also be made available.

[HCWS280]

TRANSPORT

Coastguard Rescue Service

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): I am making this statement to provide an update on the coastguard rescue service. I would like to begin by recognising the extraordinary contribution made by coastguard rescue officers across the United Kingdom. For generations, HM Coastguard's coastal response has depended on people from local communities who choose to serve with professionalism, commitment and courage. That tradition remains at the heart of the coastguard rescue service today.

On 14 January 2026, the Court of Appeal found against the Maritime and Coastguard Agency in the case of the *MCA v. Groom*. This clarified that, by providing modest remuneration, the MCA had inadvertently created a worker relationship with coastguard rescue officers. A change was therefore required to restore the volunteer model, or enact the worker model, to ensure compliance with the judgment.

On 1 June it was communicated that the coastguard rescue service would change to an expenses-only volunteer model from September 2026. This was judged at the time to be the best option, based on the advice provided by the MCA, taking into account a variety of factors.

I have listened to the views and testimonies of coastguard rescue officers about how these changes might affect them. I visited a coastguard station in Southampton, met officers from Hill Head and Portsmouth teams, and heard at first hand the impact that changes could have on CROs and their families.

MPs across the House, on behalf of their constituents, have raised concerns through parliamentary questions, a Westminster Hall debate and an urgent question. This engagement has been invaluable. I have also heard the deep concerns from many in the coastguard rescue officer community about this change.

Given these concerns, my Department has undertaken further work to scrutinise the information that was provided to inform decision making. Having done so, it has become clear that parts of the information gathering process to inform MCA operational decisions—in particular, the two surveys undertaken—were not sufficiently detailed to properly reflect the impact of these changes.

I can therefore confirm that plans to move to the expenses-only volunteer model in September will not go ahead, and current arrangements will remain in place.

CROs must feel that their views have been heard, and that they are valued, respected and empowered to carry out their duties and I am committed to ensuring that we now take the time to robustly gather the information required to understand the full operational implications of future decisions, as well as the impact on individual coastguard rescue officers and the choices they will make. This will involve engaging with CROs directly, and ensuring that their views inform the decisions that we will take on the shape of the coastguard rescue service.

Over the coming months, the MCA will carry out further engagement with trade unions, coastguard rescue officers and Members of Parliament, to understand more deeply the potential impact of changes on individuals and operations. The insight gathered from this engagement will support the MCA's understanding of operational implications, and inform future decisions on the shape of the coastguard rescue service.

In the longer term, the Department for Transport will explore options for how coastguard rescue officers can continue to be rightfully recognised and rewarded and have the flexibility to continue to serve their communities.

Ensuring the safety of the public along our coastline and continuing to properly recognise those who protect our communities through their vital work remain my key priorities.

[HCWS272]

Cranston Inquiry: Initial Response

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):

On 5 February 2026 Sir Ross Cranston published the Cranston inquiry's report into the tragic events of November 2021 when at least 30 people died attempting to cross the channel in a small boat. The Government have today published an interim response to the report.

Our deepest sympathies remain with the survivors and the loved ones of those who lost their lives. I wish to express my sincere thanks to Sir Ross, for undertaking this inquiry with great care and diligence, and to all those who participated.

Search and rescue in the channel looks very different today than in 2021. Many crucial changes have been made including closer working with France, additional people and assets, and the adoption of new technologies, but it is important that we continue to learn and improve wherever possible, including learning lessons from the Cranston inquiry's report.

Of the 18 recommendations made by the inquiry, 15 were principally operational in nature and three were focused on policy matters. This interim response focuses on the 15 operational recommendations which have all been accepted in full. The response also sets out the actions that have already been taken, and additional actions that will be taken, against each recommendation.

The Department for Transport and His Majesty's Coastguard, part of the Maritime and Coastguard Agency, are dedicated to delivering our vital maritime search and rescue responsibilities and will continue to seek opportunities to learn and improve.

The Department is conducting a review of the MCA which will consider its functions, form, governance and performance. It will report to Ministers this year and inform the Government response to the outstanding recommendations of the Cranston inquiry.

I have laid a copy of the interim response in both Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS277]

Written Corrections

Thursday 16 July 2026

Ministerial Correction

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

State of Climate and Nature

The following extract is from the statement on the State of Climate and Nature on 13 July 2026.

Sarah Champion: I really welcome the statement and all the commitment that the Government are giving to nature. I know that the 30 by 30 plan is focused just on land, with the justification being that 40% of our waters are marine protected areas, but the Joint Nature Conservation Committee has said that less than 1% of

our MPAs are assessed as being truly protected. Will the Minister please tell us when she will focus the next plan on marine protection, which one hopes would include a ban on bottom trawling?

Mary Creagh: The Water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), is only too happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss bottom trawling. I believe that about 32% of our waters are currently protected.

[*Official Report*, 13 July 2026; Vol. 789, c. 656.]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Coventry East (Mary Creagh):

Mary Creagh: The Water Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy), is only too happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss bottom trawling. I believe that about **40%** of our waters are currently protected.

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**not later than
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