Thursday
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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Thursday 29 October 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.

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House of Commons

Thursday 29 October 2026

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker *in the Chair*]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: I would like to pay tribute to a long-standing member of the House administration, Sue Holt, who passed away last week. Sue worked in the House administration for 39 years and was known to many Members across both Houses for her work in the Interparliamentary Relations Office supporting international delegations. She was spirited, good humoured and hard working. She will be very much missed and our thoughts are with her family, friends and the team that she worked with. That is the sad news that I have to bring to the House.

It would be remiss of me not to mark the fact that this is the final day that Tom Goldsmith, our current Clerk of the House, will sit at the Table. Tom, I know the whole House will join me in thanking you for your service and in wishing you all the very best in the future. For those who do not know, Tom knows every "Carry On" character and every "Carry On" film, so what I would say is, "Carry on, Clerk".

Oral Answers to Questions

TRANSPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Active Travel

1. **Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): What steps she is taking to support active travel. [901767]

18. **Ms Julie Minns** (Carlisle) (Lab): What steps she is taking to promote active travel. [901788]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Justin Madders): On behalf of the Government, I add our good wishes to Tom on his final day at the Table.

The Government recognise the importance of promoting active travel. On 12 June, we published the third cycling and walking investment strategy, which sets out our ambitious targets for active travel in England. The strategy is supported by more than £4.5 billion of projected investment through to 2030, helping to make walking, wheeling and cycling a safe and attractive choice for everyday trips.

Chris Murray: The Tour de France starts in my constituency in July. Portobello high school's Girls Gone Cycling project has already got over 70 girls on to bikes, and it is now being extended across Scotland. The grand départ trophy visited Portobello this month to mark the race's first start in Scotland and to recognise the girls' excellent work. What are the Government doing to capture that energy and inspire the next generation of cyclists? May I invite Ministers to Edinburgh in this Tour de France year to meet our impressive cyclists?

Mr Speaker: It will be coming through Chorley as well.

Justin Madders: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Tour de France is an amazing opportunity to inspire more people to walk and cycle, and what a wonderful constituency for it to appear in. Active travel is a devolved matter, but officials from the Department for Transport and Transport Scotland meet regularly to discuss active travel, most recently in September. I pay tribute to the work of Portobello high sch ool.

Cycling is a fantastic way to get around while cutting emissions and keeping fit. In England, we are investing £135 million in schemes such as Bikeability cycle training, with over half a million children receiving training each year. Alongside that, we are supporting the delivery of safer networks, enabling more children to walk, wheel and cycle to school. I will look into whether we can visit to enjoy some of the benefits of these schemes, along with my hon. Friend.

Ms Minns: To continue the theme of the Tour de France, after it leaves the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray), it will finish its first leg in Carlisle. We can all agree that cycling and e-bikes play an important role in active travel. However, many Labour Members have become very concerned about illegal e-bikes that do not meet the definition of an electrically assisted pedal cycle, which are doing great damage to the reputation of cycling. Will the Minister meet me and other Labour Members to discuss a ban on the sale of illegal e-bikes, so that we can focus on the positives of cycling in this Tour de France year?

Justin Madders: I congratulate my hon. Friend on the news that the opening stage of the Tour de France will be finishing in Carlisle next year. I hope that she will be claiming the yellow jersey at that point. She makes the important point that hon. Members from across the House are concerned about illegal e-bikes. To be clear, those bikes have no place on our roads. At the moment, it is far too easy for retailers to put in the fine print that these vehicles are for use only on private land, and for consumers to then buy them and use them on public roads, without even realising that what they are doing is illegal. I am keen to explore how we tackle this issue as a Government, including through the newly established cross-Government ministerial group. In the meantime, I will be writing to retailers and online market places to remind them about their responsibility to market these products responsibly. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and other interested Members to discuss this subject.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich)(Con): May I associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, relating to the sad loss of Sue Holt? During my time as the leader of our delegation to the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe, I found Sue to be always there, always cheerful and always helpful, as did the whole of the delegation that I was privileged to lead. We shall miss her dreadfully.

Let me also support your other remarks, Mr Speaker. During my time as an acting Deputy Speaker, I leaned very heavily on the wise advice of Tom Goldsmith. I wish him every happiness in whatever he chooses to do next.

I am sure the whole House will associate itself with the support for active travel in general and for cycling in particular, but there is a downside. The growth in the number of cyclists has led to a clear growth in the number of cycling offences, with cyclists on pavements, crashing through red traffic lights and cycling at night without any lights at all. Does the Minister have any information about prosecutions relating to those offences?

Justin Madders: The right hon. Member raises very important points. We have all seen irresponsible cycling, but let us be clear that cycling on pavements is an offence, except where it is permitted. Police can and do take action against careless or dangerous cycling. As he will know, the Crime and Policing Act 2026 introduced new offences covering death or serious injury caused by dangerous, careless or inconsiderate cycling. We have recently written to food delivery companies emphasising the need for them to ensure that their riders are acting legally and responsibly when undertaking their duties. I understand what he says, and I will certainly look further at that issue.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): I associate myself with your remarks, Mr Speaker, regarding the outgoing Clerk of the House, Tom Goldsmith. We have spent many an hour sitting in various meetings together, and I very much appreciate his wise words.

E-bikes and e-scooters are an incredibly important part of active travel. My constituency has a trial of e-scooters that has been going on for several years. That is fabulous, but unfortunately it has led to a rise in illegal e-scooters. When I met Essex police recently, it told me that illegal e-scooters are difficult to intercept, but when it does confiscate them, they are difficult to store because of concerns about battery fires. The problem is that so many people, when they buy e-bikes or e-scooters, do not realise that it is illegal to ride them, and we really need to do something about that. It is the people who buy them who end up paying the price if they do not understand that they cannot use them, and Essex police has to pick up the pieces.

Justin Madders: The hon. Member makes a very fair point. One of the purposes of the cross-departmental working group is to work with Home Office officials and Ministers to understand the limitations on police actions and to see whether we can find novel methods of tackling this issue. We would be very grateful to receive any information that she has from her local constabulary.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I associate the official Opposition with your comments, Mr Speaker, regarding the sad loss of Sue Holt. We send our condolences to her family and friends. Likewise, as many of the "Carry On" films were made in Buckinghamshire, at Pinewood Studios, I wish the Clerk of the House a very happy retirement.

The Government have been warned by more than 290 organisations that their guidance on dangerous floating bus stops puts visually impaired people, deaf people and people with mobility issues at risk. Will the Minister acknowledge that cycling and active travel infrastructure must not come at the expense of disabled people's safety? Some proponents of active travel, including those in the Department for Transport, must stop compromising the safety of disabled people who simply want to use public transport.

Justin Madders: Let me be absolutely clear that this Department does not compromise the safety of anyone when they are crossing the road. The Department published statutory guidance on the provision and design of floating bus stops with Active Travel England in January, and all traffic authorities must have regard to that guidance. It provides very clear advice on floating bus stops and the need to design them with passengers, cyclists and pedestrians in mind. The most concerning and troublesome floating bus stops are no longer being built, but we continue to work on this issue. We understand the concerns, and we are absolutely determined to deal with the matter.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I join you, Mr Speaker, in paying tribute to both Sue Holt and Mr Goldsmith.

There is growing interest in the issue of illegally modified e-bikes and their use, as is shown by comments in this House and in a Westminster Hall debate last week and by our new policy passed at last month's Liberal Democrat conference. We need to ensure that e-bikes support, rather than hinder, the growth of active travel. The Minister has talked about the cross-Government working group, but will he commit to creating an action plan based on that work to tackle the issue, with clear timescales and owners? If he did, he would have our support.

Justin Madders: I can assure the Liberal Democrat spokesperson that there is already an action plan. We have identified a number of issues, building on some of the work and recommendations of the all-party parliamentary group for cycling and walking, and those will be fed into the cross-departmental working group. The Government hear what the hon. Member and, indeed, all hon. Members are saying about this issue: we need to make our roads safe. We need to get this plague of illegal e-bikes sorted out once and for all, and this Government are determined to do that.

Public Transport: Nuisance Behaviour

2. **Tom Rutland** (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to help tackle nuisance behaviour on public transport. [901768]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): Last week, the Government launched the "Share the carriage, not the noise" campaign with rail operators across the country, reminding rail passengers to use headphones or potentially face fines of up to £1,000. The Bus Services Act 2025 gives local authorities new powers to crack down on nuisance behaviour on buses, including listening to loud music, littering, vaping and antisocial behaviour. Our new guidance will help authorities put these powers into practice and make journeys safer and more comfortable for passengers.

Tom Rutland: There is nothing more irritating than being sat on a train or a bus and being subjected to someone scrolling through endless videos or blasting music out loud, so I welcome the Department's action against these headphone dodgers. Can my hon. Friend set out how this policy will be enforced to ensure that we reclaim our public transport from nuisance passengers and restore some tranquillity to our journeys?

Simon Lightwood: Absolutely. Our "Share the journey, not the noise" campaign has started a national conversation about the standards we should all expect on trains and reminded those few who fall short that there are fines in place. We expect that most passengers will comply with requests to watch videos on silent or use headphones, but there are clear routes for escalation if they do not, up to and including prosecution. Local authorities can now introduce bus byelaws covering excessive noise, with fixed on-the-spot penalties of up to £100.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): While we Liberal Democrats are very pleased that the Government have listened to our calls to tackle headphone dodgers, I did not really hear an answer to the previous question. How is this policy going to be visibly enforced, so that public transport users in Bath can be sure that something is happening?

Simon Lightwood: Antisocial behaviour on buses is tackled through wider crime and policing laws, and transport safety officers—of which the Department has funded trials—will also be used. This is about giving local transport authorities the powers to enforce these byelaws, which obviously came about with Liberal Democrats working on the Bus Services Bill Committee. We have been tackling nuisance behaviour on public transport for a long time—it is an ongoing priority. We invested £2.5 million in the transport safety officer pilots, and have taken targeted action against nuisance behaviour and published guidance so that others can adopt best practice. Of course, the Bus Services Act gives every local authority the power to introduce those byelaws.

Railway Stations: Disability Access

3. **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve disability access to train stations. [901769]

7. **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve disability access to train stations. [901774]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): For too many disabled people, the railway remains a system of barriers rather than connections. To improve disability access at stations, we continue to deliver step-free access through the Access for All programme. Since July 2024, we have completed improvements at 31 stations across the country; a further 22 are in progress on site, and 36 are in design. Last month, we committed to make level boarding from train to platform a baseline expectation for all new Great British Railways trains.

Catherine Fookes: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer, but over 1,500 people have signed my petition to make Chepstow station fully accessible. Currently, disabled travellers need to go east into England, cross over a road, get back on a train and travel back through Chepstow to go west to Cardiff, so Chepstow residents were incredibly disappointed that they missed out on the last round of Access for All funding, despite being nearly at the top of the priority list given by the Welsh Government to Westminster. Can the Secretary of State please confirm when the next Access for All round will begin, and when Chepstow station will be fully accessible to residents?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend paints a vivid picture of how critical accessible stations are, not just to her constituents but to people travelling across the country. She will know that Chepstow was nominated for Access for All funding in 2022, but was not selected for funding by the previous Government. Future funding, beyond what I spoke about in my first answer, will be considered at the next spending review, and I would be keen to work with my hon. Friend to understand how the case of Chepstow station can be raised at that time.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Disabled residents and anyone who relies on the lift at Bishop's Stortford train station have found it consistently out of service in recent months. That is making it harder for them to get to work, school and other activities. I understand that discussions regarding a long-term fix are ongoing, but our community still lacks clarity on what those works will involve and when they might take place. The Rail Minister kindly supported my campaign to get the platform 1 lift at Hertford North train station over the line. I would be grateful if Ministers could lend their support again by asking Network Rail and Greater Anglia to bring forward a clear plan for restoring reliable step-free access at Bishop's Stortford.

Heidi Alexander: I am very sorry to hear about the problems that my hon. Friend's constituents are experiencing at Bishop's Stortford station. I am aware of those problems and know that they were further impacted by the extreme temperatures this summer. A full lift replacement is planned for 2028, but I realise that that will sound like a long way off to his constituents. In the short term, I will ask my officials to meet Greater Anglia to explore how we can alleviate disruption for residents, and I would be happy to keep him updated on that.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): May I just put it on the record that the Tour de France will be passing through my constituency twice?

Will the Secretary of State investigate the position on Kirkconnel station in my constituency, on the Nith valley line? Kirkconnel is a former mining community with an older population, and many people are unable to use the station because of infirmity or poor mobility.

Heidi Alexander: As the right hon. Gentleman will know, matters relating to the railways are devolved, but I will look into the accessibility issues at the station he refers to and progress any necessary conversations with colleagues in the Scottish Government.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): One of the lifts at Woking station was out of service for 40 days in one year, and constituents in West Byfleet have complained that their station's platform is too high for them to use safely. What is the Secretary of State doing to make sure that stations on the South Western Railway line are accessible for all?

Heidi Alexander: As I said in my earlier answer, we do have a programme of work happening across the country at the moment, whether that is further design work on stations or construction works that are under way. In reference to the two stations that the hon. Gentleman mentioned—Woking and West Byfleet—I would be happy to look at the details and discuss with him whether future improvements could come forward as part of the next spending review.

Airport Drop-off Charges

4. **Mrs Sharon Hodgson** (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of increases in airport drop-off fees on airport users. [901770]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): The Government recognise that airport drop-off charges can be a source of frustration for passengers, particularly where payment arrangements are unclear, signage is difficult to follow or motorists face additional charges for late payment. Recognising those concerns about the impact of airport drop-off charges on passengers, the Government have committed to undertake a review to ensure that travel remains accessible and passengers are treated fairly.

Mrs Hodgson: I thank the Minister for that answer, but I am sure he recognises that drop-off charges at UK airports have risen sharply in recent years, with Newcastle now charging £6, while London Stansted and Gatwick both charge £10, even though drop-offs are totally free at most major European airports, including eight of Europe's 10 busiest. The airports justify it as a much-needed income stream, but for many travellers it feels more like pinching the pockets of hard-working families. The Minister mentioned the review; is he able to elaborate on the promise to review those charges? Will the review address the issues of affordability and accessibility for my constituents?

Keir Mather: Let me be clear: we expect airports to treat passengers fairly and to ensure that travel remains accessible. The review is going to look at the impacts of airport drop-off charges on users of airport services. The detailed scope will be developed as part of the review process, but it could include affordability, accessibility, travel behaviour and the experiences of different groups of passengers.

More broadly, the Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill, which has just been through Committee, seeks to modernise the United Kingdom's aviation legislative framework. One of its key objectives is to strengthen consumer rights and protections, particularly for those who travel with disabilities.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I really welcome the Government's U-turn on adopting Conservative policy and deciding to review airport drop-off charges, but in response to my written question, the Minister did not confirm that the Government's anti-car surface access targets, the more than 100% increase in business rates that many airports have faced, or the crippling increases in employment taxes will form part of that review. Will the Minister ensure that all these important factors form part of the inquiry into what is leading to airport drop-off charges soaring under his Government?

Keir Mather: The shadow Secretary of State does not seem to want to face up to the fact that this Government are taking decisive action to help our airports and airlines, whether it is signing off airport expansion across the country or modernising our airspace to provide community benefit alongside efficiencies. I have already been clear that the review will look at questions of affordability and access to airports. That is the right way to ensure that we have a system that is proportionate for consumers and airport users while addressing the fact that, as he mentioned, planning considerations are often built in with mode share targets that are linked to airport drop-off charges. This Government will take a proportionate approach to that review and to the aviation sector as a whole.

Roadwork Disruption: Northern Ireland

5. **Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What discussions her Department has had with the Northern Ireland Executive on minimising disruption to road users during essential roadworks. [901771]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): My Department regularly discusses roadworks and other highways matters with the Northern Ireland Executive through the UK Roads Leadership Group.

Jim Shannon: I thank the Secretary of State for her answer; I am glad to hear that she has discussions with the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly. Local businesses on the A25 Castleward Road in Strangford have seen their trade reduced by some 90%, and I believe there is a sensible solution: to work at night. I have suggested that to the Department back home as a way of alleviating the impact on local businesses. Will the Minister ensure that those discussions take place? At a time when businesses are struggling to meet their basic staffing and operating costs, it is essential to protect our traders.

Heidi Alexander: I completely understand why the hon. Gentleman raises these matters. Whether it is people travelling on the roads or businesses that are impacted by roadworks, the impacts are felt across the entirety of the UK. We have discussed these matters through the UK Roads Leadership Group, and I can tell him that a code of practice was recently published. It provides guidance for authorities on how to better co-ordinate roadworks with neighbouring authorities and utilities—by considering overnight works, for example—to minimise disruption.

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): The Street Works (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) Order 2007 allows the Northern Ireland Executive to bring in a lane rental scheme to charge contractors a daily rate for disruptive roadworks, but they have chosen not to take this position. Will the Secretary of State extol the virtues of the lane rental scheme to the Northern Ireland Executive? While she is at it, will she take the final steps to give the lane rental powers under the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 to the Mayor of London, to cut traffic in Ealing Southall too?

Mr Speaker: We are struggling to stick to Northern Ireland. Pick what you can out of that, Secretary of State.

Heidi Alexander: I will do my best to address both elements of my hon. Friend's question. From my experience as the Deputy Mayor of London, I know the difference that lane rental schemes can make to manage the most disruptive impacts. I will certainly pursue discussions with the Northern Ireland Executive about lane rental, because I know it could make a real difference in that part of the UK as well.

Passenger Rail Services

6. **Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail services. [901772]

10. **Jo Stevens** (Cardiff East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve passenger rail services. [901778]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): For too long, our railways have not been run in the service of passengers. We are turning this around, with six operators already brought into public ownership under this Government and the renationalisation of Great Western Railway on 13 December. Next year, the creation of Great British Railways will bring the management of track and train together, ending decades of fragmentation, and delivering better and more reliable services for passengers.

Dave Robertson: My constituents rely on the Cross-City line to get them in and out of Birmingham, but the last train back from Birmingham in the evening does not run as far as Lichfield, meaning that we cannot make the most of the nightlife there. As Christmas approaches, does the Secretary of State agree that it is time to change that and boost the evening service from New Street to Lichfield City, so that my constituents can make the best of Birmingham's Frankfurt Christmas market?

Heidi Alexander: I thank my hon. Friend for his tireless campaigning on rail issues, and I know these services would make a real difference for his constituents over the Christmas period. I welcome the work done by West Midlands Trains and the local community on developing proposals for this trial. I think our publicly owned railways should work in the service of passengers, and these extra trains would be a great example of that. I very much back his call for this trial to take place.

Jo Stevens: I thank my right hon. Friend, because my Cardiff East constituents were absolutely delighted with the announcement yesterday of £30 million for Cardiff Parkway station. Mine is the only constituency in the capital city without a train station, so this will be transformational for growth, jobs and travel. Before the Senedd election, the Welsh Labour Government agreed to a funding contribution, alongside private investors, to ensure that this project is delivered. Can she please confirm whether, in the five months since that election, the minority Plaid Government have said they will honour that intergovernmental agreement?

Heidi Alexander: It is for the new Welsh Government to confirm their own contribution to this project, so that we can get on and deliver it as quickly as possible. To my knowledge, no such confirmation has been provided to date. I am really pleased that we confirmed our contribution in the Budget yesterday, and I congratulate my right hon. Friend on her campaigning on this issue for her constituents. She was an excellent Welsh Secretary, and it was an absolute delight to work alongside her and start to put right the historical wrongs of under-investment in the Welsh railways.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): May I constructively suggest a way in which the Secretary of State could help three Cabinet colleagues—the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Secretary, who is building a major reservoir in my constituency; the Housing Secretary, who has big plans within Cambridgeshire; and the Chancellor, who often talks about the Oxford-Cambridge arc? Securing a light rail link to the reservoir will shape the public response to it, but the Department for Transport currently does not seem to be involved at all with the other Departments. I do not expect her to be familiar with the scheme—it is primarily for one of her colleagues—but could she write to me setting out what her Department might do to help those other Departments deliver on their aims?

Heidi Alexander: This Government are investing considerably in improving rail services and public transport connections in Cambridgeshire. I would be happy to follow up on the detail of the right hon. Member's proposal. I would just say that, with the East West Rail proposals linking Oxford to Cambridgeshire and the opening of the new station at Cambridge South, significant investment is going into this part of the country, but I will come back to him with the detail on his point.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): In yesterday's Budget, there was one mention of Northern Powerhouse Rail. One of the easiest ways to deliver benefit for passengers would be to unlock the indefinitely paused York area capacity scheme. Will the Secretary of State commit to continuing to look at this, and make

sure that passengers in Harrogate and Knaresborough, and along that line, get trains when they need them with the service they would expect?

Heidi Alexander: As part of Northern Powerhouse Rail, we are prioritising improvements in the Yorkshire region, such as services from York to Leeds, and between Sheffield, Bradford and Leeds. Indeed, I was in Bradford just last week to make the announcement about a brand-new station at Bradford, which is much needed. I know the hon. Member continues to champion the case for the York area capacity study. We will continue to keep all of this under review, because we must provide the right number of trains, where people need them and when they need them.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): The Penistone line, which runs through my constituency, serves over half a million people, eight constituencies, six hospitals, four universities and a network of colleges, schools and GP surgeries, but it has only one train an hour. Our Government are funding phase 1 of upgrading the line, but further funding is needed to deliver phase 2 to enable two trains an hour along our line—the spine that connects south and west Yorkshire. Does the Secretary of State agree with me that delivering both phases of the upgrade together will most effectively secure two trains an hour, and will she meet me ahead of the next spending review to discuss delivering the full upgrade and two trains an hour to ensure growth in every postcode along the line?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend and I have met on this issue, and she is right to say that the Government are making that investment in phase 1. I remember discussing it with her when I was at Sheffield station for the Northern Powerhouse Rail announcement earlier this year. I would be happy to continue those conversations about phase 2 as we head into the next spending review.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): My London constituency does not have a tube service. My residents are entirely reliant on South Western Railway services to get to work, school and elsewhere. Stations such as Hampton and Whitton have seen passenger footfall close to or exceeding half a million in the last year, yet the services are infrequent and less reliable since nationalisation. Will the Secretary of State back my call, supported by thousands of local residents with the timetable review under way, for far more frequent and reliable services for such stations?

Heidi Alexander: The hon. Lady is right to mention the timetable review that is under way. I would be happy to discuss with South Western the options with regard to Hampton and Whitton. I would just note that one of the benefits of renationalising South Western Railways has been the roll-out of the new Arterio fleet of air-conditioned trains that are providing more capacity. I also recognise the important work that South Western has done to reduce the number of cancellations that come about as a consequence of the unavailability of staff. We need to get the basics right on South Western to provide the service that she and her constituents deserve.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Alison Griffiths (Bognor Regis and Littlehampton) (Con): Labour promised that nationalisation would deliver a more reliable railway. Two years on, it is getting worse. Between April and June, all Government-run operators saw cancellations rise or punctuality fall. Ministers say that Great British Railways will turn that around when it launches next year. They promised its implementation timetable and draft licence consultation this autumn. On this last sitting day of October, neither has yet appeared. When will they, and when will passengers see the improvements they were promised?

Heidi Alexander: May I start by congratulating the hon. Lady on her appointment to the Opposition Front Bench? I think this is the first opportunity that I have had a chance to do so from the Dispatch Box. She is right in some respects. We do need to make more progress on improving punctuality and reliability, and I cannot pretend that I am happy with performance across the entirety of the rail network at the moment. However, I would gently point out to her that at the last reporting period, cancellations across publicly-owned operators were 3.9% compared to 4.9% for operators yet to transfer and still in private ownership. On punctuality, 82.6% of stops by publicly-owned operators were within three minutes of their scheduled arrival time, compared with just 73.8% for operators yet to transfer.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): A £1 billion order for 29 new five-car, battery-electric trains for TransPennine Express was recently announced. While welcome, it has raised some eyebrows, with *Modern Railways* magazine estimating that the cost is nearly double that of conventional electric-only trains. It would cost a staggering £25.2 billion for similar deals to replace England's passenger trains that have diesel engines. Are we on the right value-for-money track with this approach to rolling stock specification and procurement?

Heidi Alexander: I was delighted to be in Derby a few weeks ago to announce the new fleet of battery-electric trains for TransPennine Express. It is a £1.2 billion investment. Included in that are hundreds of millions of pounds of maintenance costs for the duration of that contract. We are working on procurements for both Southeastern trains and Northern trains at the moment. Value for money and affordability will be central to the decisions we make on those procurements.

Air Passenger Experience

8. **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): What recent progress she has made on helping to improve the experience of air passengers through regulation of the aviation industry. [901775]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): Through our Civil Aviation (Consumer Protection and Regulatory Reform) Bill, we are cutting down on the cost and the stress of flying for families across the country. Our changes mean that airlines on all UK flights will be required to seat children under the age of 14 with a parent free of charge, and that simple name errors on bookings can be fixed for free, ending unfair and irritating charges.

Chris Vince: If my Harlow constituency was not brilliant enough, we also have an international airport on our doorstep, with Stansted airport providing jobs for over 1,000 people from Harlow and even more on apprenticeships. With the planning application for the expansion of Stansted airport approved, will the Minister put his backing behind this vital project and agree to work with local partners to ensure it really benefits my constituents of Harlow?

Keir Mather: This Government welcome the £1.1 billion investment into Stansted by Manchester Airports Group, which will transform the airport and provide wider benefits to the local area, including Harlow, for which my hon. Friend is a determined champion. The investment is a great example of the conditions for growth in the aviation sector that this Government have created. It is going to support jobs, local businesses and skills, with the planned expansion of Stansted airport college in collaboration with Harlow college, supported by £5 million of funding by the Department for Education. This shows that the Government have a strategy that is delivering for both the aviation sector more broadly and for communities like Harlow.

Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency

9. **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): What assessment she has made of the adequacy of the DVLA's performance levels. [901777]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Justin Madders): In 2025-26, the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency issued 12.3 million driving licences, processed over 100 million individual customer transactions and issued 18.5 million vehicle registration certificates. We recognise that improvement is needed on the time taken to process medical driving licence applications, and plans are in place to address this.

Dr Evans: An increasing number of constituents are coming to me with problems getting their licence. One example was a lady who had dementia; she passed all the tests but had months of delays trying to get her licence, eventually having to take her complaint to the chief executive to get an answer, only for the licence to be backdated, meaning she will have to go through the whole rigmarole again in a few months' time. That is not an isolated case. I have constituents with diabetes and epilepsy, who are all suffering. What is the Minister doing to ensure we can speed the process up so that people can get back on the road as soon as they are medically fit?

Justin Madders: I recognise the hon. Member's concerns, and I have asked for further information on some the matters he has raised. We are taking steps to tackle the issue. We have introduced a new digital casework system, we are recruiting additional staff, and the automation of routine processes is happening. Things are moving in the right direction. In 2022-23, the average number of working days to complete a medical licensing application was 89; this time last year it was 76; it is now down to 66; and we want to get it down to 45 by March next year. I can assure the hon. Member that we will do everything in our power to ensure that happens.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I am not certain that the Minister is right when he says that the DVLA is getting better. Its operating surplus is forecast to collapse by 54%. The DVLA is spending £96 million a year on postage and printing, despite a plan to move 85% of transactions online. The DVLA has committed to delivering £5 million in efficiency savings, yet expenditure is forecast to increase by £59 million in the same year. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) said, the position on medical licensing is out of control. The answer to a written parliamentary question from August revealed that the average time for a bus and lorry driver to get a decision is still an unacceptably high 64.8 days. Can the Minister come back with a detailed plan on how his Department is going to get a grip on what can only be described as a failing Government agency?

Justin Madders: Well, if the agency was failing, then that was the condition we found it in when the hon. Member's party left office. I am not entirely sure what he is complaining about. He is saying that we are spending more money on the agency, but that is to increase the number of staff, to improve automation and digital services take-up, and to make the service more efficient. There is a plan and it is working—the hon. Member should support it.

Regional Airports: Short-haul Destinations

11. **Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): What plans she has to work with regional airports to increase the number of short-haul destinations available. [901779]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): Regional airports are vital gateways for passengers and major sources of local employment. The UK aviation sector operates in a commercial market, with airports attracting passengers and airlines responding to demand through route development. The UK Government support airport growth across the country. Through the Aviation Council, which I co-chair, and its regional connectivity working group, we are examining the challenges and opportunities facing regional airports.

Steve Darling: Regional airports, such as Exeter airport, should be engines of economic growth. However, one often sees that airport services gravitate towards larger regional airports. Will the Minister give further information on how he is seeking to ensure that more peripheral airports, such as Exeter, are strongly supported to be the engines for economic change that they could be?

Keir Mather: We need to ensure that regional airports like Exeter and Newquay have the connectivity into larger airports that they need. Through our consultation on the Heathrow expansion national policy statement, we were dedicated and focused on how to increase that connectivity via either public service obligation connections or routes into the airport through a regional fund to better facilitate those connections. More broadly, whether it be through airspace modernisations to facilitate better connectivity or by ensuring that regional airports are better protected against fluctuations in the price of jet fuel, the Government are committed to taking

comprehensive action to support the sector, recognising that it can serve as a catalyst both for economic growth and for the economic connectivity for the hon. Gentleman's constituents that he rightly points to.

Noah Law (St Austell and Newquay) (Lab): Earlier this year, we saw an issue with Cornwall council being unable to secure any eligible bids for its public service obligation service from Newquay airport. Since then, the council has been scrabbling around trying to secure new commercial routes, which is very welcome and much needed. What consideration has the Minister given to more flexible PSO arrangements that might allow airports such as Newquay to bid in with a more commercial outlook on how we get that support?

Keir Mather: PSO routes are crucial to connecting areas of the country such as Cornwall, which serve as regional economic catalysts to the nation's capital. I note that since the end of the London-Newquay PSO in April, commercial connectivity has been retained, but I know that my hon. Friend is eager to see this work go further. The Department remains open to continued engagement with Cornwall council and options to maintain connectivity, and I will bear in mind his points about more flexibility in PSO arrangements as part of those discussions.

Rail Services: Bolton North East

12. **Kirith Entwistle** (Bolton North East) (Lab): What steps she is taking to improve rail services in Bolton North East constituency. [901781]

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): We are investing in the rail network in the Greater Manchester area, including the Bolton-Manchester line and services to Blackburn. These investments will improve reliability, which, combined with our funding for longer trains with more seats, will substantially boost capacity. We are also investing in key stations, including crucial upgrades at Salford and Manchester Victoria.

Kirith Entwistle: When I worked in Manchester, my train from Hall i' th' Wood station was regularly delayed, cancelled or overcrowded thanks to Northern Rail's two-carriage service at rush hour. Ten years on, commuters at both Hall i' th' Wood and Bromley Cross stations are still being failed by Northern Rail, and, with no Metrolink access, it is no wonder that Boltonians feel left behind. What are our Government doing to connect Bolton to the 21st century?

Heidi Alexander: I understand how frustrating it is when services are delayed, cancelled or overcrowded. The Rail Minister has been incredibly clear with Northern management that their level of performance, including in Bolton, has been unacceptable, and they have been instructed to produce an improvement plan. Beyond that, Northern is talking to other train operators to see whether they have additional trains that could be used to increase capacity and reliability. As I mentioned earlier, early planning work is under way to purchase up to 450 new trains for Northern, which could include the replacement of the ageing units on the Clitheroe-Bolton line.

Royal National Lifeboat Institution

13. **Matthew Patrick** (Wirral West) (Lab): Whether she is taking steps to support the work of the RNLI. [901782]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): This Government are proud to support the RNLI and the work of its volunteers to save lives at sea. The RNLI is a charity that is independent of Government, but it is a crucial delivery partner of His Majesty's Coastguard's maritime search and rescue service. I greatly value the contribution of the RNLI and all its volunteers and staff for their lifesaving efforts and wholeheartedly thank them for their service.

Matthew Patrick: I thank the Minister for his answer and for his full-throated support of the RNLI. He will be delighted to learn that five of the brilliant volunteers at West Kirby and Hoylake RNLI stations in my constituency have been awarded long service awards. However, they and the whole RNLI family are having to deal with a disinformation campaign run by cowards hiding behind a balaclava or a keyboard. I ask the Minister how he will give the RNLI his support and whether he could show some of that Wirral spirit, because Wirral is backing the RNLI every step of the way.

Keir Mather: I could not agree more strongly. I pay tribute to the five volunteers recognised in my hon. Friend's constituency and to RNLI volunteers across the country, who provide a vital public service. I am clear that there is no space for the disgraceful abuse and intimidation we have seen recently directed at volunteers and staff. I have written to the RNLI to express my support and condemn this behaviour. I am visiting an RNLI station in Bridlington later today, and have hosted a "cuppa for the crew" in my constituency, which I encourage hon. Members to do. I want to reassure my hon. Friend that the police have confirmed that RNLI lifeguard crews are recognised as emergency workers under the Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018, and therefore anyone who assaults them could face up to two years in prison—and rightly so.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): Saving lives at sea is not a political choice but a moral duty that we are all proud that our RNLI has been undertaking for over 200 years. RNLI volunteers are infinitely more patriotic than those who seek to abuse them. Will the Minister share with us how he will better protect and afford safety to those valiant RNLI volunteers in places like Eastbourne and across the country so that they can continue their life-saving work?

Keir Mather: Let me reassure the hon. Gentleman that, as a result of their being emergency workers, criminal penalties apply to any such abuse, discrimination or assault. The Government take enforcement of that incredibly seriously, and it is something that I will be certain to monitor extremely closely alongside my Home Office colleagues.

Along with the Prime Minister and other colleagues in this House, I have written to the RNLI to express my support. The hon. Gentleman is right to say that they

represent the best of British values. Coming from ordinary backgrounds themselves, they volunteer their time to go out to save people at sea. They are the best of our society and they deserve our protection, respect and support. This Government will stand behind them every step of the way.

Topical Questions

T1. [901792] **Andy McDonald** (Middlesbrough and Thornaby East) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): I am sure I speak for the whole House when I say that our thoughts are with those affected by yesterday's horrific train crash in Spain. Our Rail Accident Investigation Branch has reached out to offer assistance, and I have written to my counterpart, Minister Puente, to formally offer my condolences.

Yesterday's Budget gave families the breathing space that they need, and transport is no exception. By extending the 5p fuel duty cut to July next year and lowering the cost of using local public electric vehicle chargers, we are putting money back in the pockets of Britain's drivers. The Budget also confirmed a total investment of £300 million to upgrade Leeds station: breathing space today backed by investment for the future. This builds on the everyday fixes that we are already making to improve people's journeys, whether that is the 7,000 miles of road resurfaced this year, the ending of unfair charges for air passengers, the cracking down on antisocial behaviour on public transport or the £2 bus fare cap coming back in January. Those are just some of the ways we are making everyday journeys better, safer and easier.

Andy McDonald: I associate myself with the Secretary of State's remarks concerning the Spanish rail disaster.

Research from Common Wealth estimates that £129 billion was spent on outsourcing public services in 2024-25, generating billions in private profits. I welcome the announcement from the First Secretary of State of a dedicated insourcing unit. Will the Secretary of State meet with recognised trade unions to develop a Department for Transport insourcing strategy, including across rail and other transport services, to improve value for money, rebuild public capacity and protect workers?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is entirely right to raise the opportunity presented by the work being led by the First Secretary of State. I meet with the leadership of the trade unions regularly, and I know that this issue has already been raised at the Rail Engagement Group. Our lifting of the ban on new municipal bus companies in the Bus Services Act 2025 also presents opportunities. Where insourcing drives better outcomes for passengers and better value for the taxpayer, we should undoubtedly look at it.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Mr Richard Holden (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I associate myself with the comments of the Secretary of State about the Spanish rail crash.

On 18 June, the Secretary of State said in a statement that the Heathrow expansion is "critical to national growth". On 27 September the Prime Minister said, however:

"Principally, it's a matter for London and Londoners".

And last week, in response to a written parliamentary question, the Under-Secretary of State for Transport, the hon. Member for Selby (Keir Mather), said that the Government will consider the Transport Committee's recommendations before deciding next steps. Does she agree with herself, the Prime Minister or her junior Minister?

Heidi Alexander: The Government's position on Heathrow expansion was set out in the draft Heathrow expansion national policy statement that we consulted on in the summer. We are working through the responses to it very carefully. The right hon. Gentleman will know that this is a very significant, privately financed infrastructure project, and it is right that we look thoroughly at all the evidence, including the independent economic analysis and the really strict tests on climate, noise and air quality. It is entirely right that the Prime Minister wants to look closely at the detail of such a nationally significant project.

Mr Holden: I thank the Secretary of State for that clarification.

Last week, Chancellor Merz set out his plans to scrap the ban on petrol and diesel cars across the EU, saying, "We stand by drivers. We stand with our industry. We stand with open innovation in technology…the internal combustion ban is off the table." When will this Transport Secretary listen to British business, the unions and British drivers and scrap the zero emission vehicle mandate that is costing British jobs and costing British taxpayers?

Heidi Alexander: I say gently to the right hon. Gentleman that the ZEV mandate is the rarest of things: a policy brought in by his Government that I agree with. Sadly, after a good start, even they managed to mess that up. When we came into office, we had to reinstate the 2030 phase-out date for petrol and diesel cars. It is important that we provide certainty to consumers and industry. I believe that approach is working: nearly a third of new cars sold are electric vehicles, up from around a quarter a year ago.

T4. [901795] **Mr Alex Barros-Curtis** (Cardiff West) (Lab): The recent announcement that 7 Steel will supply Heathrow expansion with low-carbon steel production will be essential both to decarbonise our transport infrastructure and to protect Welsh workers. What steps are the Government taking to ensure that lower-carbon Welsh steel is used in all major rail and transport infrastructure projects?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Keir Mather): Welsh steelmaking remains a key part of the UK Government's steel strategy, with Wales expected to account for around half of future UK steelmaking capacity. We are committed to a sustainable UK steel sector and encourage the use of lower-carbon materials, recognising that electric arc furnace steel can provide a lower-carbon alternative in infrastructure projects across the country.

T2. [901793] **Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): Unlike my constituents, Mr Speaker, you are lucky enough not to have to suffer the weekly misery of South Western Railway. I surveyed my constituents recently and asked them what they wanted from the first nationalised rail service, now that we are paying for it. Their priorities were clear: they want more services from Liphook, more carriages at Haslemere, faster journeys from Farnham and any access at all from Whitehill and Bordon. Will the Minister commit to meeting me to get those four rather simple things done soon?

Keir Mather: As the hon. Member has referenced, SWR is developing proposals for a refreshed timetable, which focuses on improving reliability and the resilience of services. Plans will be shared through public consultation with passengers and stakeholders later this year, and I encourage his constituents to contribute to that. In the meantime, I will ensure that I facilitate a meeting with the Rail Minister on the topic he raises.

T5. [901796] **Lola McEvoy** (Darlington) (Lab): The Department is aware of my increasing frustration at balaclava-clad yobs tearing up and down on dirtbikes in Darlington. Indeed, the rest of the House is increasingly frustrated and we need action. Will the Minister and the Department commit to licensing or registration at the point of sale to aid the valiant effort of our police forces in the north-east?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Justin Madders): I commend my hon. Friend for her work in this area. She is right that these yobbos are causing misery for many communities. We are determined to see retailers cleaning up their act, and I am keen to explore how we tackle the issue. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend, through my cross-departmental ministerial group, to see how we can take the matter further.

T3. [901794] **Victoria Collins** (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): Harpenden Thameslink services are facing Luton airport expansion, the Bedford Universal studios development and 9,000 more houses coming down the line from this Government, following a local plan. All the while, passengers such as Emma are facing expensive, cramped and unreliable services. What are the Government doing to improve capacity, services and pricing?

Keir Mather: GTR is working with Network Rail and local partners to explore potential timetable, rolling stock and infrastructure improvements to increase capacity through Harpenden. That follows long-term demand forecasting, which indicates continued passenger growth driven by planned housing development and the expansion of Luton airport, which the hon. Lady references. I will be glad to continue working with her to ensure we get the capacity improvements that we need over time to meet the needs of her constituents.

T6. [901797] **Catherine Fookes** (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Most of us in Monmouthshire have to rely on our cars for every single journey, so I am over the moon that, following meetings with National Express, it will bring services back to the Monmouth area next week, with coaches stopping at Raglan services, so passengers can travel from Haverfordwest to Birmingham. Will the Minister come with me on a journey on the coach so that he can see how important the route is for my constituents?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Simon Lightwood): I am delighted to join my hon. Friend in welcoming that new coach service to her constituency. This Government are supporting operators by extending the 5p fuel duty cut until next July. I will of course check my diary, but I encourage all hon. Members to get on and book their seat; there are nine castles and some fantastic countryside to visit.

T8. [901799] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I think it is fair to say that there is disappointment on both sides of the House, following Wrexham, Shropshire and Midlands Railway's open-access application being rejected because of concerns about capacity and reliability on the west coast main line. Is the Secretary of State confident that nationalising Avanti will result in the punctuality improvements and extra pathways needed to accommodate new services, which I hope can result in WSMR stopping at Aldridge railway station?

Heidi Alexander: I share the right hon. Lady's disappointment in the decision of the Office of Rail and Road. It can independently make that decision. My had supported the application for that new direct service, which would also have served places such as Shrewsbury. I will work with Network Rail, train operators and Great British Railways, when it is established, to consider all options for new direct services to London, as well as for that part of the route. Some of the investment coming in future years could enable that to happen, because I know how important that is to her constituents and other travellers in the region.

T7. [901798] **Lewis Atkinson** (Sunderland Central) (Lab): As the Government prepare their taxi and private hire vehicle Bill, will the Minister ensure that local authorities such as Sunderland have the enforcement powers and resources that they need to regulate all vehicles operating in their area, regardless of where those vehicles are registered?

Simon Lightwood: I fully recognise my hon. Friend's concerns. Taxis and private hire vehicles are regulated through an outdated and fragmented framework, and this Government intend to bring forward a draft Bill to address that. My officials are also working hard to commence the powers from the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 that will let enforcement officers suspend any licence used in their area if there are immediate safety concerns.

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): My constituents have suffered delays, cancellations, and trains that are meant to go from London to Ely or King's Lynn terminating early at Cambridge. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss how we can take forward the Ely junction improvements, which will increase capacity and make our railway more reliable?

Keir Mather: We of course recognise the strategic importance of the Ely area capacity enhancement programme, and the significant benefits that it could

deliver for passengers, freight and economic growth, both in the hon. Lady's constituency and across the region. We will actively consider this scheme as further funding opportunities become available, and I will do my level best to ensure that she is involved in those conversations.

T9. [901800] **Dr Rosena Allin-Khan** (Tooting) (Lab): A second runway at Gatwick airport will be a lightning rod for our economy. It will bring £1 billion in economic benefits and 14,000 new jobs, many of which will benefit the south Londoners I serve. Now that it has the green light and work is about to begin, what support are the Government giving this important infrastructure project?

Keir Mather: The Government recognise the importance of this project, which is why we approved the development consent order. It is now for Gatwick airport to progress with this privately funded project. My officials continue to engage with the airport to understand how Government can help with the project's delivery, and I encourage my hon. Friend to continue to work with me on how we can best support that process.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): In May, the Government announced £57 million in nationwide funding for wi-fi on trains. Some other parts of the country have had many rail upgrades, but the south-west has terrible rail lines, and delays due to the High Speed 2 works at Old Oak Common. Will the Minister commit to a minimum fair share of £12 million for the south-west, to cover the entire Great Western Railway network of 93 inter-city express trains?

Heidi Alexander: The fact that Great Western Railways will come into public ownership on 13 December presents an opportunity. The hon. Gentleman talks about the importance of wi-fi; I hope to have more to say on that in the months ahead, because I know how important good connectivity is for people who use our railways.

T10. [901801] **Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): The extension of the fuel duty cut to July 2027 will be welcomed by my Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes constituents, many of whom rely on their cars for work purposes. What more are the Government doing to help reduce the cost of motoring for those who use their vehicles for work purposes?

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend is completely right to raise the subject of the pressures that motorists and businesses face. In addition to the extension of the temporary 5p cut to fuel duty, we are also maintaining the road tax holiday for heavy goods vehicles until summer next year. We are making public charging cheaper for those who have already made the switch to an electric vehicle, but do not have a driveway to charge at home, and we continue to offer money off the purchase price of more than 60 models of electric car.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): The village of Isham in my constituency is sandwiched between Wellingborough and Kettering, and for 40 years it has been battling to get a bypass. The situation has now got worse because of a huge development of warehousing, yet the bypass has been refused funding. May I invite the Minister to Isham, where I would give him a warm welcome? It is only when people see it for themselves that they can understand how desperately we need this bypass.

Justin Madders: I am happy to do that; I think it would probably be on my way home one weekend. We have invested a record amount of money in our networks, and there is only a finite amount, but I am happy to discuss the issue further with the right hon. Member.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): This month, there has been a series of serious road accidents in Bracknell, Warfield and Crowthorne in my constituency. In one incident, a young man, Shayan, very tragically lost his life at the scene. Will the roads Minister meet me to discuss these incidents, and listen to Shayan's family's plea for more action on road safety?

Justin Madders: First, can I extend my sympathies to Shayan's family? I am happy to meet them. I commend my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), on the excellent work she did on the road safety strategy, on which I am privileged to be able to build. Part of that will be engaging with bereaved families.

Joe Robertson (Isle of Wight East) (Con): Greedy corporate interests have stripped out more than £200 million from our Isle of Wight ferry services in the past 10 years. I am grateful to the Minister for setting up local roundtable meetings, but they are at risk of becoming a talking shop, and the ferry companies do not appear to be taking them seriously. Can he give us an assurance locally that if the ferry companies do not take this opportunity to improve services and reduce prices, the Government will consider taking steps to force their hand?

Keir Mather: The hon. Member is determined to achieve better ferry services for his constituents, and I am pleased that he reflects on the cross-Solent group, the work it has done and the progress it is making. I am keeping a close watch on its proceedings. I expect all its members to contribute in meaningful ways to find practical, local solutions to these challenges, and we will of course keep options under advisement. For ferry services, the Government believe that locally led solutions are often best in matters such as the one that he describes.

Luke Myer (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): Cowbar Lane in my constituency is at serious risk of collapse into the sea. We have a plan in place for relocating it and making it safe. Will Ministers meet me to discuss it?

Justin Madders: We recognise the impact of coastal erosion on Cowbar Lane, and we aware of the plans set out by Redcar and Cleveland council to move the road further inland. The Government have already provided more than £300 million of city region sustainable transport settlement funding to the Tees Valley Mayor Ben Houchen to deliver on that, but we are clearly not seeing anything happening on the ground. I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to see what more we can do to encourage the mayor to deliver on this issue.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Residents of Holton Heath and Sandford are being blighted every weekend by racing vehicles, motorcycles and modified small cars causing nuisance and loud noises. What progress is being made on the acoustic devices that enable police to act on these illegal vehicles?

Justin Madders: I am sorry to hear that the hon. Lady's constituents are having to endure these issues. There have been a number of trials, which have found that it is not that straightforward to isolate the noise. Police forces have powers to tackle this issue, and I am happy to write to her with further information about what they can do.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): The A259 coast road runs the entire southern length of my constituency, but daily delays on it are a huge frustration, particularly for constituents in Rottingdean, Telscombe and Saltdean. What more can the Minister do to unlock long-promised upgrades to this road, and to finally get Reform-led East Sussex county council to put in the funding and focus needed to get those upgrades over the line?

Justin Madders: The Department recognises the importance of that particular road, and we are ready to crack on with this. I join my hon. Friend in encouraging the Reform-led county council to release the funding necessary and get on with the job.

Andrew George (St Ives) (LD): My constituents are not demanding a multibillion-pound, high-speed answer to the five-and-a-half-hour journey time from Penzance to London, for example; they want just a fraction of that amount, to improve the comfort, reliability and punctuality of the service. My hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) mentioned that £57 million has been allocated for wi-fi on trains. That is a fraction of the money spent on high speed policies. We understand that the money is being held by the Treasury at the moment; when will it be rolled out? It is desperately needed now.

Heidi Alexander: As I said to the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire), we are very keen to make progress on better wi-fi connectivity on Great Western services, and I hope to say more on that in the coming months.

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

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): First, may I associate myself with the condolences expressed by the Transport Secretary and others about the terrible tragedy in Spain yesterday?

There are many bottlenecks on the national rail system that are holding back rail freight growth. I welcome the Government's announcement of the interim rail freight growth target of 40% by 2040, but without a clear and deliverable strategy, the Government risk falling behind on the expansion of rail freight, which is such an important sector for us all. When will we see a rail freight growth strategy, or will we have to wait for the overall rail enhancement strategy?

Heidi Alexander: The Chair of the Transport Committee is completely right to highlight the need to increase the amount of freight that we transport by rail. That is why we have set a target of growing rail freight by 75% by 2050, and an interim target of 40% by 2040. We are not publishing a separate rail freight strategy, as I will put that target in the long-term rail strategy when it is published, and I expect Great British Railways to set out in its first business plan how it will achieve that.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Earlier this week, the all-party parliamentary group on rail had presentations from representatives about access to both airports and seaports. They made the suggestion that modest electrification projects linking seaports such as Immingham to the main line would greatly improve rail freight distribution. Do the Government have plans for such schemes?

Keir Mather: It was a pleasure to visit the port of Immingham a few months ago. Rail connectivity to our ports, encouraging modal shift, and electrification's role in increasing the efficiency of the growth in the amount of freight taken to our seaports are of real personal interest to me. I will therefore happily take this conversation forward with the hon. Member and think about how we can facilitate better connectivity to our ports through electrification of our railways.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Ind): Meur ras ha myttin da, Mr Speaker. I declare an interest as the chair of the electric vehicle APPG. After more record EV sales, the Government's consultation on the zero-emission vehicles mandate closed last Friday. The mandate affects only 8% of all registrations of new cars manufactured in the UK. Has the consultation considered the billions of pounds in private sector investment in domestic lithium extraction, battery manufacturing and charge point infrastructure?

Heidi Alexander: I can assure my hon. Friend that we look at these issues in the round. He mentions charge point infrastructure. Only this week, I had a roundtable with the main operators of charge point infrastructure, as well as a meeting with the car manufacturers. We have held a review of the ZEV mandate, on which we consulted this summer. The Chancellor has set out the Government's intention to respond to that by Christmas, so that we can provide certainty to everyone who is contributing to the EV transition.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): The decision in July to abandon plans for changes to the remuneration of coastguards was widely welcomed, but that was over three months ago. Coastguards around the coastline tell me that there has been radio silence in the Maritime and Coastguard Agency since then. There are a number of whistleblowing complaints about the senior executive team that have simply not been addressed. When will we hear what the Government will do to fix our coastguards?

Keir Mather: I thank the right hon. Member for his work in representing the coastguard service in his constituency and across the country. I reassure him that work progressed over the summer both on questions relating to backdated liabilities and on future workforce

arrangements as they apply to His Majesty's Coastguard. I hope to have more to say in the future, but I will maintain my obligation to keep him and hon. Members across the House updated as closely as I can on developments as they unfold.

Jonathan Hinder (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): Not a single rail service has run from Clitheroe on a Sunday for a very long time. I know that the Secretary of State and her team of Ministers have heard many representations from me on this issue, but can they reassure me that they are doing everything they can to get those Sunday services back up and running?

Heidi Alexander: I agree with my hon. Friend that his constituents are right to expect a good service every day of the week, including Sundays. I assure him that the management of Northern is around the table with the RMT to work together on a way forward, and I hope to be able to say more soon.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Community transport minibuses, such as Mendip Community Transport, are a lifeline for rural communities, but the minibus driving test is costly—it costs up to £2,000 per volunteer—hard to access and pretty unrealistic for volunteers, and drivers who qualified before 1997, and therefore have the D1 classification on their driving licence, are retiring. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the industry, and recognise officially the sector's own minibus driver awareness scheme as a route for car drivers to gain a minibus licence?

Simon Lightwood: The Government recognise the vital role that community transport plays in connecting people with communities, enabling access to employment, education and essential services such as healthcare. I am happy to meet the hon. Lady.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): The last train from London to Newcastle tonight is at 11.08 pm, but the last train from London to Carlisle is at 7.30 pm. Now that the experiment with train privatisation is coming to an end, is it possibly time for a new experiment where the west coast gets the same level of service as the east coast?

Heidi Alexander: Avanti West Coast is due to come into public ownership in March next year, and there is an opportunity to look again at the timetable over the course of the next few years. I recognise the importance of later services going direct to my hon. Friend's constituency as well as to constituencies on the other side of the country.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): The derailment in the summer between Haywards Heath and Lewes caused great concern to my constituents. It happened during a period of very hot, dry weather that caused the ground to dry out and crack. I understand that Network Rail is looking at ways to change how it maintains embankments and cuttings, but there was no money in yesterday's Budget for railway services in the south-east. Do the Government have a plan to ensure that our services are punctual and safe?

Heidi Alexander: I completely understand why that incident will have been of huge concern to the hon. Member's constituents. In this control period, we are spending over £2.5 billion on the railways to address climate change mitigation and adaptation. We are awaiting the final report of the Rail Accident Investigation Branch as to the causes of that incident. Network Rail took immediate steps to increase inspections across the network to ensure safety, and the events in Spain yesterday serve as a reminder of why safety must always be paramount on our railways.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): Consideration of eastern access at Hitchin station has been stalled for far too long. I am delighted that, having worked with Ministers and our councils, we have finally been able to get it moving forward, and yesterday's announcement of £5.6 million in new growth funding for Hertfordshire provides a fantastic opportunity to go further and finally make it happen. Will Ministers meet me to discuss how we can lobby Hertfordshire county council to make the most of this opportunity for my town?

Heidi Alexander: In the interests of speed, yes.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): Aura Mobility is a company in Falkirk that designs assistive mobility products for disabled people. It and its customers need certainty that any reforms to light zero emission vehicles regulation will protect access to pavements and roads, not reduce it. Six months after the consultation on powered mobility devices closed, when will the Government provide that certainty and publish their response?

Justin Madders: I am grateful to Aura Mobility for engaging with the Department's consultation, which we will respond to very shortly.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): I am aware that the Secretary of State has already answered two questions about Peninsula Transport's fantastic wi-fi pilot on GWR trains, but if we are to go ahead with rolling it out for nationalisation on 13 December, I gently ask whether there is a way to nudge the Treasury to make that money available.

Heidi Alexander: My hon. Friend has been a tireless campaigner on this issue, and I know that she depends on GWR services, as do I in my constituency. Having good mobile connectivity is something that people feel strongly about, and it could improve satisfaction with journeys. I will continue my discussions with colleagues across Government to make that happen.

Business of the House

10.50 am

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

The Leader of the House of Commons (Sir Alan Campbell): The business for the week commencing 2 November is as follows:

Monday 2 November—Continuation of the Budget debate.

Tuesday 3 November—Conclusion of the Budget debate.

Wednesday 4 November—Remaining stages of the Sporting Events Bill [*Lords*], followed by consideration of a carry-over motion relating to the Railways Bill, followed by consideration of a carry-over motion relating to the Cyber Security and Resilience (Network and Information Systems) Bill.

The House will rise for the November recess at the conclusion of business on Wednesday 4 November and return on Tuesday 10 November.

The business for the week commencing 10 November is as follows:

Tuesday 10 November—Second Reading of the Financial Services and Markets Bill [*Lords*].

Wednesday 11 November—Opposition day (fifth allotted day). Debate on a motion in the name of the official Opposition. Subject to be announced.

Thursday 12 November—General debate on the 110th anniversary of the battle of the Somme, followed by a general debate on the Nolan principles. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

Friday 13 November—Private Members' Bills.

Jesse Norman: I thank the Leader of the House very much for that update. As the House will be aware, this is a day of very mixed feelings as we mourn the deaths and injuries sustained in the Spanish high-speed rail disaster yesterday. In a far happier vein, it is impossible not to celebrate the triumphs of Harry Kane in the Ballon d'Or—the first British winner for 25 years—and of giant-killing Fleetwood Town in conquering Arsenal in the Carabao cup.

Just in time for Halloween, we learn that the SNP Government in Scotland have assembled an army of nearly 800 ghost workers on the public payroll, costing taxpayers £27 million a year. The jobs have vanished, but the salaries remain. One of those people has been non-working in the NHS for 17 years. That is the SNP in a nutshell. Needless to say, the Scottish Government have no plans to change that state of affairs, and with hundreds of people being paid to pretend that they have jobs, it is the perfect metaphor for this Labour Government.

So to the Chancellor of the Exchequer, who spoke after the usual orgy of pre-briefings to the media yesterday. To his credit, he avoided some of the more lunatic ideas of his colleagues. He tried his best, but frankly Harry Kane or Fleetwood Town—hell, Fleetwood Mac—would have done better with that Budget. It was a Budget for a May general election, not for the future of Britain. As Helen Miller from the Institute for Fiscal Studies put it, there was "lots of fiddling", but no "clear, coherent vision". It means that disposable household incomes are falling, the tax burden is at a historic peacetime high, and growth forecasts are falling, with not even the whiff of a strategy for growth yesterday. Worse still, as noted economist Paul Johnson pointed out, the Budget implied back-end loaded spending cuts in

"most areas of public service spending of 2.6% per year between 2028-29 and 2031-32."

His verdict was that this is

"not honest politics, nor is it honest economics".

Those are his words, Mr Speaker, not mine, and I think it is well known that Mr Johnson is not a Conservative.

There is something even more troubling here. Britain is walking a fiscal, monetary and security tightrope, but yet again, the Government's response has been to postpone difficult decisions, spin the plates, ladle on the fudge and hope that nothing goes wrong. Now we have persistent speculation, despite attempted rebuttals, that the Prime Minister may call a general election—what an extraordinary abdication of responsibility that would be. The message would be this: yes, Britain faces profound economic and international uncertainty, so let us add a little extra disruption to that with an entirely unnecessary election, more than two years before one is required and, while we are at it, let us reopen the constitutional turmoil of another EU referendum to boot. The British people would surely say, "We gave you Labour people a majority of more than 170 to sort out the country's issues. You have replaced your own Prime Minister and your Chancellor. You have failed to deliver the change you promised, and now you want another election because you are simply too frit to make the decisions required."

Britain needs growth, stability, financial strength and national security. Instead, it is getting short-term fixes, deferred decisions and political manoeuvring. This is not a strategy for governing Britain; it is an absolute failure of leadership. The Chancellor could not even meet his own test for defence spending, over which he supposedly resigned. The Prime Minister has talked endlessly of his desire to "rewire the state", and the Chancellor said the same in terms yesterday. We have a huge debt burden, stretched public services, rising interest rates and growing defence commitments. There is the escalating threat of external shocks—Ukraine, Iran, inflation, AI, trade wars, extreme weather, another pandemic—so will the Leader of the House now explain, in his usual candid way, without prevaricating or blaming others, why those two men have demonstrated absolutely zero interest in actually taking any of the serious decisions required to address those issues?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join the shadow Leader of the House in sending our deepest condolences to the people of Spain in the aftermath of yesterday's horrendous train crash, taking the lives of 68 people and injuring many others. As he said, I am sure the thoughts of the whole House are with all those affected.

Last week, we saw some very severe and stormy weather across the UK. I send condolences to the families of those loved ones who lost their lives, and I thank all the emergency service workers who have been working hard to mitigate the effect of the storms.

I am saddened to hear about the passing of Sue Holt. She was a much respected member of staff in the Interparliamentary Relations Office, and I know the whole House will want to send condolences to her family and friends at this time.

Further to the tributes made last week and your words this morning, Mr Speaker, I would like to add my best wishes again to Tom Goldsmith who, after 30 years of outstanding service to the House, is retiring from the office of Clerk of the House today.

I would also like to pay tribute to Ceri King who, after 43 years in the civil service and 19 years as Head of Secretariat and Deputy Clerk of the Privy Council, is leaving her role this week. Ceri was appointed a lieutenant in the Royal Victorian Order in the 2023 new year honours in recognition of her services to the Privy Council. I have greatly valued her advice and guidance in my role as Lord President of the Council and I wish her well.

On an entirely different matter, I congratulate Harry Kane, who this week became the first English player to win the Ballon d'Or since Michael Owen in 2001. As the shadow Leader of the House said, I am sure that Members from across the House will join me in sending congratulations on that well-deserved win and that they found, as I did, his acceptance speech very moving. Young people looking at Harry Kane will see someone entirely committed not just to the sport, but to family and everything else—he really is a hero to many people and I wish him well.

There will be no business questions next week, so I want to mention Remembrance Sunday, which is on 8 November. As we take pause to honour those who gave their lives in defence of our freedoms, let us remember the extraordinary debt that can never fully be repaid.

Let me turn to the comments of the shadow Leader of the House. The Chancellor set out a very clear plan yesterday in the Budget that gives families and businesses some breathing space from rising costs and supports Britain's economic growth, not least in the £100 payment to 20 million households in council tax bands A to D in England. It also provides support for businesses, taking around 70,000 more retail, hospitality and leisure businesses out of business rates altogether. At the same time, the Budget supports the housing market, with measures for first-time buyers and social housing and on cutting unnecessary costs and delays for house builders. We have also reaffirmed our commitment to ending homelessness for good.

I have to say that I found the right hon. Gentleman to be uncharacteristically unfair about yesterday's events. On the question of pre-briefing, in the light of what we have said over a period of time, I was struck and pleased by how little pre-briefing there was about the Budget and how disciplined the Chancellor, his team and everybody else was in ensuring that this House was first to hear the contents of the Budget.

The right hon. Gentleman mentions household incomes. The Government are not complacent about the challenges we will face. I listen very carefully to what is being said about potential changes in household incomes, but I gently remind him and other Opposition Members that we had 14 years of Conservative government, and people were worse off at the end than they were at the beginning. That is the first time in history that that has happened, so we will not take any lessons from him or anyone else. He will know—because it is true—that this Government face international pressures. There are headwinds that we need to face, and a little more understanding of that would be appreciated.

Despite all that, the projection is still that the economy will grow. It will not grow as fast as we want it to grow, which is why the measures in the Budget are there to try to ensure that in getting the foundations right, we can then get on with growth as quickly as possible. We will do all that we can. I also gently point out, without being complacent, that the predictions about growth this year were lower than has turned out to be the case, but we will see what happens, not least in the middle east.

It is noticeable that when a number of very credible organisations talk about the state of the economy, not least the Office for Budget Responsibility, the International Monetary Fund and the Institute for Fiscal Studies, one of the things they pick out is not a lack of political stability, but the fact that the Government have a majority and a Prime Minister with a very clear vision of where he wants to take this country. That is done by ensuring not just that we in this place do everything that we can to boost the economy, but that no regions, towns or cities are left behind. That is why devolution is so important.

The right hon. Gentleman talks about defence. We are spending £14 billion more on defence than the previous Administration; during their time in office, they spent the lowest amount on it since the end of the cold war. The Prime Minister set out a very clear timeline yesterday in which he again committed the Government to spending 3% of GDP on defence and said that we will meet our NATO commitments. What happened yesterday was a recommitment to those things, and we are on track to deliver all of them.

Finally, the right hon. Gentleman talks about an election. The Prime Minister was very clear in what he said in the last few hours about how he sees the possibility of an election. If the Conservatives are looking for a general election, they should be very careful what they ask for.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating my constituent Connor McElwaine, who has completed an extraordinary 18,000 km cycle ride from Canberra Avenue in Dalmuir to Canberra, Australia? Over the course of nearly a year, Connor has biked through 23 countries and raised more than £5,900 for Venture Scotland, a charity that supports young people to build confidence and realise their potential. Connor is now embarking on the long journey home via New Zealand, the United States and Europe. Will the Leader of the House join me in wishing Connor every success for the remainder of his remarkable adventure and a warm Clydebank welcome when he returns home next spring?

Sir Alan Campbell: Not only do I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Connor on completing such an extraordinary adventure; I thank him for doing so for such a good cause. Many people who will never meet Connor will benefit from what he has done, but I am sure they will be hugely impressed when they learn of

[Sir Alan Campbell]

his achievements. I wish him every success for the remainder of his adventure and safe travels on his journey home.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Bobby Dean (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): Our thoughts, too, are with the victims of the train crash in Spain and their families. I also want to add to the congratulations to Harry Kane, and say on behalf of all Tottenham Hotspur fans that he is one of our own.

It is tempting to get into yesterday's Budget, but I have not spoken in the debate yet, and I fear that if I start now, I might run out of things to say. Of course, there were a record number of measures in that Budget, but they had the lowest cumulative value that we have seen in decades. I think that makes it the most extravagant display of looking busy for the boss in history.

Turning to other events, on Monday the AI debate was bumped off the agenda. I am afraid that that makes Parliament look slightly ridiculous. We last debated AI properly in this Chamber back in 2023; given how technology moves on, that is light years ago. Instead, we debated the performance of Royal Mail—an important issue, but one that was debated only the previous week in Westminster Hall. Critics are saying that this exposes how this House spends more time engaging with popular local issues than with some of the complex challenges our country faces. My view is that we must make time for both of those things; we need to make sure that we tackle those important local issues in our constituencies, but also rise to the challenges of our time.

There are huge questions to answer on the growth opportunities presented by AI and how we get it adopted widely across the country, but also on the safety concerns and the threat that superintelligent models pose to our society. Those are critical questions for this Parliament to engage with, so will the Leader of the House make time for a debate in Government time as urgently as possible, so that colleagues can engage with these big questions of our time?

Sir Alan Campbell: I always find the hon. Gentleman's comments both honest and brave, and admitting that he is a Tottenham Hotspur fan is characteristic of him. *[Laughter.]* I understand his frustration and the frustration of others about the postponement of the AI debate, but as he said, the first debate attracted a huge amount of attention, and there were two important statements to put before the House. We try to make sure that the number of statements is balanced, but we have to balance that with ensuring that the House is kept updated. I am committed to finding as much time as possible for the Backbench Business Committee, and I am sure the Chair of that Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)—who is in his place—will have heard the hon. Gentleman's desire for a debate.

The hon. Gentleman made some relevant wider points about the way we use time in this place, and he will know that the Modernisation Committee is looking at how best we can use our time.

The hon. Gentleman raised the issue of AI safety; the Budget delivers the Government's most ambitious AI package yet, investing £700 million to tackle the risks of AI. We will put AI centre stage during our G20 presidency, and I expect the House will be given ample time to debate those issues before that happens. At the summit, we will work towards hopefully agreeing a single set of global principles and standards on AI, and the Government are clear that where further work is necessary, we will do it.

As for making time for a debate, I have just announced a further three days of debate on the Budget. The hon. Gentleman made an important point about the link between AI and growth, and I am sure that with a bit of ingenuity, he or other Members could speak to that issue during that debate.

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): I was shocked and appalled when a peaceful Hindu festival in Wakefield the weekend before last was attacked by masked individuals, leaving two people injured. Children and families were present, including 50 of my constituents. My hon. Friend the Member for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill), in whose constituency this took place, has done sterling work in liaising with the police and the community. There is more work to come, but in the meantime, will the Leader of the House join me in condemning this kind of violence and the individuals who encourage it, and standing with the Leeds South West and Morley Hindus whom I represent? Will he also call for a debate in Government time on the need to protect all of our communities from abhorrent attacks?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in condemning the appalling incident in Wakefield and reaffirming that all forms of hatred and division have no place in our society. Attacks like these must never be tolerated; we need to send that message out in a united, clear and loud way from this place.

I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards) and for Ossett and Denby Dale (Jade Botterill) for the support that they have provided for their constituents. The Government take this matter very seriously. We will certainly try to find time for a debate at some point in the future about social cohesion and what more can be done, because we are doing a lot.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): Mr Speaker, if the Liberal Democrat spokesman is brave, I can tell you that I have a season ticket to watch Tottenham home and away, and I watched virtually every goal that Harry Kane scored for us. I only wish that he was still scoring for Tottenham rather than Bayern Munich.

May I start on a sad note and pay tribute to the late Sir John Hannam, who was the MP for Exeter from 1970 to 1997? He was also the secretary of the 1922 committee from 1987 to 1997, and he died at the ripe old age of 97. I am sure that we will all join together in sending our condolences to his family.

Provided that the Leader of the House allocates us time, the House will not have long to wait for the debate on the emerging risks of advanced AI, which of course had to be withdrawn because of the sheer number of Members who wanted to speak in both debates on Monday. If we are given time on 19 November, we will

allocate that time for that important debate and a debate on International Men's Day, which coincides with that date.

In Westminster Hall, there will be a debate on Tuesday 3 November on the findings of the Milburn review. On 10 November, when we come back after recess, there will be a debate on antisocial behaviour; I remind the House that that debate will start at 11.30 am rather than 9.30 am. On 12 November, there will be a debate on fire and rescue services' suicide-prevention training, followed by a debate on VAT policy for the hospitality sector. Further debates for Westminster Hall will be announced in due course.

In addition to Remembrance Sunday, which we will commemorate during the recess, that Sunday is also Diwali. I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing all Hindus, Sikhs and Jains "Shubh Diwali" for the event, and also a happy, peaceful, prosperous and, above all else, healthy Hindu new year, which follows.

However, any Hindus who are in Pakistan are in serious trouble at the moment. We in the all-party parliamentary group for British Hindus received a report from Insight UK just last week on the plight of Hindus in Pakistan, which makes for horrific reading. I ask the Leader of the House to get either the Foreign Secretary or a Foreign Office Minister to come to the House and tell us what the Government are doing to safeguard minority communities, not just in this country, as is right, but in countries where they are severely oppressed.

Sir Alan Campbell: As ever, I thank the hon. Gentleman for the hard work he does as Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, and indeed the rest of the Committee for the work they do. I join him in paying tribute to Sir John Hannam, who was a distinguished Member of this House. We send our condolences to his friends and family.

I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he said about future Back-Bench business and about the AI debate. The hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Bobby Dean) should not underestimate the influence that he has in this place, because he has got half an answer—if not the whole answer—on exactly when it will be. I will look at allocating time. As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) knows, I will do my very best to do that.

I send my best wishes to the Hindu community for Diwali. As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises very important concerns about social cohesion and faith groups, not just in this country but abroad. I put on the record my thanks to the Hindu community for everything that they do in our local communities and across the country.

I will also raise the hon. Gentleman's concerns with the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office. He has raised these matters before. The Government take the treatment of minority communities, and particularly faith communities, very seriously indeed. I will raise it with FCDO colleagues and see whether, at some point, we can get the statement that he seeks.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): I add my congratulations to Harry Kane, but let me also say how proud we remain of the success of our Lionesses—not just on the field, but off the field—in inspiring young girls to play. However, I have become aware that a girls' coach in Carlisle is unable to access the UEFA A licence because her role as a coach in the girls' emerging talent centre is excluded from the Football Association's priority criteria, whereas a coach in the equivalent boys' pathway is not. I have written to the FA, but its response states that it does not intend to change that. Could the Leader of the House advise me how we in this place can make the FA think again and ensure that opportunities available to female coaches in the women's game are not confined to the large clubs and the top tier?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend that we should all take pride in the success of the Lionesses. We are committed to supporting every aspect of women's sport, with Sport England committing £60,000 to support the FA in developing a bespoke women's football workforce strategy, so I am very concerned to hear of her specific concern. I hope that the FA has heard what she has said here today, but she asks how best she might be able to take this forward. I am happy to facilitate a meeting with Sport Ministers to see if we can get the answer that my hon. Friend wants and take this matter forward.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): The figures underpinning the business case for National Grid's ludicrously environmentally damaging Sea Link project have been shown to have been fiddled together in cloud cuckoo land. The Energy Secretary is due to issue her determination on the planning inspector's inquiry into that scheme imminently. Will the Leader of the House, with his usual courtesy, seek to ensure that that announcement is made on the Floor of the House, and not slipped out in a written answer on a non-sitting Friday?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand the right hon. Gentleman's concerns about these matters and the way that announcements are made. I will take away his point, and I will do my very best to make sure that the announcement is made in the appropriate way.

Euan Stainbank (Falkirk) (Lab): This month, 141 student loan staff, 120 of whom are based in Scotland, were told that their jobs will transfer to Capgemini, the same company that, incidentally, helped design the Student Loans Company target operating model. The transfer will come into effect from 1 March—one month before the Government's public interest test will start compelling Departments and non-departmental bodies like the Student Loans Company to evidence the long-term cost of outsourcing decisions. Will the Leader of the House encourage the Cabinet Office to provide a statement on how it can prevent outsourcing decisions from being accelerated before the public interest test comes into effect?

Sir Alan Campbell: As ever, my hon. Friend raises an issue of great importance to his constituents, and I pay tribute to him for doing so. I understand that he has a meeting with the Parliamentary Secretary for the Cabinet Office in his diary, and I hope that meeting will address his concerns. If it does not, I am sure that my hon. Friend, who is a doughty fighter for his constituents, will raise it once again on the Floor of the House, and we will have to see what else is necessary to move this forward.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): Will the Leader of the House raise with the Home Secretary the very real concerns of residents in Fenland about the proposed asylum centre in Leverington? The area was excluded by the previous Conservative Government as unsuitable for such accommodation. The council, on the basis of legal advice, has raised a number of objections, and the Home Office has missed its own deadline to give a decision by 16 October. The site is not suitable for the proposed asylum centre, and I would be grateful if he could raise that point with the Home Secretary.

Sir Alan Campbell: The right hon. Gentleman will know how difficult these decisions can be, and I know the concern that such matters raise in constituencies like his—let us be absolutely clear and honest about that. I will raise his concerns with the Home Secretary, because even where there are difficult decisions, it is important that we take local communities with us and get the right outcome in the end.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Ind): The athletics track at Carn Brea leisure centre is just one of two public access tracks in the whole of Cornwall, and it is the duchy's only five-lane facility—for a population of 600,000 people. It is in urgent need of restructuring at a cost of £600,000, but with EU and shared prosperity fund support no longer available and grants largely aimed at sports clubs, the leisure centre trust is struggling to meet the costs. Will the Leader of the House help me to secure a meeting with the Minister for Sport to discuss how we can support this vital community asset at the heart of one of the UK's most deprived communities?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a strong advocate for Carn Brea athletics track and for young people in his constituency. He knows that grassroots sports clubs and facilities are at the heart of our local communities, which is why the Government are backing them with a £400 million investment in grassroots sports facilities across the UK. I am happy to help him arrange a meeting with the Minister for Sport—she is going to be quite busy after today's session.

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Families across Cambridgeshire have been waiting years for the two new special schools in Gamlingay and March. Following meetings with two Ministers, we finally had confirmation from the Government that they will be built, and we were thankful for that. However, there has been radio silence since, which means that 270 special school places are in limbo. In July, I wrote to the Secretary of State for Education to ask for an update on the timeline for construction, and I have heard nothing. Will the Leader of the House please help me secure a further meeting and swift confirmation of the timeline for opening both schools so that our children, schools and local authorities are no longer left in the dark?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Lady is right to raise these matters on the Floor of the House on behalf of her constituents, because they will be of concern not just to the local educational community, but obviously to the young people and their families. I will take up the matter with the Department and ensure that she gets an answer to her questions.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): The higher education mental health implementation taskforce was convened in 2023 to improve mental health support for higher education students and to ensure that universities were better equipped to support student wellbeing. This taskforce, chaired by Professor Sir Steve West, as the higher education student support champion, was expected to meet until May this year, but no minutes have been published since October 2025. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Department for Education to provide an update on the taskforce's status, confirm whether Professor West is still in post, and set out when the taskforce expects to publish its final report and recommendations?

Sir Alan Campbell: I want to reassure my hon. Friend that Sir Steve West remains in post as the student support champion and as chair of the taskforce, and he will continue to do so until at least the end of the current academic year. The minutes of the last meeting, held in August this year, will be published shortly, and I hope they will provide him with the update that he reasonably requests.

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): Transport is a really pressing issue in rural areas such as South Northamptonshire, and the closure of the Ability bus service earlier this year has left many of my residents isolated. We need to do so much more, so could we have a debate in Government time on securing greater support for community transport?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government are very committed to community transport, and we understand its importance for all sorts of communities, not least rural ones. The hon. Lady may want to take this up as either a Backbench Business or Adjournment debate.

Dawn Butler (Brent East) (Lab): At Middle Yard apartments in my constituency, one constituent is stuck on the fourth floor because the lifts are not working, and 500 constituents are without hot water or heating, and they have been told that this situation could last for months. Harley Property Investments Ltd and Union Developments Ltd are responsible for this. Will the Leader of the House ask Energy Ministers to help urgently reconnect the gas, given that we are entering the colder months? Will he also ask the Minister for Housing for a statement, so we can look at financial mismanagement by freeholders and management companies, because they have form, with an apartment block in Hackney also without water?

Sir Alan Campbell: I completely agree with my hon. Friend that this situation is unacceptable. It is appalling that residents are being forced to rely on temporary measures, despite paying service charges—and with no end in sight in some cases. She is absolutely right to champion her constituents' urgent demand for the immediate restoration of services, and I hope that her words today have been heard by the developers and the managers. The leasehold Bill is coming down the track, which will hopefully right some of these wrongs, but I will also take up the matter with the Ministers most associated with this area to see if my hon. Friend can get the progress she seeks.

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): My constituent has spent eight years trying to recover child maintenance owed by their former partner. An investigation identified undeclared income and a failure to pay, yet there has been no enforcement action. The case was also recently found to have been left unassigned for seven months after being returned to the Child Maintenance Service by the Financial Investigation Unit. Will the Leader of the House help to arrange a meeting with a Minister to address this case and the wider failures in CMS case handling?

Sir Alan Campbell: We recognise that some parents' experiences of the Child Maintenance Service do not meet the standards expected of it, which is why we are committed to reforming the system. I will assist the hon. Lady in trying to get a meeting with the relevant Minister, so she can raise the case in the context of what we are trying to do generally with the CMS.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): We had huge wildfires in the Welsh valleys last summer, so I welcome last week's summit, which announced the UK's first permanent military firefighting capability. When I met firefighters after the summer, I heard anecdotal reports that some fires were being started deliberately. Could we please have a ministerial update on further next steps after the summit? We need many more preventive ideas to address this dreadful issue.

Sir Alan Campbell: The anecdotal reports that my hon. Friend raises are very concerning indeed. The Government are investing £97 million in upgrading national resilience assets and we are developing England's first wildfire action plan, covering prevention, preparedness, response and recovery. I will ensure that he receives an update from the relevant Minister to give him the answer he seeks.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): St Andrew's hospice in Grimsby and Lindsey Lodge hospice in Scunthorpe provide an excellent service to my constituents, as does the hospice movement across the country. Hospice UK held a drop-in session earlier this week. It outlined research that found that modest additional funding to the movement could save the NHS considerable amounts in emergency treatments. Can the Leader of the House find time for a debate, so that we can explore how the hospice movement can actually save money for the NHS, as well as provide excellent care for our constituents?

Sir Alan Campbell: The hon. Gentleman is an assiduous campaigner for St Andrew's hospice and related issues. I recall a particularly moving speech he gave on hospice care during the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill, and I pay tribute to him for that. We are supporting the hospice sector with a £125 million funding boost, alongside £80 million for children's hospices over the next three years, but I do understand continuing concern in the sector. I will make sure that the relevant Department hears his concerns, but I also remind him that we have three days of Budget debate. I am sure he has been here long enough to be able to weave hospice funding into a contribution, should he catch Mr Speaker's eye.

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): Residents in my constituency have reported to me dangerous racing, speeding and other forms of antisocial behaviour on the A52 near Bardills roundabout. I have raised this issue continually with the Highways Agency, Nottingham city council, Nottinghamshire county council and Nottinghamshire police, but to no avail. Will the Leader of the House assist me in bringing together relevant Ministers, so we can get those agencies together and secure safety on that stretch of the road?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Government recognise the importance of preventing dangerous driving and ensuring the safety of all road users, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for raising the issue on behalf of her constituents. Through the road safety strategy, we are taking steps to make our roads safer for everyone, but that needs everyone to step up, including local councils and police. I will do as my hon. Friend asks and help to secure a meeting with the relevant Ministers so that she can discuss the matter further to ensure that those who play a part are working together to get the best outcome.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): Yesterday's Budget included an announcement that Surrey would get a mayor. The Red Book said we were in advanced talks to have a mayor in my county, which is news to MPs like me, who have not been consulted, and there has been no vote by any local authorities in the county. Can we have a debate in Government time about the merits of introducing new mayors and on the process that could result in my constituents having a mayor without having a say?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand the concern in some areas about the changes that we are proposing, but I point out to the hon. Member that there is a statement on local government on the Floor of the House next, so he might want to make his point directly to the Minister.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Last week, I attended the National Curry Awards in Parliament, and I was delighted to present Sizzling Lounge from Bingley in my constituency with its award for best restaurant. It is one of the highest-rated curry houses in Bradford and is run by two inspiring brothers who came to the UK as child refugees from Myanmar. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Sizzling Lounge and all the fantastic curry restaurants—particularly those in Bradford—that contribute so much to our high streets and towns?

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating Sizzling Lounge on its award. However, I better be careful and also commend all the curry houses in my constituency for the fantastic contribution that they make. I thank all of those who made the awards possible. Curry restaurants are an important part of our local communities, in my hon. Friend's constituency and others, and I congratulate everyone concerned.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): We are blessed with charities up and down the country doing amazing work. I was pleased to host a dinner in Parliament to launch a new charity that is based in Northamptonshire in my constituency. It is called Living Like Linda, inspired by

[Stuart Andrew]

the incredible Linda Williamson, who now helps other people going through long-term chemotherapy to enjoy days out and social experiences, allowing them to forget about their treatment for a few hours. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to both Linda and her husband Andy for the amazing work that they have done, as well as to all other charities, up and down the country, that help people who need it most?

Sir Alan Campbell: Charities are the heart and the very best of our local communities. I am happy to join the right hon. Gentleman in thanking Linda and Andy for everything that they do, wishing Living Like Linda well for the future, and thanking all the volunteers across our country, who do a fantastic job on behalf of local communities.

Dr Marie Tidball (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Lab): I have been going to Penistone Paramount in my constituency since I was a child. This 110-year-old art deco cinema is the jewel in the crown of our town, yet the Reform-led Barnsley council has decided to shelve the £1.8 million in principal towns funding that was going to be used to build a second screen and a new café and bar area, as well as to make the cinema accessible throughout. Reform's decision is indefensible: this was ringfenced funding, with planning permission already granted and a procurement notice published. My constituents agree, with over 5,500 of them signing my petition calling for the council to reverse its reprehensible decision. Will the Leader of the House advise me on how I can best work with the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that generations of local people can continue to enjoy our treasured community asset for another century to come?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is a fantastic advocate for her constituents, and she is right to raise that important matter. I am afraid that it is just the latest example of Reform-led councils letting down the people that they are supposed to represent. With ringfenced funding secured, planning permission in place and the procurement notice published, there is no excuse for Reform on the matter. I will raise it with colleagues at DCMS and ensure that she gets the meeting that she seeks.

Victoria Collins (Harpenden and Berkhamsted) (LD): I declare an interest as a patron of the Hospice of St Francis. The assisted dying debate provided much-needed focus and cross-party commitment to improving palliative care so that all those in need can get support and solace, just like Judith's husband, John, found at the Hospice of St Francis. Will the Leader of the House join me first in thanking the charities and volunteers who drive hospice care, and in ensuring that we keep up that momentum by securing a debate on palliative care to consider the four-point plan from Hospice UK and secure the future and funding of hospice care?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am pleased to join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to hospice care, both in her local example and across the country. As I said in answer to a previous question, the Government are committing more resources there, but we are aware of the concerns and demands of the hospice sector across the country to ensure that hospices can go on providing the very best services possible. We have three days of debate on the Budget, and this seems to me the sort of thing a constituency MP might want to raise then.

Maureen Burke (Glasgow North East) (Lab): My constituent recently contacted me after his three-year-old daughter was involved in a terrifying near-miss with a recklessly ridden e-bike. The unsafe use of these vehicles is a growing threat to public safety. In Scotland, enforcement is devolved and regulation is reserved. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House make time available for a debate on how the Scottish and UK Governments can work together to protect our communities from dangerous e-bikes?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises a concerning matter. We have heard too many tragic stories involving the dangerous use of e-bikes, including in my own constituency. The Crime and Policing Act 2026 introduced new offences and penalties for dangerous cycling. I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a Westminster Hall or Adjournment debate to further discuss not just how we can work to tackle e-bikes, but how we can best work cross-border.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I do not know whether you or the Leader of the House are cinemagoers, Mr Speaker, but this weekend you could visit the Lonsdale cinema in Annan for its range of Halloween films, including a 30th anniversary screening of "Scream". I commend Alan Towers, the proprietor of the cinema, on the fact that Lonsdale has been nominated as Cinema of the Year at the British Independent Film Awards, and further commend Alan and his team for keeping the cinema going through sometimes difficult times and providing a much-valued entertainment service for people across the south of Scotland and beyond.

Sir Alan Campbell: I certainly join the right hon. Gentleman in congratulating Lonsdale cinema on being shortlisted as one of the best cinemas in the UK and Alan Towers himself on all the work he has done. Independent cinema is very important. I am a cinemagoer—I am something of a film buff. It might be tempting in one of these exchanges to have a week of cinema, Mr Speaker. I don't know—we'll see where we get to. I pay tribute to all those who work to make this possible and who have provided entertainment for so many people, both in the right hon. Gentleman's area and, I should say, at the Jam Jar cinema in my constituency too.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): Derby built the engines that powered the Spitfire. In the Budget, the Chancellor announced a £2.5 billion joint investment by Government and Rolls-Royce to develop the next generation of aircraft engine, which will support thousands of jobs and should create tens of thousands more in the next decade. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is a brilliant example of our Government rebuilding British industry and working alongside business to deliver skilled jobs and opportunities for young people and to strengthen our economy?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to celebrate the announcements made in the Budget yesterday by my right hon. Friend the Chancellor. I agree that this is an excellent example of the Government's commitment to reindustrialisation, which will ensure that our investment works twice for us—both keeping us safe and driving reindustrialisation with skills here in the UK.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): Will the Leader of the House join me in celebrating Essex Day, which was on Monday this week, and thanking Mr Speaker for flying the flag of the county of Essex from New Palace Yard here in Parliament? We have wonderful charities in Essex such as the Collier Row & Romford Foodbank and the Saint Francis Hospice, but we did not see very much in yesterday's Budget to support the vital charities that help local people and do work that possibly takes away costs from Government. May we have a debate in Government time on how we can support local charities such as the ones I mentioned to support local people in my borough and across the country?

Sir Alan Campbell: We have missed the hon. Gentleman in the last few weeks, so flags have rarely got a mention, but we are back now. I know why he does it, and he does it very well on behalf of his constituents, I have to say.

There was a lot in yesterday's Budget, which he might want to go back and have a look at. If there are measures in it that he wants to see the Government go further on, such as hospice funding, food banks or support for charities, he has an opportunity to make those representations because we have three days left of the Budget debate.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Sandra Morphew is best known as the 82-year-old former landlady of the Rose and Crown in Bishop's Stortford, and she is much loved by our community. She is currently on life support in Turkey following a serious accident. Due to a dispute over her medical insurance, Sandra's family now face spiralling medical costs and a potential £80,000 bill to bring her home, which they are now raising money to pay. Will the Leader of the House join me in encouraging residents in Bishop's Stortford to support this crowdfunder and sending best wishes to Sandra's family? Will he kindly use his good offices to help me raise Sandra's case with the relevant Minister?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that the whole House will join me in wishing Sandra a speedy recovery. I join my hon. Friend in encouraging his constituents to donate to the crowdfunder if it is appropriate and they can afford to do so. I will be happy to facilitate a meeting for him with the relevant Minister so that he can put his case directly to them.

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): I am sure both you, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House will share my delight at the news that the Seabirds pub in Bridlington has reopened following a £300,000 refurbishment. It coincides with my "Pub of the Year" competition in Bridlington and The Wolds, where we are delighted to be home to 114 pubs. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking every landlord and landlady across the country for all their hard work and everything that they do for local communities? After my competition has closed on Saturday, will the Leader of the House join me for a pint in the winning pub?

Sir Alan Campbell: It is extraordinarily tempting. I congratulate everybody involved in the refurbishment of the pub; pubs are at the heart of our local communities. I cannot guarantee that I will be there to celebrate with the hon. Gentleman, but I am sure that he will find many local residents who will be very pleased that it has happened. Perhaps when he is there sharing a pint with them he can talk about the support for hospitality that was in yesterday's Budget.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I believe that, as I did, you visited the Parkinson's UK drop-in for MPs yesterday, where it was highlighted that across the country we have a postcode lottery on access to blue badges for people who are suffering from Parkinson's. May we have a debate in Government time about this postcode lottery, because access to blue badges is a real enabler for people with disabilities to get out and go to work, education, appointments and so on?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend raises important concerns. I understand that she successfully lobbied her local council not to go ahead with a proposal to scrap free blue badge parking in council car parks. If that is the case, I pay tribute to her and local campaigners for their hard work. Regarding her concerns about people with Parkinson's having issues accessing blue badges, I will ensure she gets a response from the relevant Minister to address her points directly. Should she wish to follow that up with a meeting, I will help her to arrange that.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): My constituent William lives in a beautiful, high-quality recently built home in Wimborne, but the developer will not allow him or his neighbours to install solar panels on the front. Ben lives in a recently built beautiful shared ownership house in Merley, and his housing association will not allow him to install an EV charger. The Secretary of State for Housing has talked extensively about dealing with the blockers. Will the Leader of the House arrange for a ministerial update on the corporate blockers stopping people improving their own homes and trying to decarbonise?

Sir Alan Campbell: I can get the hon. Lady the update that she seeks, but it seems to me that this is a topic that an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate is ideal for, because I am sure that other colleagues across the House will share her concerns.

Markus Campbell-Savours (Penrith and Solway) (Lab): Purchased for £51,000 in 2022, Cockermouth's Old Courthouse later collapsed and still partially sits in the River Cocker. However, the accounts of owner Halal Group Ltd state that it has fixed assets of £248,000, and the company has not responded to calls for transparency or action. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on micro-company accounts, their use by property investment businesses and the lack of transparency about asset valuations?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure that the case will have caused great concern to my hon. Friend's constituents; he is right to raise it. I hope that the owners of the building concerned have heard what he has said today and take urgent steps to address the situation. If they do not, I have a feeling that my hon. Friend will seek an Adjournment or Westminster Hall debate on the subject, in which he will give the issue an even greater voice. I hope that those concerned listen and get on with it.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Across Keighley and Ilkley, we constantly see large discarded nitrous oxide canisters, many of them on the side of the road. They are clearly being used illegally by drivers and others. This creates major concerns about road safety, as well as littering, and it is left to organisations such as Litter Free Ilkley to pick the canisters up. There is a clear link to safety and a safety threat from driving under the influence of nitrous oxide, but detection in the body is still difficult for police. May we have a debate in Government time to address that, and on bringing out much stricter controls on the purchase of canisters?

Sir Alan Campbell: We are doing a lot around fly-tipping, and there are aspirations across Government to do more about waste crimes, so the hon. Gentleman's concerns are not only distressing but timely. He might want to seek an Adjournment debate on the subject because, as he suggests, this is not the responsibility of just one Department; it is about Departments working together to take the matter forward for his constituents and constituents across the country.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): This month marks Obsessive-compulsive Disorder Awareness Month. Last week, I had the privilege of meeting young Ellis at Lord Lawson of Beamish academy in my constituency. Ellis was diagnosed with OCD at a young age and has raised over £2,000 for OCD-UK. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Ellis on that incredible achievement, and consider a debate in Government time on improving awareness of OCD and access to support for young people?

Sir Alan Campbell: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Ellis on raising so much money for OCD awareness; she is right to do so. It is right to celebrate young people making positive contributions to our society. We are improving access to NHS mental health support for children and young people, including those with OCD; over 40,000 more received support in this year to June than did in the previous year. To make clear to Ministers the need to continue making progress, I encourage my hon. Friend to apply for a Westminster Hall debate.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): My constituent who is approaching retirement has been quoted £2,710 for root canal treatment. With just 23% of adults in Somerset having seen an NHS dentist in the last two years, will the Leader of the House highlight the problems with access to NHS dentists, and ask the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to reform dental services and end the south-west's status as a dental desert?

Sir Alan Campbell: We have heard about this issue, which is serious, on many occasions. The Government are doing all they can to get dental hubs out there, so that people can get access to dental care. However, as the hon. Lady is aware, the question is wider than that; it is about reforming the dentistry contract. I will make sure that the relevant Minister has heard what she has said, and I will get her an update on what is intended, including for her area. If she wants a meeting with the Minister, I will arrange that, too.

Paul Davies (Colne Valley) (Lab): Last week, I visited the Horizon Group in my constituency, which has developed HERO—a solar-powered safety warning device made for remote environments. The product provides essential safety messaging about unmanned crossings and access points in some regions of the Network Rail network. Innovations like this keep people safe. Does the Leader of the House, like me, welcome the Chancellor's statement yesterday on the importance of supporting innovation by British industry?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I do. My hon. Friend is right to praise the innovative work of the Horizon Group. We are committed to supporting innovation by small and medium-sized enterprises, including through the £7.4 billion for UK Research and Innovation to support innovative company growth. There are a number of days' debate on the Budget, and I encourage my hon. Friend to make these remarks—should he catch your eye, Mr Speaker—in that debate.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): As a result of the Government's so-called fair funding formula, Richmond council—my local authority—faces a devastating cut of over £100 million in Government funding over the next four years. That is almost 60% of its budget about to be gutted. Our vulnerable children and adults will suffer the most from these cuts. Given the Prime Minister's commitment to local leadership and empowering local communities, will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on revisiting this damaging formula, so that we can find a sustainable solution?

Sir Alan Campbell: The Budget announced £100 million for local authorities to provide further support to the households in greatest need. We are giving local leaders greater control over locally generated revenue. We are delivering £78 billion in a multi-year finance settlement, and a £5.6 billion boost for local services over the next three years. I understand that local authorities that are adversely affected will have concerns, and the hon. Lady is right to raise them. We have a local government statement after this; she might find a way of getting that point into the statement.

Rosie Wrighting (Kettering) (Lab): Last weekend, the Alfred East art gallery in Kettering reopened after being shut for six years. I have such fond memories of visiting it as a child, so I am so pleased that the next generation of young people in Kettering will be able to experience the same. Would the Leader of the House join me in thanking Billie, Adam and all the gallery team in Kettering for making this possible, and in encouraging everyone in Kettering and the surrounding areas to visit the gallery? It is free and a brilliant cultural experience.

Sir Alan Campbell: I absolutely join my hon. Friend in congratulating the hard work of everyone involved in the reopening of the Alfred East gallery. We are committed to funding the arts; 130 cultural venues, museums and libraries are benefiting from the Arts Everywhere fund, which will ensure that galleries like the Alfred East are around for years to come.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): Last month, South West Water was fined £8 million for more than 500 sewage dumps. Rather than going back to the Treasury, that money should reduce the bills of customers who pay for waste and sewerage services. The fine followed 330 illegal dumps into the River Camel and 230 untreated dumps at Harlyn beach, a world-class beach in Cornwall. My constituents are sick of a company that keeps breaking the law, and that treats fines as a cost of doing business. Will the Leader of the House commit to a debate in Government time on holding these failing water companies to account, and on introducing jail time for offending water bosses?

Sir Alan Campbell: We have introduced criminal liability for water bosses who cover up or hide sewage spills—indeed, they could face up to two years behind bars. The hon. Gentleman speaks powerfully; I understand the effect that this issue has in areas like his. I hope that the water company has heard what he said. Should he seek an Adjournment debate or a Westminster Hall debate on the subject, I am sure that he could go even further in setting out this issue, which he clearly feels strongly about.

Kirsteen Sullivan (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): My constituent Hazel McLeod has brought generations in Winchburgh together—pupils from Winchburgh and Sinclair academies, together with members of the senior community group Good Companions—to create a book of residents' memories called, "What do you see when you look at me?" The book received the "highly recommended" award at the global Intergenerational Excellence Awards 2026, which recognised 13 projects worldwide. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating everyone involved, and commend Hazel's sterling efforts throughout the years, and make a statement on the value of intergenerational projects in preserving local stories and strengthening community spirit?

Sir Alan Campbell: Yes, I do. I join my hon. Friend in congratulating everyone involved in making the "What do you see when you look at me?" book on receiving their prestigious award. Projects like this play a vital role in preserving local stories, bridging generational divides and strengthening community spirit. I want to say well done to everybody concerned.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The report, "International Labour Law and International Human Rights Law: Analysing the Convergence and Divergence" recently launched, right here in Parliament. It highlights significant gaps in the implementation of international labour rights, which particularly affect women, children and informal workers. Will the Leader of the House please ask the Secretary of State to make a statement on the effectiveness of UK programmes in promoting international labour rights, and supporting the implementation of core International Labour Organisation conventions? Better still, will he make time for a Backbench Business debate on the subject?

Sir Alan Campbell: As ever, the hon. Gentleman raises a serious matter. He is right to point out that it is often women and children who suffer most when international labour rights are undermined. The UK continues to work with the ILO to implement and uphold employment rights across the world. I will raise his concern with Ministers, but the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee, the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), is still in his place, so if the hon. Gentleman seeks a debate on the issue, I am sure that the Committee will want to give his suggestion consideration.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): This month marks GloWeek, the Child Brain Injury Trust's annual campaign reminding children to be bright and be seen as the clocks go back. I recently joined Delves Lane school for a GloWeek event, at which I was joined by County Durham fire and rescue, Consett neighbourhood police and Elddis Transport; it brought along vehicles to show pupils how to stay safe on the roads. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking the trust, and will he make Government time for a debate on improving road safety education, so that we protect young brains from injury?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend has been a distinguished campaigner on this issue, and I pay tribute to her for that. I also pay tribute to the work of the Child Brain Injury Trust. We are taking steps, through the road safety strategy, to make our roads safer for everyone. These matters have been raised consistently with me in business questions, and I encourage my hon. Friend perhaps to join others in seeking a Backbench Business debate on these matters. I think it would be particularly well attended.

Samantha Niblett (South Derbyshire) (Lab): In South Derbyshire, an initiative developed by my constituent Dan Motley, my team and me has been taken forward by South Derbyshire district council. It encourages businesses to publish clear accessibility information. This helps disabled people, their families and friends to make informed choices about venues to visit, while recognising the economic value of the purple pound. Ahead of Purple Tuesday on 3 November next week, which celebrates the purple pound, will the Leader of the House consider a debate on introducing mandatory accessibility information standards for businesses, to ensure that disabled consumers can access clear, consistent information. and to give more businesses the confidence and guidance to become accessible and inclusive?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend and her constituent for their local initiative, and I will make sure that the relevant Department has heard her question today. I encourage her to apply for a Westminster Hall debate, so that the matter can be discussed further, because I am sure that other Members might want to join in on that.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Last weekend was the 65th anniversary of the building of the Tamar bridge. Local people are still paying to cross what is clearly critical national infrastructure. I marked the occasion by talking to local people in Saltash and Torpoint about my petition to end the tolls, which are a

[Anna Gelderd]

barrier to growth and to accessing essential healthcare, schools and jobs over the Tamar. Will the Leader of the House support me in securing a meeting with the Secretary of State for Transport on delivering a fairer toll system in the short term, and a toll-free Tamar in the long term?

Sir Alan Campbell: I thank my hon. Friend for this question; she is assiduous in campaigning on this matter. She makes a powerful case about the financial burden that tolls place on residents and businesses who need to get to work and access essential services. I will make sure that the Transport Secretary is made aware of her representations on the Floor of the House today. We will see whether we can arrange a meeting for her.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): Mr Speaker, if you or the Leader of the House would like to visit my constituency, first, you would be very welcome, and secondly, you would see a rather rare sight: seagulls seemingly walking on water in Gloucester docks. I am not aware of any divine intervention, but we have had a very dry summer and an unprecedented silt build-up. The Canal & River Trust has started a £4 million dredging programme, but I am concerned that in the long term we will keep seeing this problem build up again and again as the dry summers continue. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on how we can make water companies such as Bristol Water, which pump water out of our canal system, pay their fair share to uphold and maintain the historic docks in Gloucester?

Sir Alan Campbell: I understand that the current water supply agreement between Bristol Water and the Canal & River Trust is due to be renewed in 2028 and that there are ongoing conversations regarding dredging and managing silt in Gloucester dock. I will make sure the relevant Minister hears my hon. Friend's concerns, but he may want to take it further and seek an Adjournment debate.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Many local towns like Rye and Bexhill give free Saturday parking during the festive season to boost local high streets, but not Hastings. That is why last year I launched a campaign calling on the local council to roll it out in Hastings, too. Does the Leader of the House agree that after the Government took decisive action in the Budget yesterday to support local businesses and cut business rates, Green-run Hastings borough council should get in the festive spirit early and support my campaign for Christmas parking in Hastings?

Sir Alan Campbell: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend, who is a doughty campaigner for her constituents. What she says about parking in the run-up to Christmas will resonate around the country. As she rightly points out, we have given Hastings council record funding, and I suggest that the council listens to what she has said and spends it on her constituents' priorities.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Advantage Retirement Homes runs two care homes in my constituency: St Thomas' Priory near Armitage and Chasewater Mews in Burntwood. Between those two properties, the company is currently owed almost £600,000—a staggering sum—by the local integrated care board. The board is failing to pay out funded nursing care payments, a weekly sum that the NHS should pay to cover the cost of registered nurses in care homes. This has been going on since 2003. Does the Leader of the House agree that this is utterly unacceptable, and will he ask the relevant Minister to meet me to discuss the penalties available for ICBs that fail to make payments that are owed to hard-working companies in our constituencies?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to raise that concerning issue today, and the fact that it goes back to 2003 adds greater urgency to it. We recognise the significant concern that unresolved payment issues can cause for providers, so I am happy to try to facilitate a meeting between him and the relevant Minister, so that he can raise the case further.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Bonfire night can be difficult in Edinburgh, and previous years have seen serious disruption and pretty terrifying antisocial behaviour in Niddrie and Craigmillar. I have been working closely with the police for months and with the Hays Community Hub, Sandy's Community Centre and many other groups across Craigmillar and Niddrie to keep disruption this year to a minimum, backed by £20 million from the UK Government's Pride in Place funding. Will my right hon. Friend support a debate on how we back community organisations to tackle antisocial behaviour around bonfire night?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to raise this matter, which will resonate with Members across the House. It is often raised with me at this time of year, and I commend him for the work he is doing in his local community. The Government are looking at the matter that he raises. The consultation on reforming fireworks and pyrotechnic legislation received a very high number of responses, not surprisingly. The Government are currently considering the evidence and will respond in due course. At that point, I am sure there will be ample opportunity to discuss this matter further.

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): After Storm Austen last week, with its echoes of Storm Goretti, I wanted to recognise some of my Cornish parish councils for setting up emergency plans; Salt Wind Catering for working with the National Grid to provide some of the warm food that people needed; National Grid and its team—particularly Jacob Wallace—for their work; Cormac for sorting out the trees so quickly; our farmers; and Radio Cornwall. I think a lot of their actions and what we did in Goretti led to the "Be Ready" scheme that the Government rolled out last week. Could we have a debate in Government time on support for community resilience in the face of the effects of climate change and severe storms?

Sir Alan Campbell: My hon. Friend is right to list all the individuals and organisations who played an important part in clearing up after the storms. I pay tribute to them and, indeed, everybody across the country for everything they have done, including local radio, National Grid and farmers, who in many cases are crucial to the

work that happens. The Government understand the challenges of a changing climate and the importance of resilience. We will be bringing forward in the future an opportunity to debate these matters further, but again, because this is about ensuring that organisations have the resources they need, we have three days of Budget debate left if my hon. Friend wishes to raise it.

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): The Muster Point, a local veterans support group, does fantastic and vital work supporting veterans across my community. This winter, it is teaming up with the inspirational Chicksands and Henlow military wives choir to release a single "We're Still Here" to raise funds to support that vital work. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking them for all they do for our community and urge hon. Members across the House to dig deep, get behind their efforts and drive that single right up the charts this Christmas?

Sir Alan Campbell: I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking the Muster Point and the Chicksands and Henlow military wives choir for their invaluable work in supporting veteran communities. I join my hon. Friend in encouraging hon. Members to get behind and listen to the Christmas single "We're Still Here" to ensure that it gets the notice and credit it deserves.

Local Government Reorganisation

12.6 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon): The Government are committed to shifting power from Westminster and Whitehall to the places where people live and work. Yesterday's Budget shows that we are committed to giving local leaders, local councils and local communities the tools to shape their future. But our ambition to rewire the state and ensure that the country is ready for devolution depends on strong, sustainable local government, and it is only through reorganisation that we will create those strong foundations.

We know that reorganisation is difficult, but we also believe that it is worth it. The decisions we take now will be the building blocks for how the country is governed for generations to come. Our vision is clear: mayoral and strategic authorities, underpinned by strong unitary councils with real powers to take decisions in the interests of their communities.

On 7 September, the Secretary of State announced a review of the programme to ensure that it was robust and aligned with the Government's priorities. Since then, we have listened to local leaders, sector partners, mayors, and Members of Parliament. I place on the record our thanks to them for their work and for engaging constructively. Consensus will not always be possible, but I know that all of us are putting forward arguments for what we believe is best for the different areas of England. I am committed to hearing all those views before coming to final decisions. I also want to take a moment to recognise the impact on councils, councillors and their staff. I appreciate their desire for clarity.

Today, I can provide some clarity on what comes next. I can announce to the House that the first phase of the review is now complete. I have tested the programme framework, including whether the criteria set out in February last year continue to support the Government's priorities. I have concluded, on the basis of the programme, that it is robust and that the existing criteria are correct on their own terms and continue to support the Government's policy agenda. We are content that we can take forward local government reorganisation in line with the existing criteria.

In concluding the review, I have also considered the best way to bring clarity quickly while making sure that each area receives the deep and thorough consideration that it deserves. We will inform councils of outcomes at the earliest possible opportunity—with some areas getting those outcomes more quickly than others.

Today, I am able to give further clarity on some of the 14 areas who had decisions in July. The Secretary of State and I have carefully considered all the proposals and the evidence for those 14 areas. Following that initial consideration, we are minded, subject to representations and parliamentary approval, to implement the following proposals in five areas: 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 three-unitary proposal in Oxfordshire, including boundary changes; the two-unitary proposal in Warwickshire; and the two-unitary proposal

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in Worcestershire. Those decisions are for the same council structures that were previously announced in July, or they are new decisions following full and thorough consideration.

Before final decisions are taken, there will be a minimum three-week period during which those who are interested may make further representations to me. The start and end date for that period will be confirmed shortly, as well as further details on how councils and other interested parties can make representations. Any final implementation decisions will be subject to the normal parliamentary approval. We are going to take more time on the remaining nine areas announced in July, and we will use the coming months to consider further the proposals submitted before coming to a view.

To give councils clarity on the legal status of existing decisions we are withdrawing the decisions announced in July for the following areas: Derbyshire and Derby; Devon, Plymouth and Torbay; Hertfordshire; Kent and Medway; Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen and Blackpool; Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland; Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire; Nottinghamshire and Nottingham; and Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent. I want to be clear that this is no reflection on the work underpinning those proposals.

I can now set out the plan for the final phases of the review. The review will now focus on the 15 areas that are due to have a "minded to" decision. Those are, in no particular order, the nine areas I have just mentioned, the four areas where decisions were withdrawn in September, Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and West Sussex. All options and proposals for those areas will remain under consideration, and I will approach them all with an open mind. As such, it should not be assumed that the same proposal will automatically be selected. It is important to allow the process to run its course and to allow full and proper consideration. We will move faster where we can, and some remaining areas may receive an outcome decision before others. I commit to coming back to the House with updates for another set of areas by Christmas, and every area will have an outcome by early next year.

As we set out in September, the local elections scheduled for May 2027 will now go ahead to existing councils. That means that elections to new councils will be made in 2028, followed by a vesting day in April 2029. That is for all areas apart from Surrey. I have also heard concerns about cost uncertainty, and we appreciate that areas have incurred costs in good faith. All areas will receive half the transition funding that they were previously due, which equates to £450,000 per new unitary previously announced. Those guaranteed payments will be made in the coming weeks regardless of the outcome of the review. Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and West Sussex, will also receive £500,000 per area. After final decisions, we will pay any remaining balance, depending on how many councils are chosen.

I have heard from Members across the House about the pride, history and identity sitting behind our cities and counties. City status and ceremonial matters play a valuable role for local pride, so we will work with areas to ensure that city status is preserved following reorganisation. Subject to final decisions, we will continue to work with places to protect their city status by working through all the options, including bringing forward legislation where necessary—*[Interruption.]* Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have been struggling with a cold for about a week. Usually when a Minister comes up in the morning with a croaky throat it is the result of a long night of karaoke, but I am afraid this is the result of back-to-back LGR conversations all morning, which does not carry quite the same sense of fun or rhythm.

I want to use this moment to build consensus and deliver a programme where central Government and local government work together. This programme must be a joint effort. It is the foundation of rewiring how our country works, and getting foundations in place to devolve new powers and functions in every area. This Government will be an active and reliable partner, and we stand ready to work with councils to support them to deliver these significant changes. I promise to keep the House updated, and I commend this statement to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Regardless of the croaky voice, I was paying attention because the statement concerns my constituency in East Sussex. I call the shadow Secretary of State.

12.14 pm

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): It gives me no pleasure whatsoever to say that from start to finish, this Government's approach to local government reorganisation has been nothing short of a farce. The Government first promised to publish their English devolution White Paper in November 2024. It was delayed until December 2024, with affected councils given three weeks over Christmas to decide whether or not to delay local elections. Last year, after the right hon. Member for Ashton-under-Lyne (Angela Rayner) was forced to resign from the Cabinet, her successor—and, as it turns out, her predecessor—assured us that reorganisation was not taking, and would not take, any longer than planned, and that elections scheduled for May 2026 would go ahead. The Government confirmed that twice in November 2025, yet the very next month announced that elections in some parts of the country would be pushed back as far as 2028.

Two weeks later, again in the run-up to Christmas, the then local government Minister invited another wave of postponements. In January this year, despite having promised not to delay elections in November, the then Secretary of State announced legislation to postpone 29 elections. The next month, days before the Department was due to answer for its behaviour in court, those postponements were withdrawn. Naturally, the taxpayer was left to pick up the tab for all those delays—a bill that runs into the tens of millions of pounds. That U-turn was announced during recess, so that Members of Parliament had to wait to question Ministers.

In March, there was another set of announcements and another set of legal challenges. In June, it was revealed in a pre-action letter issued by the Department that Ministers had ignored official advice over reorganisation plans. In July, just days before the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) became Prime Minister, the previous Secretary of State announced a whole new set of reorganisation plans, with many Members given essentially no time to scrutinise the

sweeping changes that were set to be imposed on their areas. We still have not seen the advice that informed those decisions, so will the Minister confirm today, in the interests of transparency, that that advice will be published?

In September, following updated and privileged legal advice, the current Secretary of State withdrew decisions for Essex, Hampshire, Norfolk and Suffolk, and paused plans in most of the rest of the country. What a complete joke! Today the Minister talks of giving councils clarity, yet goes on immediately to say that all options and proposals remain under consideration, and that he approaches all decisions with an open mind. He cannot be serious. We are two and a half years into this process, and the Government had years in opposition to plan it. Why have these decisions not yet been made? How can we still be at the stage of keeping an open mind, and what clarity exactly have we gained from the statement?

The vast majority of councils are none the wiser after what we have heard today. The Minister talks of allowing the process to "run its course" and of giving "full and proper consideration" to each decision, but can he set out what will be taken into consideration? What role have party political objectives played in determining new local government boundaries? Have the Government received, at any point during the process, legal advice that indicates that political considerations were given undue weight in deciding new council boundaries? When can councils that have been left in the dark by today's announcement expect some kind of verdict from the Government? Which areas will hear by Christmas, and what does "early next year" actually mean?

Given the Government's record on meeting their own deadlines, I am sure that the Minister will forgive me for my scepticism. The real-world results of this endless delay are plain to see. People across the country are left without any sense of which council will be providing services in the year and years to come, while councillors and council officials have spent millions of pounds of taxpayers' money planning and preparing for new authorities that might never materialise.

Notwithstanding the announcement that the Minister has made on funding, will he provide an estimate today of the total cost of this Government's shambolic local government reorganisation? How much of that cost is being eaten by legal fees? The money spent on this farcical reorganisation process should have been spent instead on resurfacing roads, collecting bins and maintaining parks—core local government functions that people care about. For all the Prime Minister's talk about local government, this whole approach to devolution has shown nothing but contempt for local democracy. Local voices have been ignored in the drawing of new council boundaries, and have been overridden by party political considerations. Again and again, the Labour Government's approach to local government has been about imposing more government, pushing up tax, and stacking the deck in a cynical effort to gain political advantage. They should be ashamed.

Jim McMahon: First, let me say that we do not take for granted concerns about the implications of the delay on the councils, councillors and officials who have been working on these schemes. We know that the pause was disruptive, and that people put a lot of work into their proposals and the transitional work in preparation for the new unitary councils. Equally, it would have been wrong had the Government not taken into account the legal status of those that were in court and not used that as an opportunity to review the programme overall, which was the decision that we announced in September. That was the right thing to do to give clarity to the programme and move forward with confidence; to ensure we were reviewing the criteria, the process, the decision making and the evidence base; and to allow us to come to fresh decisions, where needed.

From my perspective, I am playing this with an absolutely straight bat—I want to do this with integrity. It is important to say that there are no Government proposals on the table because the only proposals that a Minister can consider are those that councils themselves have submitted during the process. Our job is to ensure that we take into account local opinion and test the evidence base, the assumptions, the alignment with public service boundaries and the financial modelling. Through that work, we then make a balanced determination. By the way, there is no perfect solution for quite large parts of England that I have seen, but that does not mean we cannot reach a solution that is the best that it can be.

Our job is to make a decision in an objective way and with an open mind, which is why I cannot understand the shadow Minister criticising what is objectively the right thing to do. It would be entirely wrong, in a legal process, to predetermine the outcome we most desire and railroad that through. All the vulnerabilities with LGR that she speaks about were features of previous rounds of LGR, which the Conservative Government undertook on a fairly regular basis.

No Government decision is not open to legal challenge if somebody wants to make that challenge. On LGR, the Government found themselves in court defending previous decisions. Cumbria is a good example: the Government were taken to court, the case was heard by a judge and the Government had to explain why they came to their view. We should not pretend that a legal challenge somehow represents a fault in the system, but it does bring a pause for thought, and we have used that pause to ensure that the reorganisation is right going forward.

On the question of how we will proceed, the approach I am setting out does not have the tranching up of areas that we had previously, so quite deliberately, we do not have tranches 1, 2 and 3. However, we are going to work through authorities as quickly as possible. The commitment that we have made is that, rather than waiting for an artificial date—a particular point in time—if we can come forward with a few earlier, we will do that, so we do not have to wait for the whole programme to be confirmed later in the process.

Finally, on the point about costs and how much has been incurred, there are different ways of looking at that. There are the costs of producing the proposals, but they are not abortive because those proposals are real today and they will be considered as part of the new process. Those are not wasted costs at all; they are the normal costs that are incurred in reorganisation. Then there are the costs of transfers and, once the decision is made, preparing the ground to move to the new shadow unitary authorities, but those costs are required whatever decision is made in whatever county, so that is not abortive work either.

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However, we accept that the decision to pause and to ask staff in particular areas to stop working on the proposals has led to a cost being incurred by those authorities that would not have been incurred had we not decided to pause the programme. On that basis, we have decided to release the money that I have set out today, and I think that is the right thing to do. We believe strongly in central and local government working in partnership together and being respectful to each other. If councils say that they have incurred costs that they would not otherwise have incurred, it is right for the Government to say that we are willing to meet them halfway.

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, but there remains some confusion in Lancashire, so I hope he is able to clarify a few things. Moving away from the different tranches suggests that there is now no timetable for what might happen in Lancashire. Councillors are asking me for clarity on a timetable for Lancashire. I also seek reassurance that the decision means that Lancaster will not lose its city status in any part of the reorganisation, and that the building blocks with which we are making the reorganisation do not have to be strictly borough councils. For example, Wyre borough council, which was already an amalgamation of other councils, might want to look in different directions.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for the representations on Lancashire's reorganisation and on devolution that she has made over a long period of time. I accept that we have not set out a list-by-list, county-by-county timetable showing exactly when reorganisation will come, but we have said that we will conclude the considerations in the new year. Wherever the counties find themselves in the programme, when it is eventually developed, they will know one way or the other in that February to March period, and we will work through them as and when. My point was that if we are in a position to announce them earlier, we should do that rather than keeping areas waiting unnecessarily—that is the idea of the approach that we are taking.

My hon. Friend correctly makes a point about Lancaster's city status, and that applies to cities across the counties that are in scope. It would be absolutely wrong if a city risked losing its status just because its city status is aligned to a local authority that is being abolished rather than to a geographical area. I can give an absolute assurance that even if we have to introduce new legislation to preserve that status, we will do whatever we have to do to ensure that no city loses its city status through reorganisation.

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

Pippa Heylings (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): Liberal Democrats support genuine devolution and shifting power out of Westminster, but we have been shocked by the Government's botched handling of this process. Ministers promised that MPs and local leaders would be properly involved in decisions affecting their areas, yet many have been left in the dark until announcements were effectively made for them. Will the Minister explain why MPs representing affected areas were not briefed before today's announcement?

Even now, after months of confusion over local government reorganisation, delayed elections and significant abortive costs, councils and communities are still waiting for certainty. Local authorities, many in dire financial positions following years of under-investment, have spent time and money in good faith preparing these proposals according to the Government's criteria and timetable, only for that timetable to shift repeatedly.

In my constituency of South Cambridgeshire, one of the fastest growing areas in the country, businesses need certainty to invest and plan. Councils need certainty to set budgets and deliver services, and council staff deserve clarity about their future. Yet today's statement leaves Cambridgeshire and Peterborough yet again awaiting a decision, while other areas move ahead. When will the Minister finally provide a clear and stable timetable for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and for other areas that are still awaiting decisions?

Finally, following the chaos of decisions being withdrawn, reorganisation being paused and the programme being reviewed following updated legal advice, can the Secretary of State even guarantee that what is being announced today is legally sound? Will she now publish the legal advice to demonstrate that?

Jim McMahon: Working backwards, the reason we carried out the review was to ensure that we, as the Ministers who were making the decisions, were satisfied that the decisions were being made in a rational way, with the evidence base secured, and that where there were outstanding questions, we tested them in the process. Obviously, we were not the Ministers who made the decisions in July, so on coming back in, we needed to be absolutely sure that what we were putting our names to was correct. That is what we are doing.

That may mean that the same conclusion is reached in many areas, but importantly that conclusion will be reached as a fresh decision. We are going to go through that process, which is why it is taking time, but if we had come here and said, "Do you know what? We have completed the whole programme review and the financial review, and we have done every single outstanding county in England in a few weeks," hon. Members would have cast doubt on just how much time we had given to each of the counties and their proposals. We are determined to make this decision robust, for it to be right and to put in the time needed to ensure that we fully go through the proposals, the consultation and the financial assessment.

Where local areas have put forward an argument in support of their proposal, we are testing that line by line. For example, if a local authority is requesting a boundary change or to grow its boundaries, and that is predicated on matters like housing numbers, economic growth or travel-to-work areas, I want to see those things. I want to see the travel-to-work map, the form that the urban development takes and so on, so we are testing those proposals to ensure that we are satisfied. To return to my previous point, I have not seen a single proposal that I consider to be the perfect proposal, but our job is to ensure that we get the best possible proposal using the information that we have received, and we are undertaking that work.

On the hon. Lady's point about Cambridgeshire and Peterborough—obviously, the point applies to West Sussex as well, as they essentially go into the same pool—I would

not necessarily assume that because those authorities were at the end of the decision-making process in the previous round, they will be at the end of the process in the current round. We will make a decision on which ones we are going to bring forward shortly.

On the hon. Lady's point about legal advice, which was also mentioned by the shadow Minister, it is long-standing Government policy that we do not publish that legal advice.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I need Members to ask much shorter questions, and I need the Minister's answers to be on point as well.

David Williams (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): When I am out listening to residents in Kidsgrove and its surrounds, they tell me that they want good public services delivered efficiently and to a high quality, but a two-tier system causes constant confusion. If a resident wants to raise issues about their local park, they can go and speak to the borough council. If they have a question about their local library, they can go and speak to the county council. If they need a pothole fixed, they can go and speak to their county council, not their borough council. The list goes on. At the same time, we are paying for managers and directors at two councils, rather than one, which is a waste of taxpayers' money. Does the Minister agree that what matters most to the residents of Kidsgrove and its surrounds is having good, high-quality services that work for them? That also offers greater accountability; at the moment, my residents are passed from pillar to post. Equally, residents in Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove want clarity from the Government, so can I please press them to offer that clarity?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes the case for reorganisation well. It is less important how we perceive the structures of government in this place; in my view, it is more important that local people know who to hold to account for decisions made in their name and with their taxes. The truth is that in two-tier areas, there is confusion about which council to hold to account for the delivery of services, and there is a duplication of services. The fact that we have multiple chief executives, multiple finance directors, multiples HR directors and so on means that—in a period with there are all the pressures on adult social care, children's services and temporary accommodation, and when we desire to start rebuilding neighbourhood services so that people can see improvement in their area—we have to do absolutely everything that we can to direct money to the frontline and to the local services that people can see.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I do not think that the Minister mentioned Essex in his statement, but he made a point about funding which I think is much appreciated—that areas have incurred costs in good faith. Does that apply to Essex? On the basis of £450,000 per new unitary previously announced, we would be due £2.25 million for the inconvenience and disruption to local government in Essex.

Jim McMahon: All the local authorities that were engaged in LGR, whether they were part of the four subject to the court challenges or the one that we are withdrawing today, will receive a payment for the work that they have done. The reorganisation programme is going ahead, so we are going to return to Hampshire, Essex, Norfolk and Suffolk to complete that work.

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): Councils have spent considerable time and resources building the case for local government reorganisation, including by producing robust financial analysis, housing data, work on the social care impact and work on the impact on travel-to-work areas. Today's announcement raises serious questions for any future timetable. Will the Minister confirm if councils are expected to go back to the drawing board and negotiate with surrounding councils on new boundaries? If so, how can they be expected to do that by January while meaningfully consulting their residents?

Jim McMahon: As it stands, we are satisfied that there is not a requirement for areas to develop new proposals. We will consider the proposals already submitted and the evidence base, as well as the consultation that went alongside. However, there have to be fresh ministerial decisions that are objective and that we approach with an open mind.

There is no further requirement on councils to do that front work. However, we are going to introduce a "minded to" process. When decisions are made, they will be "minded to" decisions. The idea is that we need to rebuild good faith in local government. If areas have concerns about a proposal that we believe is a "minded to" decision—if that proposal is not quite right for an area, or there are concerns about its potential implementation or what it means for local communities—there has to be something in the process that ensures that the Government are open to listen. We believe that is best done through the "minded to" process.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): May I warmly welcome the Minister's statement and his announcement that Gloucestershire will be one unitary authority? That will produce better administration and better value for money. However, will he explain to my constituents why we are having an election next May on the existing councils, which will gradually lose power as we move toward the following election the next year? Why can we not simply have an election next May on the shadow unitary authority?

Jim McMahon: It is important that we have a programme that is consistent across the country. We cannot say, "Well, because there seems to be a bit more local consensus in one place than another, and maybe the legal risk is a bit less, we can suddenly kind of shortcut the process." That means that Gloucestershire, like everywhere else, will go through the "minded to" process. The letters going to councils today will give interested parties around three weeks to make representations. We then need to consider our response and do any more development coming from that. That will mean that the 2027 election for the shadow unitary just will not be possible.

Another thing to have in mind is that, even though we are doing our best to tie this work down and make it robust, any decision of Government can be challenged in court, including the one in Gloucestershire. The worst outcome is that we pretend that May '27 is an option. We are going to get to the end of the "minded to" decision in January, and it will take a couple of months to look at it; there will be no time at all for returning officers and political parties to find candidates for the new shadow unitary. There is a chance that a decision could be judicially reviewed in that process,

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and that would probably be the worst outcome. It is a fact that this work will take a bit longer, but that gives more certainty to councils so that they can prepare.

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): The Minister knows about my frustration with LGR and the original outcome. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool North and Fleetwood (Lorraine Beavers) and the hon. Member for Fylde (Mr Snowden) agree that the outcome that came for Blackpool, Fylde and Wyre to merge as one authority was the worst outcome possible, given the challenges that we face in an authority like Blackpool. Will the Minister look at the "minded to" decisions to ensure that if local areas object, they are able to feed in other proposals that were originally on the table and may work better—not just for our area but across Lancashire? On top of that, if local areas want to go back to authorities of 500,000 people, will he look at that?

Jim McMahon: We have confirmed multiple times that the 500,000 population size was a guiding figure, and we were very mindful during the course of reorganisation that some councils went above that, with Gloucestershire being one example—I think the population was in the mid-600,000s. Other councils did not believe that was the way forward for their local population, for different reasons; sometimes it was because of a spread of different identities between a coastal community, an urban city or a rural shire surrounding it. In those councils, the view was, that the council should better represent the identity of the area, rather than being a single unit. That figure was always a guide.

There is not a window in this process for new proposals, but there will be a "minded to" process. When we confirm our preferred option, if there are proposals for tweaks that would make it better, we will be open to receiving them during that process.

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): On 7 September, the Secretary of State made a commitment that Devon MPs would be able to hold a meeting with the appropriate Minister to discuss local government reorganisation in Devon. Sadly, that meeting has not occurred to date. What timescale can the Minister give for such a meeting occurring?

Jim McMahon: We said that the meeting would take place after the review, as we wanted the review to take its course. It has obviously now concluded, and I have made a statement today. We have a list of about 40 to 50 MPs who have requested meetings in debates and in writing, so we will have a Monday evening surgery every two weeks from 7 pm to 9 pm. We will make sure that MPs are given a slot at the earliest possible opportunity.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): The prize on offer for Gloucester residents from local government reorganisation is the promise of devolution so that we can share in the powers and investment that the Prime Minister and the Chancellor have announced over the last few months. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we can ensure that local government reorganisation and the model proposed for Gloucestershire will unlock devolution opportunities, rather than block them? The only credible option for Gloucestershire is a foundation strategic authority in the short term and joining the West of England combined authority in the long term. That is backed by six of our seven local councils and all four constituent councils of the WECA.

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes an important point. One of the criteria for reorganisation is that it has to be compatible with devolution going forward. I hope that Members saw the announcement yesterday for 10 new devolution agreements across England—that is significant investment coming our way. When we look at the map of England, there is that belt around the midlands where economies and communities say that they look in different directions. We need to work through what a good settlement for those areas looks like in practice, but I absolutely take on board my hon. Friend's points. I thank him for all the work that he does on this issue, and I am very happy to meet him.

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): The Government are very good at imposing on people things that they do not want. In Staffordshire Moorlands, the Government want to impose the end of Staffordshire Moorlands district and the end of Staffordshire police—reorganisations that will have different timeframes and will lead to great confusion. Will the Minister consider my proposal for local government reorganisation—this has been my proposal all along—which is to leave our councils and local authorities in the state they are in? The Government can give us a mayor, if that is what they want, but we really do not need any more distractions for our local government officials, who need to get on and deliver services.

Jim McMahon: I just do not agree with the analysis that we can stay as we are. I do not think we can stay as we are from a public service delivery perspective, a devolution perspective, or a financial sustainability perspective. The world has changed, and the demands for people-led services—in adults' and children's social care and in temporary accommodation—are overwhelming councils. We have to make sure that we free up the money from the system that is currently used for executive pay and back-office support and direct it straight to neighbourhoods and people-led services. That is not at all to decry the good work that district councils do. I respect those councils, but we have to take this in the context of the 50-year period of reorganisation.

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): As the Minister knows, I support local government reorganisation, and I welcomed the original pause of the decision to split Amber Valley in two. I know that the Minister is taking the time to carefully review the situation, and I thank him for the thorough and thoughtful manner in which he is doing so. However, delays bring uncertainty about council officers' futures, planning services, and delivery of projects for the people of Amber Valley. Given that splitting Amber Valley is the only point of contention between the boroughs and districts of Derbyshire, can I urge the Minister to commit to a swift and firm timetable for Derbyshire? This can be sorted out quickly.

Jim McMahon: I thank my hon. Friend for all her representations on this issue over a long period of time. I can definitely commit to moving as quickly as possible. All the points she has raised—about identity, good public services and so on—are in our mind when we consider the proposals.

Nigel Farage (Clacton) (Reform): I am pleased that my party's legal challenge has bought us a stay in Essex and elsewhere, but to re-emphasise: district councils matter to remote, rural and coastal communities. In Clacton, planning decisions—big decisions that matter—are taken in Clacton town hall. Under your proposals, those decisions will be made in a large population centre.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Farage, no "you" and "your", because it is not me who is responding.

Nigel Farage: Under these proposals, big planning decisions that are currently taken locally will be taken miles away, in a big population centre with no understanding of the local ground. Is that not against the devolution powers that the Prime Minister, the Chancellor, and you yourself have championed as being good for the country?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Before the Minister responds, let me say that I am not at the Dispatch Box. It is "the Minister", not "you" and "your". Back-Bench MPs should be speaking through the Chair.

Jim McMahon: I am delighted that the hon. Member has managed to find his seat today—he looks quite comfortable there, and there is not a prayer card in sight, as far as I can see. Actually, he makes the important point that local politics matters. What we do not want to do through reorganisation is take away the local, so the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 requires us to bring forward neighbourhood governance arrangements before Christmas. We want to try to have a unit of government within a council—to hardwire it and mainstream it, so that local councillors are given the respect that comes with being frontline councillors with the powers and resources to get things done in their area. We can do that at a bigger level and in a different way.

To be clear—although I know the hon. Member did not mean it—the Reform party is not taking the Government to court; local authorities have decided to issue claims. We need to make sure that we are not using local authorities for party political reasons.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. As he knows, I have been calling for a devolution settlement for Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland, which I was pleased was confirmed in yesterday's Budget. However, we know that local government reorganisation is going to be key to long-term strategic growth in our communities, so it is disappointing to hear about this withdrawal now. I have more concerns, though, about how this uncertainty will impact our communities and our hard-working colleagues across local councils. In the light of this change, how will local authorities in Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland be supported to make sure it does not disrupt their long-term aim of providing excellent services to my residents?

Jim McMahon: My hon. Friend makes a very fair point about the impact of the delay. That has impacted a lot of council staff who have been working on this; it has definitely impacted chief officers, legal officers and councillors, which is why we committed to return as soon as possible. I think we have honoured that through the work we have done so far, but we will move at pace to make sure we can act as quickly as possible. Obviously, securing devolution and investment for the counties of Leicestershire and Rutland could be transformational for their communities and their economy.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): After more than two years, the Minister has come to the Chamber today to say that all options are still on the table. He cannot say what the timeline is for Cambridgeshire, yet he also said from the Dispatch Box that his priority is getting resources to the frontline. I am not surprised that the Secretary of State, who is in her place, has decided to duck making this statement and has passed it to the Minister, but will he answer the question asked by my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam)? What has been the total cost to local authorities and the Government of this process so far, given that we have arrived at a situation today where all options are on the table?

Jim McMahon: The cost of transitioning from the two-tier system to new unitaries is covered by councils in their proposals. They tell us how they will finance the transitional arrangements that they are asking the Government to consider. For the first time—Government have not done this before—we have introduced a multimillion-pound budget, £900,000 per new unitary, to support the transitional arrangements on top of that, so I do not believe that the way in which the right hon. Gentleman has framed his question reflects the reality. The Government are meeting the councils halfway.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I welcome the announcement in this statement that the Minister has scrapped the disgraceful and discourteous announcement made in July 2026. He is right to throw it out, but my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme want and deserve certainty and clarity, and I did not hear much of that in the statement, so may I ask the Minister three very quick questions? Will he confirm how Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent MPs will feed into the review? How much money will our local authorities get to redress what they have spent so far? And may I urge him to focus on the new mayoral authority announced yesterday, because that has the support needed to achieve a change of this scale?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I appreciate how local this is for everybody, but I ask Members to please ask only one question each, because we need to get through this statement quickly.

Jim McMahon: Obviously, we were delighted to announce the devolution agreement yesterday. That will definitely bring new resources and powers to my hon. Friend's area, but it has to be built on a strong foundation of local government that can be sustained. As for how MPs can engage, the "minded to" process for when decisions are issued gives us a window in which MPs and other interested parties can make representations.

Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD): The two local authorities that serve my constituency are due to be abolished next year as part of the first phase of local government reorganisation, and now we hear that Surrey is likely to have a mayor. Will the Minister confirm that the

[Mr Will Forster]

Government will let Surrey choose whether or not to have a mayor via a public consultation and a vote of councillors?

Jim McMahon: As with LGR, devolution is locally led, so it is for local areas to come to Government to say, "We have a broad agreement that we want to be in talks about devolution." We then bring that into a programme and speak to the Treasury about financing that programme, which is where we got to yesterday, so this is great news for the 10 areas that are in scope. The next stage is a consultation, probably around December, and then local authorities will be taking local decisions to form the strategic authority, probably in February and March. Once they have done that, we will move the statutory instruments—the legislation—here in the House.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): Councils across Cambridgeshire and Peterborough have worked collaboratively throughout the whole local government reorganisation process, even when they have disagreed. I have long advocated for our region to have three unitary councils, not just two, and I hope the Government will agree, but there are of course questions about where boundaries should lie. What avenues will be available, or are available, for councils to submit modifications to proposals if consensus can be built on improvements?

Jim McMahon: At the moment, we will be going on the proposals that we already have. If those proposals generally contain the type of outcome that my hon. Friend wants and we are minded to go with them, there is an opportunity during the "minded to" window to make representations: "Actually, those proposals could be improved if this modification were made." If we accept that as an argument and want to make a modification order, we will then need to go through a separate consultation process. That will probably take a bit longer, but if it is the right thing to do, we should be open-minded about doing it.

Nigel Huddleston (Droitwich and Evesham) (Con): The Minister cannot stand at the Dispatch Box and say that the Government are not imposing local government reorganisation, and then say that the status quo is not an option. Is he fully aware of the chaos, cost and uncertainty that this indecision is causing in Worcestershire? If I understand correctly, we have local district council elections next year, a unitary election the year after, and maybe—for what mayoralty we do not know—a mayoral election. Does that make sense to him?

Jim McMahon: The pace of change is quick—we know that—but the economic and social requirements for that pace are vital. If we do not move quickly, we will have no chance of ensuring growth can reach every postcode in the country, which is our promise, and no ability to ensure the funding required for those who need social care, care in their local communities and vital neighbourhood services. It is, therefore, the right thing to do.

On the hon. Member's point about whether we are imposing this, to be clear, the English devolution White Paper that was published in December 2024 invited councils to be part of the voluntary programme, and every one of the 21 outstanding counties applied.

Chris Ward (Brighton Kemptown and Peacehaven) (Lab): The Minister will know, because of the many times I have raised it with him and the Secretary of State, that there is still real concern in Peacehaven, Telscombe and East Saltdean, in my constituency, about the proposed merger into Brighton and Hove. Given today's announcement and the "minded to" decision, can he explain a little more clearly how my constituents can feed in, during the three or four-week period, and how I can ensure their views continue to be heard?

Jim McMahon: At the moment, the proposal regarding the "minded to" decision is to expand the boundary of Brighton and Hove city council to include the communities of Saltdean and Peacehaven further down the coast. However, that is a "minded to" decision, so there is an opportunity for communities to make representations, alongside MPs. I give my hon. Friend credit for the representations he has already made on this over quite a long period.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I commend the Government on granting Cornwall, by exception, a single-authority FSA—foundation strategic authority—devolution deal. I have been proud to work with all of Cornwall's MPs and the council leader on this, and Cornwall is very much relieved that it will not be merged with any other region. Will the Minister now meet all of Cornwall's MPs to discuss how we can move to that mayoral suite of powers and funding, without a mayor, as new legislation comes before this House?

Jim McMahon: I understand that all MPs were invited to the meeting at No. 10 North about devolution, which is good news. That shows just how importantly we are taking this; it is a Government-wide priority and we are working across our different teams to ensure that it lands.

I hope the hon. Gentleman also recognises that, for Cornwall, we are working as hard as we can to recognise that different places are in different positions on devolution, but, ultimately, we want to complete the map, either through a foundation authority or through an MSA.

Steve Race (Exeter) (Lab): I welcome yesterday's announcement of a mayoral strategic authority for the geography of Devon. However, as the Minister is aware, cities that currently have district councils are the drivers of economic growth, jobs growth, house building and much else in their areas, but are currently locked out of sitting as full constituent members of mayoral strategic authorities. As we are looking at potential legislation regarding cities, can the Minister give some commitment to looking at whether cities, in advance of local government reorganisation, could sit as full constituent members of MSAs?

Jim McMahon: First, I thank my hon. Friend for the representations he has made on behalf of Exeter over a long period of time on this, both regarding reorganisation and devolution. He raises a very fair point, which is that we were trying to align reorganisation to be in place before devolution, but the fact is that those are now going to run to slightly different timetables. It raises a question: if this is about an economic project—which it is—the city economic drivers and the travel-to-work areas ought to have a voice in that. I cannot make commitments today, other than to say that I acknowledge the point my hon. Friend makes and will take it away.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Were he to consult a map, the Minister would understand that the Creator's purpose in placing the estuary of the Test was to prevent, for government purposes, the eastern part of the New Forest from being treated as a suburb of Southampton.

Jim McMahon: I will certainly make a note of that.

Andrew Pakes (Peterborough) (Lab/Co-op): Peterborough is ambitious for growth and to improve life for our residents, so anything that extends this process risks knocking back some of that ambitious growth. I ask the Minister, can we do this as quickly as possible?

I think Peterborough is also unique in this process, in that we are already a unitary council and are being brought into a bigger process. We are consistently told that a decision has not been taken, but in July a review had already started. Can the Minister confirm whether any review has actually happened since the last one was started in July? Will it take a "minded to" decision for MPs, councillors and communities in Cambridgeshire to have a say on the options being considered?

Jim McMahon: With Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and also with West Sussex, we are still earlier in the process, so we will confirm in writing what that will be. However, all decisions will be "minded to". My hon. Friend makes a very strong case about the economic benefits of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and that being built on strong foundations. Also, I congratulate him on his appointment as the Government's co-operatives champion; he has always been my co-operatives champion, but it is nice that he has been recognised.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The reason this local government reorganisation has been so appalling shambolic is that the Government made political decisions, as opposed to the right decisions. Reform in Lincolnshire welcomes the decision to pause there, but does the Minister understand that Reform in Warwickshire is concerned that the two-unitary proposal he is minded to accept will lead to the bankruptcy of both unitaries within a matter of years?

Jim McMahon: The "minded to" process will allow anyone in the area to make those points in representations. If there is new information that we have not considered, I would be happy to receive it.

Luke Murphy (Basingstoke) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I urge him to make a "minded to" decision as quickly as possible for Hampshire, and for that to include the creation of a north Hampshire unitary authority. It is right economically and for the delivery of public services, and has a coalition of charities and businesses behind it. I also join my hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Steve Race) in urging representation for districts—not just cities, but large towns such as Basingstoke—on the Hampshire and the Solent combined county authority.

Jim McMahon: Hampshire was one of the areas where decisions were withdrawn earlier in September, so we will be reviewing that process. As I think I said before, it should not be assumed that, just because areas were in previous batches, that will be the order in which we will take them. We will confirm how we will batch those up, or not, in the coming weeks.

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I did not think that the Minister could make things for people in Worcestershire even more confusing than they were. They just want their bins taken out, their roads maintained, enough school places, adult social care provision and a say in planning. But now I understand that we will have to get councillors elected to district councils again next May, that we will have to get councillors elected to a new shadow authority the following May, and that this new entity in the south of Worcestershire will now not be created until 2029. I just cannot see how that is going to benefit my residents.

Jim McMahon: The hon. Member makes the case as to why the district elections are important. We cannot have a situation in which there is a democratic deficit, where one part of the partnership in the reorganisation—the transfer of assets, workforce and liabilities, and the rest of it—does not have a say. As she says, the vesting day on this timetable will be April 2029. I am afraid that the idea that there should not be a democratic-mandate reset to negotiate that transfer just does not hold.

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): I will start by thanking the Minister for the part he played in getting the announcement of a strategic mayoral authority for Staffordshire over the line in time for yesterday's Budget. However, despite the potential efficiency and simplicity gains of local government reorganisation, the shifting goalposts and the stop-start process have caused deep frustration in our county. Can the Minister confirm what the coming months will bring in terms of consultation with MPs, councillors and, most importantly, our constituents, so that they are clear on how they can again have their say over the future of our councils?

Jim McMahon: Now that the review has concluded, the individual meetings requested by a list of MPs will take place, and we will contact MPs in the usual way for those Monday sessions. Notwithstanding that, the "minded to" process will allow formal representations even beyond that.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): Still West Sussex waits, and we badly need certainty on the geography of the new authorities for my county. I cannot overstate how cash-strapped and fragile our public services are. The £500,000 to offset the cost of further delay is welcome, but it is only the tip of the iceberg of the amount of money that the Department has spent in the past two years on LGR. May I press the Minister again: how much has that cost?

Jim McMahon: As I say, all the localised costs of reorganisation are included in the financial profiles that councils send to the Government; councils themselves determine what type or form of arrangement they want to put forward for their area. Alongside the boundary proposal, they have to do a financial assessment of the transitional arrangements and the cash implications, and that is all set out in the proposals.

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome today's statement, the new transitional funding and the Minister's work on this issue so far. My understanding is that

[Oliver Ryan]

Lancashire's case for reorganisation is stronger and more robust than it was just a few months ago, if a little delayed. Can the Minister confirm today that this new window of engagement is an opportunity for Lancashire to remake its case for our future—we have had the very welcome announcement of a new mayor—and an opportunity for me to keep lobbying him for a smaller east Lancs unitary, and perhaps new electoral boundaries, rather than the existing county divisions?

Jim McMahon: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his representations. It is probably fair to say that I cannot get through the voting Lobby without him making those representations, but he does so for the right reasons. He cares about the place that he represents, and he wants devolution in Lancashire to be a success. In that, we are entirely as one.

Mr Gagan Mohindra (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): Like others in this House, I think it is fair to say that this whole process has been a shambles. Like many in the House, I come from a local government background, and I feel sorry for my councillors, my council and my residents for what they are having to go through. Having said that, the previous decision for Hertfordshire was wrong, so I appreciate that the Minister has taken the opportunity to reassess what Hertfordshire will do. Given that my community is a collection of small towns and villages, and we do not have a mayoralty, how will he ensure that my community is properly represented, whatever the outcome for Hertfordshire?

Jim McMahon: I will review not only the proposals that came forward, but the consultation that was carried out at the time, and I will test the assumptions. On one side, there is the idea that big is beautiful, and that having a single unitary will save money and all the rest of it; on the other side, there is the idea that local is better. In today's debate, we have heard that there are very different views on that, and I tend to find that the truth is somewhere in the middle. I am trying to get a compromise that people accept, but clearly we cannot pre-empt the findings; we are coming at this with an open mind.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): It is right that all options proposed by Nottinghamshire authorities be looked at fairly and properly, so I welcome the Minister's confirmation, but today's update makes it clear that LGR is extremely complicated, should never have been a term-one priority, and has destabilised the very organisations on which we rely to deliver so many services. Having led a local authority, I cannot emphasise enough how big an impact this is having on our councillors and council officers, so I hope the Minister can clarify the situation. Are there scenarios in which "minded to" may mean that LGR does not go ahead? Are councils able to make representations to that effect, and who is being held accountable for the announcements on 16 July, which should never have happened?

Jim McMahon: To be clear, the invitation for areas to make submissions to the LGR process was entirely voluntary; there was no mandation. When councils submit a proposal, that initiates LGR. This is a Government-wide programme, but it is taking place because we have received proposals from local councils that we are now required to review. However, I take on board my hon. Friend's point about being mindful of the impact of the process on council officials and councillors.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister is a genial sort of fellow, and I want to believe him when he says that he wants to proceed by consensus. Will he accept that there is no consensus at all on splitting the New Forest and putting the Waterside under the control of Labour-dominated Southampton? Well over 30,000 people signed the petition to keep the forest together, and it was handed in at Downing Street on the very day that the Government rightly withdrew the plan for Hampshire.

Jim McMahon: Hampshire is an area that we will look at afresh, just as we will look afresh at other decisions. I have not predetermined what might happen, but the right hon. Gentleman makes a fair point. This is an imperfect process, but ensuring that the decision reflects community identity is definitely at the back of my mind.

Dr Al Pinkerton (Surrey Heath) (LD): As the Minister said, LGR and devolution are intrinsically linked, so it came as a bit of a surprise to read on page 66 of the Red Book that Surrey is apparently in advanced talks with the Government over a new strategic mayoralty, because those talks have not involved any of the local MPs and have apparently entailed only a 10-minute phone call with the new unitary authorities for Surrey on Monday evening. In the spirit of consensus and correspondence, can we make sure that before this goes any further, those unitary authorities and the local MPs are fully consulted?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Gentleman makes a fair point about consultation. The Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, my hon. Friend the Member for Doncaster Central (Sally Jameson), and I have done a lot to engage with local government, and many of our drop-in sessions have been about devolution, so I push back on the idea that we have not done that, but we could always do more. Further talks might be required, but let us not detract from the benefit of this multibillion-pound investment to our communities. As local MPs, surely the reason we come here is to make sure that our areas get their fair share.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): Like my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown), I agree that merging six district councils and one county council into one unitary authority for 650,000 people is a good idea—it has a lot of efficiency. In Worcestershire, we have 630,000 people, six district councils and one county council. How on earth did the Minister come to the conclusion that it was a good idea to split the county council in two and have a north-south divide in a county smaller than Gloucestershire?

Jim McMahon: We do not align the decision on one county with the entirely separate legal decision on the county next door; all we can do is act on the basis of the proposals we receive. These are not always easy decisions, and they are always a matter of balancing competing interests. As I said, I have not yet seen a perfect proposal, but we are trying to get to the best possible solution in Gloucestershire, Worcestershire and all the other places

that we have mentioned today. We are in the middle of the "minded to" process, and if the hon. Gentleman wants to make representations, I would be very happy to receive them.

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Reform): The Minister knows, because we have discussed this many times, that the boundaries of historical counties and cities are very different from local government boundaries, and I am pleased that he has said today that city status is preserved, as are ceremonial matters. Will he finally allow historical and ceremonial counties to be as one, in order to avoid confusion, and so that we in Romford can have our Essex identity, regardless of local government boundaries? Will he give a cast-iron guarantee that there is no plan to merge the London borough of Havering with other east London boroughs to create some sort of super east London council?

Jim McMahon: I think I have enough on my plate without taking that on.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): There seems to be some confusion on both sides of the House about the next steps for Cambridgeshire and Peterborough; perhaps the Minister can clarify. He said that the process was in its early stages, so Cambridgeshire will still receive written confirmation of what the options are. He also appeared to confirm that despite the fact that the four options tabled will be selected, they could later be modified by councils, if they saw fit, and taken forward. Could he clarify that that is the process, and clarify the criteria under which that decision will be taken?

Jim McMahon: We published the criteria at the start of the process, and those criteria stand. They are unweighted; the idea is that they give us the freedom to take into account that England is very diverse, and what is right for one county might not be right for another. In the end, decisions have to be as sustainable as possible. They have to balance efficiency and identity, and these are not easy decisions.

On the hon. Gentleman's point about the opportunity for a modification proposal, we are now receiving proposals, and there is no additional window to do that. Also, consultations have already been carried out. However, there will be a "minded to" process for all these decisions, so that he and others can make representations. In the case of Cambridgeshire and Peterborough, and also West Sussex, I am very happy to confirm the details by writing to Members shortly.

Charlotte Cane (Ely and East Cambridgeshire) (LD): As many Members have said, this process has been a shambles, but I welcome the "minded to" approach, and the fact that people have time to give their views. Although I want this process sorted quickly, the timetable has to be long enough for a real consultation. Bear in mind that all local government has to give proper due notice of its meetings, and of what will be on the agenda, so that the public can come and have their say. I am not at all sure that three weeks is long enough. Will the Minister please look at having a timetable that makes it practical for local authorities and local people to properly make their representations?

Jim McMahon: The way we approach "minded to" decisions is not to assume that the council will be the conduit for every view in an area. In a single area, there may be very different views from different political groups, local charity organisations and other public service providers. The deliberate intention is for councils, local residents, the business community and whoever has an interest to make representations, and our view is that three weeks ought to be enough time to do so.

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Six weeks ago, the Government announced that they were scrapping the local government reform proposals for Essex and going back to the drawing board. That announcement created yet more uncertainty and further paralysed decision making, yet the Minister has not even mentioned Essex, and he has provided no additional clarity whatsoever. How can he expect elections to go ahead in 2028, when we will not even know what authorities the candidates will be elected to until next year?

Jim McMahon: I definitely accept the right hon. Member's point that having an itinerary of areas, with a clear date alongside them, would do what he has asked, but that is not where we are. We have decided that we ought to confirm the decision for an area as soon as possible, rather than waiting for this to be patched up, in the way that may have happened previously. On whether elections should go ahead, I have made the point that these district councils will be in place until the vesting days of the new local authorities. We cannot have elections being cancelled, creating a democratic deficit. Councils must have representatives around the table, with a mandate given to them by the public.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire, the two unitaries serving my constituency, are unanimous in wanting to maintain the status quo, as are the four MPs across the area. The Minister's predecessor announced that that would be the case. Could he enlighten us as to why he is further delaying and continuing the uncertainty?

Jim McMahon: The hon. Member is almost suggesting that the further delay is for the sake of delay, but new decisions have to be taken. When I review previous decisions, I am not just saying, "Well, we'll just allow them to go through." We are withdrawing decisions entirely for areas, and we will make new decisions from the point of proposal, with a consultation and based on fresh evidence. He says that his is a compelling proposal, and asks why we would think otherwise, and what he proposes may well be the outcome, but it would be wrong to predetermine it.

Personal Statement

1.13 pm

Tony Vaughan (Folkestone and Hythe) (Lab): With your permission, Madam Deputy Speaker, I wish to make a personal statement. Following a complaint to Parliament's Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme by a former member of my constituency staff, the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards and the Independent Expert Panel have found that, on three occasions in February 2025, I breached Parliament's bullying and harassment policy. I accept those findings in full.

At a small gathering to thank my former colleague for her work establishing the constituency office, I initiated a hug. I assumed that she was content to be hugged, but I did not ask, and the hug was unwelcome to her. Later that month, while out of the office, intending to join an online meeting that was not in my diary, I took my former colleague's phone from her hand without her consent to join that meeting. She immediately challenged me and took the phone back. It was not mine to take. The next day, two calls between my former colleague and me were ended abruptly while I was trying to find the venue for a constituency appointment—one of them deliberately by me, after I entered a live church service. Regrettably, I never explained why these calls had ended, as I ought to have done.

As a result of these behaviours, my former colleague was upset and humiliated. My behaviour had a real and continuing impact on her and her family, and I am truly sorry for this. I was the employer of my former colleague. There was an imbalance of power between us, and I was not sufficiently alert to it, as the behaviour code requires. The responsibility for behaving in a way that was mindful of that imbalance was mine, not hers. I also recognise that behaviour like this could well impact on somebody who is vulnerable, whether or not it is known that they are vulnerable. That is why respect and courtesy must come first in every interaction I have with others.

Since these events, my approach has changed. I am more alert to the need for sensitivity to those I work with. I have undertaken further training, including one-to-one training. Going forwards, I will be mindful of the need for both courtesy in my dealings with staff, including in times of stress, and for my personal attention when staffing problems arise. I made mistakes, and I breached the policy. I apologise unreservedly to my former colleague and to this House.

Ways and Means

Budget Resolutions

INCOME TAX (CHARGE)

Debate resumed (Order, 28 October).

Question again proposed,

That income tax is charged for the tax year 2027-28.

And it is declared that it is expedient in the public interest that this Resolution should have statutory effect under the provisions of the Provisional Collection of Taxes Act 1968.

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

1.15 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): This Budget must be bewildering to members of the Prime Minister's party. He promised them a "circuit breaker", an end to "40 years of neoliberalism" and a "new political model". Instead, it is all gherkins and aubergines. The Defence Secretary, who is sitting on the Front Bench, is probably wondering the same as everyone else: was that it? To be honest, he is probably thinking he would have done a better job, and he might be right. It is not too late: if he resigns again, he might get his chance to be the Chancellor.

All the while, Britain has a debt problem, Britain has a defence problem, Britain has a growth problem, and apparently, as we learned yesterday, there is nothing the Chancellor can do. On the big challenges, what has this Budget actually done? It does not reduce borrowing; total debt has gone up. It does not properly fund defence; the Government still have not set out how 3% will be funded. It does not cut taxes to get the economy growing; instead, they are putting up taxes again.

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): The hon. Gentleman says this country has a defence problem. Could he elaborate on the context of that defence problem, and perhaps reflect on the fact that it may have something to do with the under-investment that has left the Army with unprecedented levels of poor morale and left British soldiers unequipped to do their basic job of defending our country?

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Interventions should be short and sharp, and questions should be to the point.

Andrew Griffith: If time allows, I will be very happy to go into great detail about our record on defence. When Russia invaded Ukraine, we were proud to stand with the people of Ukraine, and to reboot the funding for defence. The test that the Chancellor failed was not my test; it was his own test. It was the Chancellor who resigned because the previous Chancellor and Prime Minister would not give our armed forces the proper funding for our defence.

Yesterday we needed decisive action, and all the Government delivered was a Budget of ducked decisions. The Chancellor has taken to heart the idea of, "Why do today what you can put off to next year or the year after?" Let us be clear that, as a result, Britain will be less secure, less fair and poorer for it.

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): The shadow Chancellor says we will be less secure. After 14 years of Tory Government, our armed forces were reduced to a size smaller than at any time since the Napoleonic wars. How secure were we during his time in power?

Andrew Griffith: Madam Deputy Speaker, I should make some progress, and we have got plenty of time to talk about defence—

The Secretary of State for Defence (Wes Streeting): That is not an answer!

Andrew Griffith: No, no. I have a very good answer. In 2010, the Defence Secretary's party wanted to reduce and cut further our armed forces. We were the party that will always stand behind our armed forces.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Andrew Griffith: Let me make some progress, because this debate is about the whole Budget. There will be plenty of opportunities to talk about defence, which we can come back to.

Let me give the Government some credit for some of the few positives in the Budget. The Chancellor was right to U-turn on his party's manifesto commitment to equalise the youth rate of the minimum wage. One in six young people under this Government—shame on them—are looking for a job and cannot find one. Equalising the youth minimum wage would have made a desperately tough situation harder. He should have gone further and halved the jobs tax for young people as we would have done.

The Chancellor was also right to ignore those on his Back Benches who wanted to raise capital gains tax. In fact, it was not just the Back Benchers; the Defence Secretary was also calling for that. Thank goodness the Chancellor did not listen to him. It would have meant many more wealth creators joining the thousands who have fled our country under Labour.

The public were not asking for much from this Budget and yet even their lowest expectations have not been met. Ordinary people wanted the Government to get a grip on out of control welfare spending. They wanted a Budget that properly funded defence. They wanted the Government to tackle the deficit, with tax cuts for their families to be better off. That would have been real breathing space. Against all and any of those tests, the Budget has comprehensively failed.

It could have been a moment when a Chancellor resolved to live within our means. Instead, this Government will have added—do they know the number?—more than £300 billion-worth of borrowing over the course of this Parliament. Borrowing is up in every single year of the forecast. The national debt now stands at the equivalent of £100,000 for every household and it is set to grow by a quarter in the next five years. Britain is walking along a fiscal cliff edge and the Government have decided that this is the moment to close their eyes.

Yesterday, the OBR confirmed that the Government are spending £124 billion a year on interest alone—up £14 billion and more than the Government spend on defence, policing and prisons combined. That money goes straight out of the door to our creditors. It was so out of control that the Bank of England, in the run-up to this Budget, was forced to make an extraordinary £200 billion intervention to try to reduce the cost and still the 30-year gilt rates rose above 6%.

It is not fair, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is not fair to our children or to their children. We cannot continue to kick the can down the road for future generations of taxpayers. Instead of getting a grip, the Chancellor doubled down. He repeated his predecessor's mistakes and cut the fiscal headroom to just £15 billion, the equivalent of just three-and-a-half days of public spending. Is that recklessness why the Defence Secretary want us all to have three days' worth of stockpiled food? The Chancellor said in his conference speech that

"these levels of debt are an assault on our common sense, they are an affront to our values."

That was just a month ago, so what has changed? He is now raising debt in every single year of the forecast. A month ago, it was an affront to his values; now it is front and centre in his Budget.

The Prime Minister may not care about the debt we hand on to the next generation, but he really ought to. And so should Labour's faithful little helpers, the Liberal Democrats, who are so enraptured by Europhilia, so desperate to crawl back into the clutches of Brussels, that they have not noticed a glaring problem: the nation's figures are so poor that we could not rejoin the EU even if we wanted to. EU rules say that a member country's national debt should be under 60% of GDP, yet the UK is approaching 100%. The EU's deficit limit is 3%, yet the UK's is one-and-a-half times that.

Despite all that debt, the Chancellor still has not found the money to properly fund 3% of GDP on defence. We welcome that the Government are finally funding their own defence investment plan, but it is not good enough.

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): Is the hon. Member aware that while defence spending when Labour left office in 2010 was 2.5% of GDP, it fell below 2% under the Conservative Government and is now set to rise to 3.5%? Does he understand the correlation between Labour Governments and increased defence spending?

Andrew Griffith: The Labour Whips have clearly been doing their history lessons, but history lessons are not going to defend our country. The threat is real. The Defence Secretary is running around telling us to put food under our beds and to store water. The issue is now and that is why the Chancellor himself resigned as Defence Secretary, saying that funding below 3% was inadequate. Nobody challenges that.

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Griffith: I will give way one last time.

Alex McIntyre: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way. There is an element of agreement, because in our Budget yesterday we agreed to get to spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2030, as did the hon. Gentleman's mini-budget back in 2022. But does he agree that the difference between our Budget and his budget is that we will actually get to the spending review next year to be able to deliver it, and that it will last longer than 47 days?

Andrew Griffith: Labour Members try so hard, but the hole in their Budget is gaping wide open. The problem is that it is not just us on the Opposition Benches who can see that hole, but our adversaries around the world, leaving ourselves open. Not properly funding our armed forces is not going to scare anyone in Moscow and it will not deter Tehran.

The Defence Secretary has resigned once before, so we know he is not against resigning. Perhaps he could resign again on principle today. We on this side of the House are used to Labour breaking their promises, but to break the promises they made to our armed forces is a new low. If the Chancellor had any dignity, he would have resigned yesterday.

Despite their failure to fund defence, the Government have still raised the tax burden to the highest level on record—higher than in the aftermath of world war two and higher than even the right hon. Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves) raised it. Who remembers how this Government had no plans to put up taxes? How is that working? For the third Budget in a row, the tax burden is set to rise. All told, taxes are going up by a total of £75 billion a year: higher next year, higher the following year and higher in every single year of the forecast. Even the Prime Minister's former economic adviser, Andy Haldane, now says that Britain is "taxed out". He also called the Chancellor "penny wise, pound foolish". I am not even sure about the penny wise bit, to be honest. And where will that money come from? Families, small businesses, the self-employed, farmers, the people who work hard and want to get ahead. Why? To pay for those who do not—those who could work, but choose not to.

The damage does not just stop with the tax bill itself. It is the disincentives in the economy that do the most harm. Two years ago, the then Chancellor stood at that Dispatch Box and raised taxes on jobs. Now, we are in a jobs crisis, with over 170,000 jobs lost since July 2024, all because Labour does not understand that if you tax something, you get less of it. Now it is raising taxes on the banks, which provide mortgages, loans to small businesses and pay interest to savers. The Chancellor might think it is just a bank tax, but we know that, like every tax, it will end up being paid by ordinary working people: higher mortgages, lower returns on savings and bank branch closures in every constituency and every high street, and fewer jobs in this country.

The Budget also contains a vindictive tax rise on people who have done the right thing, those who have done what Governments have always told them to do and what this Government want them to do: save money. Yet for many, up to 49p in every pound of interest on hard-earned savings will now be taken by the Chancellor. It is the same story with landlords, who have already come under attack from this Government, and the OBR says that rents will go up as a result.

Of all that the Budget was missing, the lack of welfare reform stands out the most. Or at least, so we thought—because this morning the Chancellor told the BBC that there will be welfare cuts before the election. Perhaps a Treasury Minister could come to the House and clean up the Chancellor's mess. His Budget has not even survived 24 hours.

Last week, the Prime Minister called the benefits bill a moral outrage; he was right then, but he is not doing anything about it now, because Labour Members are too afraid to say, "Enough is enough." They do not have the courage to get a grip on welfare, because they are worried that it would cost them their jobs. Thanks to the TaxPayers' Alliance, we know that for more than half of all Labour MPs, the number of benefit claimants in their constituencies is larger than their majority. It is true for the Chancellor, it is certainly true for the Defence Secretary, and it is true for the Economic Secretary to the Treasury. They will not get welfare under control because it would cost them their seats—they are putting their own interests before the country's. *[Interruption.]* I am making progress. Don't you worry—I am doing very well, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Fascinated as we all are, there are many people hoping to contribute this afternoon, so I hope the shadow Chancellor will be concluding soon.

Andrew Griffith: I read that the Budget had the most measures in it of any Budget, but also that they were the most inconsequential. I will try to crack through a few other things. *[Interruption.]* Labour Members are all chuntering, but I will tell you who else's interests they are putting first: the trade unions.

While the Government are raising taxes on everybody else, they are handing out more than £40 million over the next two years to a union learning fund. I cannot even begin to imagine what they will be learning: how to run rings around the Health Secretary; what to do with those extra days off from working a four-day week; how to keep public sector pay rises twice as high as the private sector—*[Interruption.]* The Defence Secretary says, "How to keep the Conservatives out." That is probably about right—that is probably exactly what they are doing! It is a political bung to their political allies. It is ridiculous. While families face tough choices in a cost of living crisis, this Government use their Budget to tax people and hand money to the trade unions.

It was not just the Budget we heard yesterday; we also heard the figures from the Office for Budget Responsibility, and they really do show us just how bad things are. For the first time ever, the Government are planning to spend over 45p in every £1 in the economy. Government spending goes up every year of the forecast, debt is up every year of the forecast, and it is official: living standards are down. Real household disposable incomes are set to be lower next year than when Labour took office—£1,500 lower at the end of this Parliament than they were forecast to be under the Conservatives. It is not hard to understand why: inflation is up, interest rates are soaring and unemployment is up again.

The one-off £100 that the Government are putting into bank accounts will not touch the sides for most people, given the cost increases. The only thing that will put us on a path out of decline and deficits is growth. The Conservatives understand the value of growth. The Prime Minister has got his history entirely wrong. The mistake this country made was not to choose markets over socialism in 1979—it was not electing Mrs Thatcher—but giving up all that we achieved in the '80s and '90s.

In conclusion—Madam Deputy Speaker is very firm, so I will conclude—this Budget will go down as one of history's great missed opportunities. It was an opportunity to undo not 40 years of neoliberalism, but the damage of the first two years of this Government—the mistakes

made by the right hon. Member for Leeds West and Pudsey, who is now busy job hunting and discovering for the first time what it is like to receive rejection after rejection. Yesterday was a chance to put Britain back on the right track, and the Chancellor blew it. Higher taxes, higher spending, higher borrowing; lower growth, lower living standards, fewer jobs—I hope the Chancellor kept the receipt for the Budget, because I think he is going to want to return it.

The British people know that this is not the Budget we need. This is a great country whose potential is being held back. We have a Chancellor who ducks his choices, and a Prime Minister who wants to take us back to the 1970s. We cannot tax and regulate our way to growth. National security really does matter more than social security, and only by tackling the deficit can we back away from the fiscal cliff edge and do the right thing by future generations.

1.34 pm

The Secretary of State for Defence (Wes Streeting): I am proud to open this Budget debate on behalf of the Government, proud of the leadership of the Prime Minister and of the Chancellor, who is offering this country breathing space today and fresh hope for the future.

Before I turn to that, I need to talk about the threat this country faces—one that sabotages our economy, pushes out misinformation and attempts to undermine people's trust in government. For once, I am not talking about the Russians, but the Trussian, not least the shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who I fear is part of a Trussian sleeper cell operating in the shadows of the Conservative party. He did not say much about his plans today, but I do not think we do not need to look very far. In fact, there is a book out that tells us all about the secret plans he is no doubt saving up for the next manifesto: "Bank Job", it is called, written by one Liz Truss. The shadow Chancellor knows her well; it is the Liz Truss for whom he helped write the mini-Budget, which crashed our economy and damaged Britain's reputation, and which he still says contained, "lots of good things." Maybe that is why, when I tried to obtain a copy of "Bank Job" this morning, I found that there were no copies available in bookshops for miles around. Presumably, the shadow Chancellor has gone around and bought them all up, just in case someone finds out exactly what the Trussians stand for.

Because that is the danger, Madam Deputy Speaker: they walk among us, the Trussians, hiding in plain sight—deep-cover sleeper agents masquerading as responsible fiscal Conservatives. But we will not be fooled. We remember when the shadow Chancellor cheered Truss on, and we all know the consequences of their misjudgements. If we are not careful, the Trussians will be coming—they are already winding up to play their own game of roulette with our public finances once again.

All joking aside, I think it is genuinely appalling that the arsonists have the audacity to complain as the firefighters are clearing up their mess—never forgive, never forget, and never let the Tories do it again. In fact, in one of the low points of an otherwise dull and inaccurate contribution to this Chamber, the shadow Chancellor had the audacity to level low blows against my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves). Let me point out that, despite the economic global shocks that this country faces, along with security threats of a kind that we have not faced in generations, earlier this month the IMF upgraded its growth forecast for Britain for 2026. It said that the UK "stands out" among G7 nations, and it credited the Government's responsible approach to handling the public finances. That is the legacy of my right hon. Friend, and I pay tribute to her leadership, her experience and her hard-headed stewardship of our economy. *[Interruption.]*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. I can tell that the Defence Secretary has had his Weetabix, because he is very loud at the Dispatch Box—but he has to be loud, because there is so much heckling. Can everybody just calm down a little bit?

Wes Streeting: They can shout all they like, Madam Deputy Speaker. The fact is that the former Chancellor restored the confidence of the markets after the Conservatives trashed Britain's reputation with their catastrophic mini-Budget. She created the platform for our Labour Government to invest in public services, protect the most vulnerable, foster innovation and navigate the headwinds of the last two years. During her time as Chancellor of the Exchequer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West and Pudsey established a record that the Conservative Front Bench could not begin to touch. Those are the facts.

None the less, against the backdrop of the enormous challenges this country faces, the Chancellor, as he set out yesterday, is taking action to tackle the cost of living and give households breathing space today: help for 20 million households to heat their homes this winter; freezing fuel duty to keep prices down at the pump; helping with the everyday cost of the weekly shop so that people have more money in their pockets; action on energy bills; and the minimum wage, the national living wage and the state pension all going up to help people out. No one is suggesting that these measures solve everything for everyone, everywhere, all at once, but people can see that we are doing everything we can, as fast as we can, to give them breathing space today and fresh hope for the future; to show that this Government and this Prime Minister have got their backs; and to show that we can still do big things as a nation, that Government can make a difference to people's lives, and that Britain is a country we can still believe in.

That is important, as we look beyond the optimism of the first 100 days of this new Government and our new Prime Minister to the brighter future that lies ahead for our country if we make the right choices. Yes, we face great challenges, but the character of a nation is not defined by the challenges it faces, but how it chooses to respond to them. And be in no doubt: it is a choice. We choose not to be daunted by the scale of the challenge, but to be motivated by it—to face the future not with fear, but with confidence, and to choose hope. We choose it because we know what hope can do.

Look at what this Labour Government have delivered in the past two years: half a million children out of poverty; waiting lists down by a quarter of a million; the asylum backlog down 60% in a year; small boat crossings at their lowest in six years; the fastest growing economy in the G7 in the first half of this year; free breakfast clubs

[Wes Streeting]

feeding 680,000 children; six train operators brought back into public ownership; and defence spending up by £14 billion compared with the Conservatives' final year in office. Lots done and lots more still to do, but so many reasons to believe that our best days lie ahead.

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): As the Defence Secretary is talking about defence spending, could I just point him to paragraphs 2.5 and 2.6 on page 31 of the Red Book? I am sure that one of his Treasury colleagues will have a copy. He will see that £10.3 billion of that spending is funded by reprioritisation, alongside £4.7 billion, £3 billion of which is from capital cuts elsewhere and £1.7 billion from the reserve. He will, of course, get the £1.7 billion from the reserve, but has he been told by the Treasury where that £3 billion of capital savings is coming from? How much of it, if any, is coming from his Department? Can he assure the House that the Government are on track on the more than £10 billion of efficiencies, given that the Institute for Government and many others say that it is highly unlikely to be delivered?

Wes Streeting: I can absolutely confirm that thanks to the responsible choices made by the Chancellor and his predecessor, we have headroom to weather shocks, and the Chancellor is drawing on that. On capital budget reprioritisation across Government, it is absolutely true to say that across the Cabinet, Ministers have been willing to prioritise within their own capital programmes in order to fund defence. We can be absolutely clear, beyond any doubt, that this is a Chancellor, a Prime Minister and a team who choose to prioritise defence. I bet the right hon. Gentleman wishes that he made the same choices when he was Chief Secretary to the Treasury, instead of leaving our armed forces "hollowed out and underfunded".

It was another great Healey—my predecessor, Denis Healey—who said that without strong defences,

"we have no houses, we have no hospitals, we have no schools. We have a heap of cinders."—[*Official Report*, 5 March 1969; Vol. 779, c. 551.]

The first duty of any Government—to keep our country safe—is a greater and more urgent challenge now than it has been for generations. The gravest dangers of the 20th century are returning, armed with the technologies of the 21st. Britain faces growing threats from state-sponsored terrorism, sabotage and hostile acts that are designed to disrupt our lives, undermine our security and spread fear.

Yesterday, the Chancellor gave his response to those threats at this Dispatch Box, delivering more support to the frontline for freedom in Ukraine, plugging the £4.7 billion gap in the defence investment plan and confirming our unshakeable commitment to NATO to spend 3.5% of GDP on defence by 2035. But he went even further, with a new target reflecting Labour's commitment to fund defence spending at 3% of GDP by 2030. That is the commitment the Chancellor made at this Dispatch Box yesterday. That is a record the Conservatives cannot even begin to touch—

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Wes Streeting: But I look forward to the hon. Gentleman defending the indefensible.

Ben Obese-Jecty: I just wanted to bring the Defence Secretary back to his comments about the defence investment plan and its being fully funded. According to the Red Book, there is a reallocation of capital spending that is £145 million this year and £2.1 billion next year. Can the right hon. Gentleman outline where that reallocated capital spending will come from?

Wes Streeting: I have just set that out. It is there in the Budget. The Government have reallocated from capital programmes across Government to ensure that defence is fully funded.

It is disappointing, Madam Deputy Speaker. This has become a running theme of the leadership of the Leader of the Opposition. When we sat on the Opposition Benches, I remember that Keir Starmer always made a virtue of standing with the Government on issues of national security and defence. We provided constructive challenge where we needed to, but we stood with the Government. This lot cannot help but try and score petty party political points at the expense of defence and national security.

What is even more extraordinary is the enormous brass neck of the Opposition, considering their record. Just look at it: we had the smallest army since the Napoleonic wars; every single recruitment target was missed; morale fell to a record low of 40%; almost every equipment programme was over budget or behind schedule, and often both; and defence spending faced a real-terms cut between 2010 and 2024, falling from 2.5% of GDP to 2.3%. *[Interruption.]* In the words of their own Defence Secretary, the armed forces were left "hollowed out and underfunded". *[Interruption.]* And now the Conservatives have the audacity to turn up and criticise a Labour Government who are investing more, investing more quickly, and cleaning up their mess.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Obese-Jecty, this is not good behaviour. After yesterday, Mr Cartlidge, I thought you would have had a much quieter voice. I cannot hear the Secretary of State. Can we just let him continue?

Wes Streeting: I am trying to make my voice heard from the Dispatch Box, Madam Deputy Speaker.

As I have said from my first day as Defence Secretary, I trust this Chancellor to give us what we need to keep our country safe, and yesterday demonstrated why. His Budget proves why Labour can be trusted on defence—*[Interruption.]* It does say that here, because I wrote it. We are delivering the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. That was Labour's record before the Budget; this Budget takes us even further, and next year's spending review will take us further still. What a contrast with the abysmal record of failure staring us in the face from the Opposition Benches.

I appealed in my first statement to this House for national unity on national security. It is important that our allies and our adversaries know that we agree far more than we disagree. We all believe that we should spend more on defence; we all believe that we should stand with Ukraine; we all believe that we should invest

in homeland security. What a pity, then, that the Leader of the Opposition and her ragtag band of political vandals choose to play politics with national security. For the Opposition to do that in the current environment is bad enough; to do so with their abysmal record in government takes some brass neck.

Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

Wes Streeting: Perhaps the right hon. Gentleman wants to defend that record.

Graham Stuart: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way, but he will be aware that there is no plan to ensure that that 2030 target is met. At a time when we have short-term cuts in operational spending, the Secretary of State must feel a certain amount of disappointment that we do not have a firm plan in place, because if the Treasury do not sign off the numbers, then nothing really happens. That is true, is it not?

Wes Streeting: I just do not know what the Opposition have to moan about. We came into government with the abysmal inheritance that we faced, and we chose straightaway to invest more in defence to clean up their mess. We have now gone even further than the NATO commitment of 3.5% by 2035 by choosing to set our own target of 3% by 2030. That is not just about the future; it is built on our record in our first two years.

Defence spending has gone from 2.3%—

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Will the Defence Secretary give way?

Wes Streeting: In a moment. Just so that we are clear, we have gone from spending 2.3% of our GDP on defence when we came into office to spending 2.7% next year. It is very clear that we are on the right trajectory. That is not a record that they can speak to. I do not know how they can be so shameless—

Mr Francois *rose*—

Wes Streeting: Let's find out—I give way to the right hon. Gentleman.

Mr Francois: If it is true that the Defence Secretary has a plan for 2030, I ask him why the Labour Chair of the Defence Committee said yesterday in reaction to the Budget:

"some of the key decisions on defence spending have lamentably been delayed until next year's spending review. There is a cost to inaction. Investment in our nation's defence and security cannot be kicked into the long grass. Our adversaries are not bound by fiscal years and spending cycles."

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Before the Secretary of State responds, may I point out that there are many people wishing to contribute? Hopefully his speech will be coming to a conclusion shortly.

Wes Streeting: I have been too generous with allowing interventions, but let me take that point head on. I think that is completely unfounded criticism—

Mr Francois: He is the Chair of the Defence Committee!

Wes Streeting: I don't care if he is the Chair of the Defence Committee. I would say it directly to him, and I am sure I will get the chance to say it to the entire Committee. It would be fair criticism if this Government had not already made decisions that are leading to the fastest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war—not in future years but already, on the basis of our first two years in power. The Chair of the Defence Committee is a good friend, and I am sure that, just as I can take his criticism on the chin, he will take mine. I will gladly accept criticism where I think it is fair, but I robustly reject it where I think it is wrong.

I have referred to the Conservatives' record of 14 years in power. Let me contrast that with what I have presided over in the last 14 weeks: armed forces recruitment showing its longest run of growth for half a decade; 400 contracts signed, worth £4 billion; £400 million for spy drones for the Army; £135 million for Royal Navy torpedoes; £700 million for next-generation fighter jets; over £8 billion for our nuclear submarine fleet; and the UK's sixth attack submarine and first ever space squadron launched. We have returned gun barrel manufacturing to the UK for the first time in decades; we are backing British industry to build the docks for our nuclear subs; we have increased monitoring of Russian vessels in the English channel; provided 50,000 apprenticeship opportunities for young people; welcomed record-breaking investment in Scotland; deployed our armed forces to help Saudi Arabia defend itself from Houthi attacks; bolstered support for Ukraine; and signed a landmark AI deal to access cutting-edge battlefield data. We have strengthened our NATO alliances, as I have visited Washington, Paris, Copenhagen, Warsaw, Reykjavík and Kyiv. We have mobilised with our allies in the Ukraine defence contact group, the E5 and the joint expeditionary force, and hosted our friends from Italy, Japan, Canada, Australia, Qatar and Oman as well as the NATO Secretary-General. And in case the Conservatives missed it, as their party leader seemed to yesterday, on top of the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, we have set out our target to spend 3% of GDP on defence by 2030. That is our record, and it is a record that the Conservatives cannot begin to touch.

This is a Government who actually put our money where our mouth is—strengthening our armed forces, alliances and industrial base, and backing Britain by buying British. That is how to defend this country—not with the gimmicks and grandstanding of the Conservatives but by making this country ready with our allies to fight and win so that our adversaries think twice about launching an attack in the first place.

The truth is that this is a more dangerous world, and that makes greater investment essential. Delivering what the Chancellor announced yesterday requires choices and trade-offs. We will ensure that every pound that we invest is well spent and creates jobs and opportunities—not just a Ministry of Defence but one of growth and opportunity. We will help to deliver the Prime Minister's domestic agenda—stronger regional economies, a rebuilt industrial base, good jobs and better opportunities for the next generation. We will have a more resilient United Kingdom built by the British people to keep Britain safe.

Spending on our defence is a measure of our commitment, but capability is a measure of our credibility. That is what this Labour Budget does, rooted in our values. It gives breathing space to working people. It gives us

[Wes Streeting]

fresh hope for the future, and it strengthens the security on which we all depend. Building a Britain ready to fight and building a country worth fighting for—that is our record and plan. That is why I am proud to stand at this Dispatch Box and commend the Budget to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

1.54 pm

Mr Joshua Reynolds (Maidenhead) (LD): After years of government chaos and failure we can only end the brutal cost of living crisis and fix our broken public services if we get the economy growing. We need a real growth plan with Europe at its heart, so Labour must fix the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal by joining the single market, negotiating a new customs union and using the billions of pounds that that raises to cut people's taxes and bills.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Reynolds: Already? Okay.

Dr Evans: We heard from the Conservative Front Bench that we do not meet the criteria to rejoin the EU. How do the Lib Dems suggest that we get around that problem?

Mr Reynolds: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He should have listened to what I said in the previous 30 seconds. What I said was that we need to join the single market and negotiate a new customs union. I did not say that we need to rejoin the European Union.

First, Liberal Democrats would fix the biggest brake on our economy: the botched Brexit deal. It has put up barriers for every business that trades with our largest market. Small firms in Maidenhead tell me that they now spend more time filling in forms than filling in orders. Some have simply given up trading with Europe altogether. That is lost trade, lost jobs and lost revenue. We would rip up the Government's red lines and build a new growth and defence partnership with Europe, including the single market and a new customs union.

We would grow our economy. According to independent research, those measures would bring in £27 billion a year in extra tax revenue by the end of the Parliament. We would give those proceeds back to the people who earned it by raising the tax-free personal allowance to £15,000 and raising the higher rate threshold to £56,000, taking 2.5 million of the lowest paid out of income tax altogether and putting £650 back in people's pockets. It was the Liberal Democrats who raised the personal allowance before. We can do it again. That is how to cut taxes responsibly—we grow our way there.

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): Would the hon. Gentleman wish to add his thanks to the Chancellor for the new low-income tax-free allowance for pensioners, which will ensure that they can keep their state pension and hard-earned pension?

Mr Reynolds: I think the hon. Lady will find that there is an anomaly within the Chancellor's proposals: a 54% tax rate for certain pensioners on certain incomes. I do not necessarily believe that a 54% tax rate for pensioners is the right thing to be doing.

Secondly, Liberal Democrats would make fairer choices about who pays. This Budget goes back once again to savers. Tax on savings and property income go up by another two points. That is on top of the two points that were announced last year. The retired couple who have put money away all their lives and the family who are saving for their deposit will be taxed more. The Government are giving savers a little with one hand while taking with another.

There is a fairer option, though. Because of the high interest rates and the way that the Bank of England's quantitative easing programme works, the Treasury is handing billions of pounds over to the big banks every year. That is a windfall that the banks did nothing to earn. It is a windfall that they keep, and businesses in our villages and towns are paying the price. Our plan to claw back some of that money would raise £5 billion a year on average. That has never been needed more. As UKHospitality confirms, the hospitality sector pays 82p in business taxes for every £1 it makes. That is the highest amount paid by a sector in our economy and double that of the banks.

In my constituency, we have felt that more than ever. Last month, the Crown at Burchetts Green, ranked among the 50 best gastropubs in the country, closed its doors, with its owner blaming staff costs, rent, business rates and VAT. They said enough was enough. If a pub like that cannot make the numbers add up, what hope is there for cafés, restaurants and pubs across the country? That is why we would use some of the bank windfall tax to cut VAT for the hospitality sector, where it needs it most. The third thing we would do is take our security seriously.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): There is a slight irony in what the hon. Gentleman has just said. He wants to cut VAT on pubs, yet he wants to get closer to the European Union, which would not allow us to cut VAT in our own country. Is there not a slight contradiction there?

Mr Reynolds: Once again, the hon. Gentleman is confusing rejoining the single market and customs union with rejoining the European Union.

I am glad that the Defence Secretary is in his place, because just days ago, he said that we need to be ready for war by 2030, within 1,000 days. I take that warning seriously, and I hope that his colleagues do, too. Yesterday, the Chancellor set the target for spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2030, and the plan to pay for that will come in next year's spending review. The money needed for the issues and compromises that the Defence Secretary describes will not come until next year. No Government can meet a 1,000-day deadline on a funding plan that does not exist. That is why we Liberal Democrats have proposed defence bonds. Our plan would raise £20 billion over two years, ringfenced to rebuild our armed forces. That would start now, inside the Defence Secretary's 1,000 days, and not after them.

Meanwhile, the Government are funding their defence investment plan by cutting budgets across Whitehall. Earlier this year, Departments were told to cut 1% from their capital budgets to pay for the first £10.3 billion of the DIP. For the remaining £5 billion, they must now find another 1% on top of that. As has already been mentioned, we do not know where the cuts will come from. Families right across the country want to know which capital projects are to be cut. Will it be the rebuilding of our crumbling schools or our leaking hospitals? Where will that money come from? We are asked to choose between security and growth, but we need both. The Government urgently need to make the case for defence bonds, so that we have the money to rebuild our defences as soon as possible. If we built that capacity alongside our European partners, every pound would go further, and support skilled jobs and British businesses in the supply chain.

We have also set out how to keep that investment going for the long term: through the digital services tax. We would raise the tax from 2% to 10%, bringing in billions of pounds a year from the tech and social media giants by 2030. They are some of the most profitable companies in the world, and they should pay their fair share. Our plan shows how, and it is fully costed. Defence bonds will provide the money up front, and the higher digital services tax would sustain that amount year after year. Together, they would pay for us to expand British shipbuilding and build more frigates to protect our waters.

Our European neighbours are investing billions in their defence industries, and Britain must be at the heart of that, not watching from the sidelines. We need our new growth and defence partnership with Europe—buying together, building together and defending our continent together—to ensure that British shipyards, engineers and factories win jobs and investments from European contracts. If we are shut out, those jobs go elsewhere.

This Budget is a holding pattern Budget; it is not the growth Budget that we all needed. There is a better way: growth with Europe; fairer taxes that ask the big banks, rather than hard-pressed savers, to pay their share; lower bills for every household; and a serious plan for our security. That is what fiscal responsibility looks like. We need to grow our economy, cut people's bills and cut people's taxes.

2.3 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): This Budget gives my constituents and people up and down the country much-needed breathing space and fresh hope for our long-term future. It tackles the big issues facing our country, from the cost of living pressures facing all our constituents to the need to bring growth back to our economy. The Chancellor was honest about the impact that the war in Iran has had on our economy, energy prices and supply chains. I remind the House that we Labour Members opposed that war, but the Conservatives supported it.

I will address the impacts of the Budget, first on my constituency, and then from my perspective as Transport Committee Chair. I am pleased that the Budget delivers for house building, and will mean more council and social housing, as too many families in Hounslow, Brentford and Isleworth live in temporary housing. There is also the new Your First Home scheme, which will support many who are earning, but do not have a deposit to get on the housing ladder. The Treasury listened, and raised the sale price cap for the scheme in London. I am grateful.

Over the past year, I have met businesses across my constituency, from restaurants such as Sam's Waterside and coffee shops such as Ballucci in Isleworth and Hounslow to small specialist manufacturers Ormiston Wire and Newmont Engineering. Their common message has been that costs, particularly energy and business rates, are too high. I am therefore pleased that the Chancellor has committed to taking more businesses out of paying business rates—900 each in the Hounslow and Richmond boroughs—and frozen business rates for many more.

I know that to support businesses, we need to get more money into people's pockets. Increasing the national living wage and the minimum wage, addressing energy bills, keeping commitments on tax and introducing the new pension tax allowance, among many other measures in the Budget, are all much welcomed by my constituents. I also welcome London now having the fiscal devolution that our city has long deserved, bringing it more into line with other world cities. It allows the mayor to kick-start projects across the capital, one of which is the West London Orbital, a much-needed rail line linking Hounslow to Hendon via Old Oak Common, opening up development and employment opportunities across a swathe of west to north London.

As Chair of the Transport Committee, I will mention several transport-related elements in the Budget that I welcome: the Government's work to bring international rail services to Stratford, which will increase rail connectivity and choice; the work to address the costs for electric vehicle drivers using public charging points; and the decisions on fuel duty, which not only benefit car drivers but save a light goods vehicle driver £472 on average, and the average heavy goods vehicle driver nearly £4,000 per year. Given the impact that fuel prices are having on the critical logistics sector, we all end up benefiting from those changes.

Rail infrastructure costs far more to build per kilometre in the UK than in any equivalent economy; I refer to my Committee's February '26 report, "Rail investment pipelines: ending boom and bust". I welcome the announcement of the review of rail infrastructure costs, and the publication of the more extensive infrastructure pipeline. The review's terms of reference responded to many of the issues discussed in our inquiry, including investment certainty, with clarity about at what point costs are fully understood and when funding will be committed. That drives efficiency, safeguards workforces and enables skills planning. Investment certainty is certainly needed if we are to allay the concerns of the rail supply chain and its investors.

Although the Government review is restricted to rail, its scope is otherwise very similar to the scope of the Competition and Markets Authority's review of road and rail procurement, so I want to know from the Government how the two will relate to each other. Strangely, in their response to our report, the Government denied that there was such a thing as boom and bust in investment; I hope that the review will be more open-minded on that front.

I am glad that the Chancellor has heard the pleas of the owners of airports and private rail infrastructure, such as St Pancras and High Speed 1, who are concerned

[Ruth Cadbury]

about the exceptional and unpredictable rateable value increases. I hope that a rational and predictable system can replace the current mess, which is holding back long-term investment in our rail and aviation infrastructure.

I welcome the work that the Treasury is doing to enable the Prime Minister's drive for devolution and partnership with local leaders. Northern Powerhouse Rail and a whole host of local transport projects will deliver local growth across Britain. Finally, the Chancellor is also backing British bus manufacturers, with a new look at bus procurement, which is very welcome indeed. I conclude by thanking the Chancellor for tackling the big issues that face our economy, and for a Budget that delivers both for constituents and for the whole economy.

2.9 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (North Cotswolds) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to catch your eye in this important Budget debate. I listened to the Defence Secretary, and thought he absolutely embedded his comedic skills. Some of what he was saying would have been better said on "Have I Got News for You" than in this Chamber.

This Budget was a tragic lost opportunity to fix the fundamentals of the economy. Our debt is at a record level. The tragedy is that we are paying a higher interest rate than Greece on that debt—5.31%. That will add additional interest of £14 billion, just on that debt. If the amount that we are paying to service that debt were a Department, it would be the third largest. The budget for the Department for Work and Pensions is around £344 billion. That does not even cover the amount of income tax we raise in this country in total, which is £330 billion. In other words, income tax does not pay all our DWP bills. The second highest-spending Department has a budget of £226 billion. I welcome the Chancellor saying that he will meet his fiscal rules by the end of this Parliament, but that involves the national debt falling by the end of the Parliament. If I were a betting man, I would doubt very much that he will meet that rule.

One of the saddest things about our economy is that inflation is going up. Before Labour Members start to scoff at that, it is one of the most important measures of the lot, because it affects everything; it affects all our cost of living. Everything from our fuel costs to our energy and mortgage costs are affected by inflation, so the one thing we ought to be doing is trying to get the rate of inflation down. One of the saddest things about inflation is that my constituents, many of whom live off the gas grid, have to pay for heating oil, which has gone up by 75% in the last year. Imagine that for someone on benefits. In this Budget, they are getting very little help with meeting those costs.

Dr Evans: £35 per person, if they are eligible.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend has made his point well. Let us hope that is read into the record. Currently, 13% of 16 to 24-year-olds are not in employment, education or training. We should be focusing relentlessly on creating opportunities for young people and supporting businesses that employ them. Sadly, this Budget does not do that. When sickness benefits pay more than the minimum wage, what is the incentive to work? Sectors such as tourism and hospitality that provide opportunities in every part of the country and in every constituency, but especially in rural areas, face significant economic pressure, and nationally, at least one pub is closing a week. The rates relief offered by the Chancellor in this Budget may help by a minuscule amount, but that is unfortunately offset by the increase in the minimum wage, and the VAT costs that those businesses face.

I want to turn to the kernel of what the Defence Secretary was saying, and to defence. It was solemnly promised by this Prime Minister and the previous Prime Minister that we would not only quickly get to spending 2.7% of GDP on defence, but would have a path to 3%. There is no path to 3%. The only path I can see is that departmental budgets will be cut, and it has not yet been tied down what services will be cut to pay for that 2.3% real cut in Departments. There was no clarity on this in the Budget yesterday. Surely if the Labour party and the Government keep boasting that they will go to 3%, the least they owe the British people is a path to get there—and it is not only the 3%, but the 3.5% in the following Parliament, which is a great deal of money.

Importantly, as General Sir Richard Barrons said recently, we do not own the clock. In other words, we do not know when our adversaries are likely to launch some form of attack on us, and we know that the Ministry of Defence is not able to place the orders it needs. To take the bigger equipment, when will the F-35s come? The Defence Secretary shakes his head. They are still in the queue; they cannot be manufactured for us because we have not given a solid commitment on when we want them. Those delays in procurement particularly affect some of our smaller defence companies, because they do not have the cash flow.

I mentioned artificial intelligence in an intervention yesterday. One of the most important things the Chancellor could have done for this country yesterday was provide a proper path to how every single Department will operate digital and AI more effectively, so that he could increase productivity. The machinery of government changes that the Government have undertaken in the last year do not give the Public Accounts Committee, which I chair, any confidence that the Government have a real policy on digital and AI, and how they will produce mechanisms for using this technology properly.

A year ago, digital policy was in the Cabinet Office. It was then transferred to the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, but DSIT was abolished. Now it is in the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—the Department which historically has been used to dealing with sport and culture, not the important matter of AI. Without this priority, it is difficult to see how the Government will make this digital policy work.

When my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Sir Jeremy Hunt), as I said in an intervention yesterday, gave in his Budget a significant sum of £3 billion to the Department of Health and Social Care—the Defence Secretary's former Department—to transform their digital equipment, that was the start of what we should have been doing for every single Department. I do not know how the Government will meet their efficiency targets unless they start to introduce proper AI and get rid of some of our legacy equipment, which, as the Defence Secretary knows only too well, is more vulnerable to cyber-attacks.

I turn to local government reform. I was pleased by the announcement this morning that Gloucestershire will be one unitary authority—that is good news—but

our local authority will only get any increase in finances if we can come up with devolution. There was no link to how Gloucestershire will move from local government reorganisation into a strategy authority, and we need to have that. Otherwise, we will not be able to take advantage of some of those financial benefits.

On the civil service pension scheme, there is a good news story for which I praise the Government. We have had five hearings on the Public Accounts Committee into the dreadful mess that Capita has left that scheme in—five hearings where every single deadline has been missed. That is not good enough for the poor 1.7 million members of that scheme. The Government have done a good thing. Last week, I wrote to the Pensions Minister about a problem: if Capita did not pay out a lump sum within two years, scheme members would be taxed on that sum at the highest rate. The Minister met me fairly quickly, I raised it on the Floor of the House on Monday and—bingo!—I got a letter yesterday saying that the law was going to be changed in the Budget. I pay tribute to the Government and the Pensions Minister for that quick action. That was the just thing to do. Those pension scheme members will not have to keep worrying about whether they will get their full lump sum.

In conclusion, this is sadly a wasted opportunity, and we look forward to future Budgets actually giving us a path to a better economic future. One of the economic forecasts we had in the Budget yesterday was growth of 1.2%, which all the Government and the Chancellor are crowing about, but historically 1.2% is not enough to keep spending at the rate the Government are. We need more measures to help business and a proper taxation policy, and then this country will start to grow.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

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

2.18 pm

Chris Webb (Blackpool South) (Lab): Yesterday the Chancellor affirmed this Government's commitment to good growth in every postcode. As the MP for a town that has been neglected by previous Governments, I welcome this investment in communities like mine because it is desperately needed. Through years of austerity and economic decline, places like Blackpool were asked to do more with less, again and again, until there was nothing left to cut. I believe that with the right investment and with local people in the driving seat, no community needs to feel left behind again.

Many of my constituents have already welcomed the cost of living measures this Budget set out. A £100 household energy payment for eligible households in council tax bands A to D means 97% of households in my constituency will feel that benefit. Freezing fuel duty rates and extending the 5p cut to July 2027, along with more generous mileage rates for people who use their own vehicles for work, will make a real difference to the Blackpool's tradesmen and care workers alike. Taken together with a welcome increase in the minimum wage, these tangible changes will have an impact on my constituents' pockets.

However, improving people's lives also means improving their environment. People want to walk out their front doors and be proud of where they live, not be met by boarded-up buildings. High streets are the beating heart of our communities, and hard-working businesses should be able to thrive on them. The derelict buildings fund, announced alongside the Budget, lets us bring prominent long-term vacant buildings back into productive community or commercial use. After campaigning hard in this place for funding to tackle the blight of derelict buildings in Blackpool, I am delighted that we have been allocated £1.35 million from that fund. This is the type of investment we have to make count, and I will be leading on this work locally. I want local residents to tell me the buildings that matter most to them, or the projects to back that have the potential to transform the area. This fund is exactly what we mean when we talk about putting power back into every postcode, and it is another step towards building a better Blackpool.

It is right that this Labour Government have now committed more than £40 billion to the biggest house building programme in a generation, with an extra £1.5 billion committed in the Budget. At the end of last year, 11,844 people in Blackpool were waiting for social housing. I therefore urge Ministers not to overlook us, like their predecessors did, and ensure that we get a share of the additional homes to meet the scale of our need.

I welcome the Chancellor's additional £432 million to ensure that people sleeping rough have a route off the streets. Figures from Blackpool council show that applications from people seeking help with homelessness in 2024-25 were running at nearly three times the national average. We must make sure that safe accommodation sits alongside the practical health, addiction and housing support that people need to rebuild their lives and stay off the streets for good.

We have fantastic homelessness and outreach organisations across Blackpool, such as Streetlife, whose youth advisory group I welcomed to Parliament last week. They told me that they need wraparound support and for us to see the whole person. Unfortunately, the odds have been stacked against our young people. We face serious concentrations of deprivation and poor health, and high demand on services for children and families. Blackpool currently supports nearly three times the national average of children in care.

Despite the immense pressure, Blackpool council has significantly improved its children's services. We were recently graded outstanding by Ofsted, thanks to the tireless work of frontline staff and dedicated leadership from Councillors Jim Hobson and Kath Benson. The leader of Blackpool council, Councillor Lynn Williams, joined me in urging the Government to commit to a dedicated children and families transformation investment package for Blackpool, so that we can build on the work that has already been done to bring down the numbers of children in care. We stand ready to work with the Government to make our town a national example of prevention-led children's services reform.

I have told this House on numerous occasions that I truly believe that when Blackpool succeeds, Britain succeeds. If we can fix the problems of a town at the sharp end of many statistics, we can fix them anywhere. We are now a town on the cusp of change. We have a wealth of creativity and culture and the ambition to be the city of culture in 2029. That could be the connecting tissue between all the areas of good work being done. In conclusion, breathing room is needed, and this Budget provides some of that, but we must scale up the ambition

[Chris Webb]

and the speed of the projects. Blackpool's motto is "Progress". The town has pioneered so much and has kept moving even through deep spending cuts. We are on the right path; what we need now are a Government who walk with us.

2.23 pm

Seamus Logan (Aberdeenshire North and Moray East) (SNP): I begin by asking the House a question. When I heard the Chancellor's speech yesterday, I thought, "Is that it? Is this the Government's best shot?" If the Prime Minister is planning to go to the country on the back of this Budget, I say, "Bring it on." Yesterday the Chancellor delivered the gravest betrayal of the just transition in my constituency and in Scotland. Grangemouth, Mossmorran and now St Fergus—this looks like Thatcherism on steroids. Is anyone seeing a pattern here? The Chancellor did not even have the courage to spell it out in yesterday's Budget, with the loss of Government support for Acorn hidden in the weeds of the Red Book.

While the Labour Government's so-called "mature" carbon capture, usage, and storage projects in England and Wales get the go-ahead, their paltry offer to Scotland amounts to merely seeing how loans or equity investments can support the continued development of future CCUS, with specific mention of the Acorn site. In other words, the project will no longer be considered for direct Government money as part of the Government-funded track process.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Seamus Logan: No, I am not taking interventions. A lot of people want to speak.

The Labour Government are prioritising £9.4 billion in England and Wales, but are not even managing £200 million for the Acorn project and the Scottish cluster. The rhetoric once again fails to match reality and instead reveals treachery in cold blood. I was promised a final investment decision by the previous Chancellor at the Dispatch Box. Where has that promise gone?

Trust in this UK Government from Scotland lies in tatters, as they renege on their commitment to the green transition and re-industrialisation in the north-east of Scotland. We have taskforces, reports, road maps and decisions to be made in the future. It is jam tomorrow. As one newspaper put it this morning, the sound we heard yesterday was the can being kicked down the road.

The Chancellor calls it capital reprioritisation, but his fancy phraseology hides the truth. Existing capital remains prioritised in Teesside and Merseyside. Why not Acorn in Scotland and the Scottish cluster? The UK's net zero future, and thousands of jobs in Scotland, rely on the ability to cut industrial emissions. Acorn provides the country's only viable CO_2 transport and storage solution. Without it, key industries including energy, chemicals and manufacturing will face mounting costs, a loss of competitiveness and a major risk of job losses. Meanwhile, as the cost of living and the cost of food, fuel and energy spiral upwards, Scotland remains trapped in an economic doom loop under Westminster control. We estimate £650 million will be removed from our budget next year.

Where is the breathing space for households? When energy bills will soon be more than £1,000 higher than promised, the Labour party's gas price hike will disproportionately increase costs for people in Scotland. What about the many people who rely on home heating oil in my constituency and across Scotland? They will not benefit from the changes on standing charges. Where is the help for those households facing enormous hikes in heating costs? *[Interruption.]* I know that Government Members do not like to hear it, but I am still going to say it. *[Interruption.]* Where are the transformative measures on child poverty?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am struggling to hear the hon. Gentleman. Please let us hear the words being said.

Seamus Logan: Where are the transformative measures on child poverty? The UK Government only have to look to Scotland for inspiration and innovative policies to combat child poverty, such as the Scottish child payment.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Seamus Logan: No. Where is Labour's equivalent? Where is the full windfall tax on the banks? Just 3% for 15 months will not cut it, when £46 billion of profit was made in 2024.

Chris Murray: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Seamus Logan: I have already said no interventions, thank you. Where is the help for the Scottish whisky industry? Why is there nothing on fiscal drag and tax thresholds? Why is there nothing on VAT reduction for small hospitality businesses? Of course, the extent of the Barnett consequentials remains to be seen.

Devolution is fine for mayors, but what we need in Scotland is a fresh start with independence. That is why we in the SNP choose Scotland, not this tepid version of a Chancellor's Budget. It is a wasted opportunity, a betrayal of our energy workers and a hopeless stab in the back for struggling families. The Government are robbing Peter to pay Paul. I will conclude by channelling the words of T.S. Eliot—words written more than a hundred years ago. This Budget was not so much a bang, but a whimper.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I remind the Members who are heckling from the Back Benches while also trying to catch my eye that they may want to be mindful.

2.28 pm

Dame Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): I welcome the Chancellor's Budget, particularly the additional £1.5 billion for social and affordable housing, taking the Government's investment to more than £40 billion. The only lasting solution to our housing crisis is to build more homes, particularly council homes, but I want to address a crisis that cannot wait for those homes to be built: the almost 200,000 children across the country who will spend tonight homeless. In London,

that figure is one in 30 children, or one in every school class. They are not sleeping on the streets—they have a roof over their heads—but they are homeless.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for households in temporary accommodation, I see the national picture and scale of the homelessness crisis we face, but as the MP for Mitcham and Morden, I see the faces behind those statistics week in, week out at my constituency advice surgery. I see families living in a single room, parents desperately trying to keep their children at the same school, and children without anywhere to do their homework or cooking facilities where their parents can prepare a proper meal.

Temporary accommodation is increasingly anything but temporary. Earlier this year, my APPG published research into child mortality in temporary accommodation. Between 2019 and 2025, 104 children died in cases where temporary accommodation was identified as a possible contributing factor to their vulnerability, ill health or death. Seventy-six of those children were babies under the age of one. Behind every one of those numbers is a child whose future has been taken away and a family who will never recover from that loss. We must never accept that as an inevitable consequence of homelessness.

There is also a serious financial argument for tackling this crisis. London councils are spending more than £5.5 million every single day on temporary accommodation. Much of that money is spent on securing accommodation from private providers, often at considerable expense, without creating the permanent housing assets that councils so desperately need. The cost of unsuitable temporary accommodation does not end with the council's housing budget; it is felt in our schools, our NHS and other public services, through disrupted education, worsening health and the additional support that families so often need. That is why we must consider the full cost of homelessness to the public purse, not simply the price of providing a roof over someone's head.

I welcome the Chancellor's additional £432 million to tackle rough sleeping, but homelessness is not confined to our streets. The Budget recognises this and confirms that the Government's ongoing value for money review of homelessness funding will examine temporary accommodation. That review must consider how councils can acquire more suitable accommodation locally, reducing their reliance on costly private placements.

But we cannot wait until 2027 to improve conditions for children living in temporary accommodation today. Every child deserves somewhere safe to sleep, somewhere to do their homework and somewhere their parents can prepare a proper meal. Those are not luxuries but the most basic requirements of a home. The Chancellor's additional investment in social and affordable housing is a welcome commitment to tackling the root causes of homelessness, but building the homes we need will take time. For the children growing up homeless tonight, time is something we cannot afford to waste. We must ensure that the Government's ambition to end rough sleeping is matched by an ambition to end child homelessness.

2.33 pm

Charlie Dewhirst (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): Fiscal responsibility means living within our means. Every household across East Yorkshire and up and down the country knows that we cannot spend more on the family credit card than we earn, racking up debt with little more than the hope of a future pay rise, yet that is exactly what this Government are doing with our country's credit card—a credit card taken out in my constituents' names.

After Labour crashed the economy in 2008, it left a deficit of 10%. It was spending 10%—£160 billion—more on the country's credit card each year than our country earned. Only the Conservatives' fiscal responsibility was able to fix Labour's mess and steadily wrestle that deficit down. Even after the exceptional need to support jobs and businesses through the global pandemic and the Ukraine war, that deficit rose to 4.4%—less than half of the legacy left by Labour in 2010.

Here we are again, with Labour's fiscal irresponsibility and no plan to deal with the deficit. Labour is borrowing £308 billion more than the plan it inherited in 2024. Under this Government, the national debt has surged through the £3 trillion mark for the first time ever. This spending cannot go on. This Government need to get borrowing down, they need to get public spending down, they need to get welfare spending down, and they need to get people's taxes down. Next year the tax burden will reach a historic high of 37.9% of GDP under this Government, and it is set to surge from there.

Where is this money going? I would like to address briefly some of the issues around the mismanagement of public money in the civil service. This Government, to their credit, pledged to reduce the size of the civil service, but I have bad news: the headcount has risen by 11,000 people since they took office. Cutting the civil service headcount is not this Government's only broken promise. Last year, they put out a press release promising that they would instruct civil servants to stop what Labour themselves called "wasteful spending"—namely, banning Government-branded merchandise and away days in externally hired venues, rather than using freely available Government buildings.

However, the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs spent £20,000 on an away day at the Cumberland hotel in March. In the same month, the DCMS spent £2,000 on an away day at the British Museum. The following month, in April 2026, the Cabinet Office spent over £33,000 hiring the Hartwell House luxury hotel and spa, and its swanky restaurant with a 20-page wine list, for another retreat for its top tier of civil servants. I am slightly confused that the Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office, the hon. Member for Gateshead Central and Whickham (Mark Ferguson), admitted that in a written answer to my hon. Friend the Member for Kingswinford and South Staffordshire (Mike Wood), because when I asked the question, I got the response:

"In the calendar year 2026, the Cabinet Office has not held any departmental Senior Civil Service away days."

The Crown Prosecution Service spent £37,000 on an away day at the four-star Manchester Marriott hotel. The Department for Transport managed to spend £9,000 on an away day at the Foreign Office and £14,000 on one at the HS2 offices. The Northern Ireland Office spent £4,000 meeting in a castle. The Department for Education held an away day for £27,000 at a grade II listed building in Sheffield, while the Ministry of Justice spent another £34,000 on an away day at a theatre.

The Treasury—which we might hope would be holding the purse strings a little tighter—held two away days, with one at the British Museum, and spent £25,000

[Charlie Dewhirst]

"excluding VAT". The Department for Energy Security and Net Zero held three offsite away days, two at four-star hotels, costing a total of over £50,000. The Department for Business, Innovation, Science and Trade also spent £50,000 on three, including one at the Emirates stadium because no "alternative venues were available." The MOD and the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office could not tell me whether they had had any away days, as it would cost them too much to answer the question, so I dread to think how many away days they have had! Unfortunately, the Minister for Women and Equalities has not even bothered to reply to me, so I assume her staff have got lost on an away day to a nice spa hotel.

The list goes on and on, but let me turn to merchandise. The Cabinet Office—which banned all of this—alone spent £4,500 on T-shirts, stickers and commemorative coins. I could move on to No. 10 North, but as we know, it is nothing more than a vanity project.

In conclusion, it is time to bring back common sense and fiscal responsibility. Taxes are at a record high, growth is down, borrowing is higher, debt is up and living standards are down. We cannot keep spending more on the country's credit card than we earn. Wealth must be created before it can be distributed, by our businesses, our entrepreneurs and those who go to work every day. There is no such thing as Government money; it is taxpayers' money, and Labour is addicted to spending other people's money, not creating it. We Conservatives want to see Britain richer, more prosperous and thriving. To paraphrase the excellent point made by the Leader of the Opposition yesterday, our country is overspent, overborrowed, overtaxed and drowning in an out-of-control welfare system—what a pickle we are in.

2.38 pm

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): I am very happy to contribute to this debate, and it is a pleasure in particular to follow my hon. Friends the Members for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury), for Blackpool South (Chris Webb) and for Mitcham and Morden (Dame Siobhain McDonagh).

I welcome this Budget for three reasons. First, it maintains the fiscal discipline that is a strategic imperative, and I think the fact that sterling, the FTSE indexes, and 10 and 30-year gilt yields have remained stable over the last 24 hours is a signifier of that. Given the risks that the UK economy faces—be it barriers to trade, the imposition of tariffs, volatile and rising energy costs, or higher Government borrowing costs everywhere—it is really important that this Budget remains within the fiscal rules. Secondly, it provides families, households and businesses in the towns, villages and cities that make up the Buckingham and Bletchley constituency with genuine breathing space as they manage ongoing cost of living pressures.

Thirty-four thousand households in council tax bands A to D will receive a £100 household energy payment and even more will feel the extension of the electricity VAT cut. Businesses on Queensway in Bletchley and on the high streets of Buckingham and Winslow will gain from the higher small business rate relief threshold rise. Agricultural businesses in north Buckinghamshire will benefit from the extended red diesel duty cut.

However, while fiscal responsibility is an absolute imperative, it should never be an end of itself. The third reason I welcome the Budget is that it does what my right hon. Friend the Chancellor sought to do, which is to back those "bloody-minded entrepreneurs". It is not just me saying that; business groups such as Startup Coalition and UK Private Capital are, too. Fiscal responsibility enables Governments to help the people building Britain's next generation of national champions and globally consequential companies. Be those in artificial intelligence, defence, clean energy, life sciences or advanced manufacturing, they are driving economic growth, job and wealth creation, and are ultimately underpinning the sovereign capabilities of the UK.

Growth in every postcode is absolutely the right objective, and that means we need entrepreneurs in every postcode. Today is undoubtedly a better day and a better Britain in which to build a company than yesterday was. When it comes to helping people start a business, raising the trading allowance from £1,000 to £3,000 is a strong signal that people—young people in particular—can realise their dreams here in the United Kingdom. We have known for a long time that scaling businesses is where Britain could do much more and needs to go further quickly. Expanding the capacity of the British Business Bank and the National Wealth Fund, including by deploying £5 billion over the next four years in defence, recognises the role that public capital has to play in acting as a cornerstone investor alongside our deep pools of private capital—all £3 trillion of that.

With all the blood, sweat and tears that go into building a business, we need to give founders a genuine, compelling reason beyond patriotism alone to remain anchored here and to stay here. That is why the founders' relief is so welcome. I know that many business groups have been arguing and advocating for it across Government and Westminster for some time. We are giving entrepreneurs greater confidence that they can build and scale here and that they will be rewarded. Just as importantly, the relief will strengthen their ability to reinvest their wealth and reuse their expertise and experience in more ventures into the future.

Growth and wealth creation, and fiscal responsibility, are intrinsically linked. Growth is the ultimate stabiliser of the public finances through stronger receipts that will help to reduce the budget deficit and reduce our borrowing costs in the long run. That will give us flexibility to let people keep more of what they earn and invest in the things that are particularly important to us, be they our national security, our schools or our police.

The Budget is a very welcome step in the right direction. There is much more to do, and I look forward to the 10-year plan and the spending review in the long run. I welcome this Budget.

2.43 pm

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): I welcome many elements of the Chancellor's Budget, including his commitment to fiscal devolution, his promise to end rough sleeping and the additional assistance for people to pay their energy bills, but there were many significant omissions and missed opportunities. Instead of freezing fuel duty, he should have listened to Liberal Democrat calls to cut it. Instead of promising reform to carer's

allowance in four years' time, he should have delivered it now. Instead of flirting with the EU, he should have committed to beginning negotiations to rejoin the single market and a new UK-EU customs union.

For our young people, the Chancellor has moved away from Labour's manifesto commitment to equalise the minimum wage and living wage while failing to address the student loan bubble, which is at bursting point, or to scrap his predecessor's damaging national insurance contributions rise that is keeping young people out of work. For working people, he failed to address wage compression by following Liberal Democrat calls to increase the personal allowance and to raise the higher rate income tax threshold. That reform is vital for the 110,000 Londoners being dragged into the higher tax bracket.

While there are measures in the Budget that can be welcomed, there are many missed opportunities. The Liberal Democrats will push the Government to be more ambitious and to deliver on their promise of providing people with the help they need during the cost of living crisis and with the unaffordably high cost of doing business.

Not enough is being done to support small businesses that are struggling, particularly with the cost of employment. In retail alone, employment costs have jumped by £6.5 billion since the 2024 Budget. Unemployment levels are alarmingly high, with 25% of young Londoners not in employment, education or training. The Government must start making it easier for businesses to provide opportunities, particularly to young people as they begin their working life.

The move to decouple gas and electricity prices is a welcome step, and we welcome the short-term relief that many households will receive to ease energy costs this winter, but the Government have failed to address the issue facing many businesses: the cost of energy for our industrial sector. Our dependence on other countries for fuel makes us all vulnerable to international turmoil. Household energy bills remain a third higher than before the war in Ukraine and the average UK resident and small business is being hit by those rises. The ongoing war in Iran reminds us yet again of the importance of secure and reliable energy sources. The best way to cut energy bills is to invest in home-grown renewable power.

Make UK sets out the "ruinous effect" that industrial electricity costs have on investment. It has highlighted the continuing lack of action to address those costs and the risks now associated with taking on workers. The manufacturing sector accounts for 2.6 million jobs and 42% of UK exports; the Government must listen to its calls to reduce energy bills much more urgently than the 10-year schedule set out in the Chancellor's speech. The British Chambers of Commerce and the chief executive of the Food and Drink Federation have echoed those calls, highlighting that the energy support available to certain manufacturing sectors does not apply to food and drink businesses.

It is time for the UK to lead within Europe again on security, working closely with our democratic European allies so that we can support Ukraine and our European partners during peace and war. Our trade relations must also be adjusted to reflect the geopolitical realities we face. The Government must remove their self-defeating red lines and be bolder by introducing a new EU-UK customs union. Ministers must take advantage of the upcoming UK-EU summit to maximise opportunities for closer trading with the European Union and mitigate the risks and damage caused by schemes such as "Made in Europe".

The Liberal Democrats have always championed fiscal devolution, so I welcome that the Budget will legislate for the Mayor of London to set up a successor to the Elizabeth line business rates supplement. Anyone who has used London's train network recently will acknowledge that it is in need of upgrades. Whether it be persistent cancellations on the District line or the discomfort of using the Central line, commuters in London deserve better. That said, the business rates supplement remains quite a limited way of raising funds and the Government have seemingly constrained it to apply only to the west London orbital and the Bakerloo line extension. So while I welcome the business rates supplement as a step in the right direction, I will continue to champion further fiscal devolution for the capital.

I am concerned that the Home Office and the Department for Transport are set to face funding cuts. While taking into account the caveat that figures are adjusted due to lower employer pension contributions, the Home Office faces £1.2 billion in cuts next year and another £1.2 billion cut the following year while the DFT will lose out on £100 million over two years. Two of the most common issues I see in my inbox are concerns about policing and transport, so that is of huge concern to my constituents.

Lastly, on an issue that the Prime Minister has declared is

"a matter for London and Londoners",

I come to the question of Heathrow expansion, which is still yet to be answered. The Budget Red Book states that, on Heathrow,

"The Transport Secretary will provide an update as soon as possible".

If the Prime Minister is true to his word, why does the decision on a third runway still seem to lie in the hands of the Government? It is a white elephant project that does not have the support of the majority of Londoners and must be scrapped.

2.48 pm

Alex McIntyre (Gloucester) (Lab): Yesterday in the Budget the Chancellor's priorities, and those of this Government, were clear: delivering breathing space for families and businesses in Gloucester this winter in the middle of global headwinds from wars in Ukraine and the middle east, and starting to tackle the big issues facing our country such as defence, social care, and energy bills, to build fresh hope and optimism for the future—a future that delivers real change for Gloucester residents. The cost of living crisis remains the No.1 concern for families and businesses in my city, so I welcome the down payment made by the Prime Minister this summer, reintroducing the £2 bus fare cap, scrapping VAT on electricity bills, and cutting business rates for our pubs. Yesterday I was pleased that the Chancellor went further. The £100 household energy payment will be paid to 50,000 households in Gloucester this January, providing much needed help in the coldest months. Freezing fuel duty and increasing the minimum wage above inflation will help.

The Chancellor acknowledged that those measures alone will not solve the cost of living crisis, but they are a vital first step, with the Prime Minister's 10-year plan

[Alex McIntyre]

coming later this year, and the spending review next spring. I ask the Government throughout all of that to keep hard-working Gloucester families at the front of their minds when going through those processes. Breathing space is not just for families; it is also needed for the small businesses that are the beating heart of our city. For too long, our local high streets have been punished by an outdated business rates system. By freezing rates in real terms for retail, hospitality and leisure properties, and providing that 20% cut for our pubs and live music venues, we are taking decisive action. By increasing small business rates relief, almost 60% of businesses on our high streets will be taken out of business rates altogether.

I also welcome the Government's new Hope on the High Street strategy, which aligns with the great work done by Andrew Hearne at Gloucester city council on our city masterplan. It is an ambitious plan for our city, and we must be ambitious.

I must draw the House's attention to the immediate roadblock that we face at home in Gloucester, because Gloucester city council is, to all intents and purposes, entirely broke. Years of mismanagement have forced it to rely on an emergency bail-out from the Government just to keep the lights on. To make matters worse, following a recent vote of no confidence in the leader of the council, the entire Lib Dem cabinet of the council has walked away, and it is now operating without any political leadership whatsoever. My constituents cannot afford for Gloucester's regeneration to be held hostage by local political chaos and bankruptcy. The city centre desperately needs investment, officers need political certainty, and the businesses of Gloucester need a reliable, functioning partner to unlock the growth that this Budget makes possible. So I ask the Government today: what support can they provide to my constituents to get Gloucester back on track? How can we, at a national level, bypass this local vacuum of leadership to ensure that our city centre gets the investment it so desperately needs, and so that our national growth strategy is not blocked by local government failure?

On growth, I want to ensure that Gloucester businesses truly benefit from our national economic strategy. Small businesses need a reliable place in the national supply chain. When we invest, we must buy local, build local, and grow local, and nowhere is that supply chain more crucial than in our national security. Gloucestershire has a proud, deep-rooted footprint in the defence, cyber-security, and aerospace sectors. I am proud that this Government are fully funding the defence investment plan, and putting ourselves on a firm path to spend 3% of GDP on defence by 2030. I urge the Government to ensure that that historic investment flows directly to innovative SMEs in Gloucester such as Poeton Industries, Avon Metals, Cherry & White and Permali—the very businesses engineering the technologies that keep our country safe.

This Budget fundamentally recognises that the people closest to problems should have the power to solve them. It promises greater control over local economic futures, and it is clear that devolution is the key to unlocking Gloucester's immense potential. Sadly, due to a lack of consensus from local leaders, Gloucestershire is being left behind. Only one option makes long-term sense for Gloucester, and that is for us to join the west of England combined authority. I am in complete cross-party agreement with Lisa Spivey, the Liberal Democrat leader of Gloucestershire county council, on that. In the meantime we need a Gloucestershire foundation strategic authority to unlock investment in my city, and I ask the Government to meet me to deliver that.

Every decision in the Budget shows that we have shut the door on the reckless, unfunded promises of shadow Chancellors past, and that we reject the dangerous rhetoric of Reform—its Members are again not here—whose pledge to slash public spending in 100 days without any detail would decimate our hospitals, schools, and police. We are choosing a different path. Gloucester has an incredible future ahead of it, provided that we get the devolution and investment we deserve. We can build new council homes, we can rebuild our high streets, and we can finally deliver the fresh hope that our great city deserves.

2.52 pm

Steve Barclay (North East Cambridgeshire) (Con): The Defence Secretary opened today's debate by praising the former Prime Minister and former Chancellor. That may come as a surprise to them both, given that earlier this year the Defence Secretary resigned from the Government, saying in his resignation letter that he could not serve alongside them because of the lack of direction and the drift. It is less than a year since Labour Members cheered and waved their Order Papers at the Budget from the right hon. Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves), and it is striking how much continuity there is today with measures that they cheered yesterday, despite being so unhappy with the previous Chancellor.

To illustrate that, I will highlight certain phrases and words we hear from Labour Members on a regular basis, starting with perhaps the most frequent, which is the need to have no austerity. An "end to austerity" is a constant refrain—*[Interruption.]* I see those on the Front Bench nodding. They might be surprised to see that the OBR report states on pages 21 and 115 that there is an £11 billion shortfall from the year after next for all Departments, other than protected Departments such as Health. The Government have already said that they want to commit to Defence. I do not think the party that stands saying "24 hours to save the NHS" will cut funding to the health service going into an election, but perhaps that is its policy. If not, according to the OBR, Labour will be cutting funding for unprotected Departments by 2.6% in those final three years. There is a paradox about that: only last week, the Defence Secretary came to the House to say that there is urgency in national resilience, yet Departments like the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, which would deliver that national resilience, will be the same unprotected ones facing cuts, so Labour Members are cheering a Budget in which there is austerity baked in—*[Interruption.]* They shake their heads.

Labour Members may have been told by the Labour Whips, "Do not worry—the spending review will fix that", but having run a spending review, I know that a spending review allocates the funds but does not decide on the quantum. They may have been told, "Do not worry, there will be a election"—maybe there will—but yesterday the Prime Minister was saying the opposite. Either they

believe a Budget that has austerity baked in, they think the spending review will fix it, or they do not believe the Prime Minister and think an election will avoid the issue entirely. But it is an odd position for Members who come to the Chamber talking about an end to austerity to then be cheering a Budget where that austerity is in the Red Book numbers.

The second paradox is that Labour Members talk about breathing space. There are policy areas that show continuity with last year's Budget: the 2p on property income tax is a repeat of last year's 2p increase—4p in all—with both measures starting at the same time, in April next year. The OBR makes it clear that that will lead to fewer people entering the rental market, fewer landlords and prices going up. The Budget includes a bank tax, again repeating a trick of the former Chancellor, who thought, "If I tax employers with national insurance, it will not go through into a jobs' tax", so we have a bank tax on the basis that that will be more palatable. But do not take my word for it: *The Times* leader on 16 October said it will be a tax on growth, and one of Labour's favourite advisers, Lord O'Neill, said it will "hobble" growth.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I thank my constituency neighbour for giving way. In the context of the criticism of tax changes for banks, how does he respond to the chief executive of Barclays describing changes along the lines of ones that we have made as "bearable"?

Steve Barclay: Of course it will be bearable for the chief executive because he will not take it from his bonus—he will take it by adding it to the mortgage rates and the loan rates that he charges the hon. Member's constituents. Does the hon. Member honestly believe that the bankers will take that tax from their own bonuses, or does he think they will pass it on to constituents and consumers? That is exactly what *The Times*, Lord O'Neill and many others have commented: it is a displaced cost that adds to the constraints on businesses. This Government talk about wanting growth in every postcode, but making it harder for businesses to access capital will make it harder for them to expand. As with the measures imposed on landlords, this approach continues that taken by the previous Government.

There is a lack of consistency in the proposals, even measured against those announced in the Labour conference last month. As the Minister pointed out, at the conference the Chancellor talked about how he was aghast at the idea of debt. Well, the OBR document makes it clear that the Budget measures are adding £8 billion of debt this year alone, on top of the £11 billion of additional debt that flows from interest rates and inflation. *[Interruption.]* Again, a Government who say that they want to reduce debt have a Budget that is adding to debt in a way that will further constrain the growth in every postcode.

Unfortunately I have run out of time, but I suspect that in a few months' time, as with the last Budget that Labour Members cheered, once the detail becomes more known and they see how it goes against many of the equities that they say that they stand for, we will find this Budget disowned in exactly the same way as the last one.

2.58 pm

Dr Zubir Ahmed (Glasgow South West) (Lab): When I was first elected to this place as the proud Member for Glasgow South West, many of my constituents lived in great financial uncertainty: the more than 6,000 kids in my constituency who live in relative poverty; the many constituents who have not had a decent wage rise for over 10 years; and the proud shipyards of Govan that are unable to fill their order books. I am proud that I was part of a Government, and a friend of a Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves), who helped to eliminate some of that uncertainty by ensuring the fastest wage growth in a year—it was much greater than any wage growth that happened in the previous 10 years —and by lifting the two-child benefit cap. That took thousands of kids in my constituency out of poverty, and probably benefited the local economy to the tune of £4 million. We also secured the Type 26 frigate contract, which will give certainty to Govan shipyard workers for generations to come.

It is not only in the large policy areas that this Labour movement does its work. It is at its best when, at the ground level, it feels the pain of ordinary people who are trying to get by and are not able to live the life that they were promised by their forefathers. In that regard, I am very proud of the Budget, and the direction that my right hon. Friend the Chancellor has taken, particularly in relation to energy bills. Through this Budget, we are committed to immediately ensuring that 90% of my constituents will feel the benefit of £100 off their energy bills; and 100% of my constituents will be absolved from the need to pay standing charges on their energy bills.

All my constituents will also have VAT eliminated from their electricity bills. No country or Government can insulate their citizens from the pressures of global markets and global conflict, but we can do as much as we can. I believe that we are doing as much as we can on energy bills, and creating the space for people to live more comfortably.

Dr Evans: The hon. Gentleman is talking about doing everything that we can. One way to bring in some funding is through gas and oil tax receipts. Page 94 of the Office for Budget Responsibility report explicitly says that Rosebank is baked in as being granted. Does he support Rosebank?

Dr Ahmed: The hon. Gentleman will know that there is a quasi-judicial process, and it would be remiss of me to make undertakings on an issue for which my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero is responsible. I gently remind the hon. Gentleman that those calculations have been baked in for many years. This is not some new reference to the assumptions in this year's OBR report, and he knows that very well; I think he is being a little mischievous in his questioning.

Let me return to my principal point about giving breathing space. It is not only families and individuals who need breathing space; it is businesses, including small businesses on the high street. I am really proud that before and in this Budget, we have been lifting many more businesses on the high street out of the need to pay business rates. As hon. Members may be aware, in Scotland, that will not be automatic; it is at the discretion of the Scottish Government. I plead with

[Dr Ahmed]

them to ensure that the Barnett consequentials of that decision translate into savings on business rates for ordinary high-street businesses, including pubs.

My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister made an undertaking during the summer to reduce business rates for music clubs and pubs. As far as I know, that has not yet translated into a similar policy statement in Scotland. I know that pubs in my constituency, which are around many of the underground stations in Glasgow—students and others like to do a Clockwork Orange pub crawl—crave and would benefit from those savings. I urge the Scottish Government to pass them on with immediate effect.

Those interventions all make life a little more bearable and easier. I know that some Members think that there is a binary choice to be made between social and personal economic security on the one hand, and our national security on the other, but there is not; one is very much reliant on the other. That is why we are committed to ensuring that our defence spending hits the 2030 and 2035 targets that our NATO allies expect it to. I am proud that my constituency is contributing to the defence of our nation, whether it is through the shipyards and building the Type 26 frigates that will patrol our seas, or through more novel technologies, and drones being designed in my constituency.

Labour Members are proud of investing in defence. Investing in defence is not taboo, contrary to the view that the Scottish Green party and the Scottish National party have sometimes espoused; we in Scotland should be proud that we are at the forefront of defending our nation, and we will always invest in that. I am grateful to the SNP for finally relenting and matching our funding for two defence technical excellence colleges in Scotland, enabling us to defend our nation.

In closing, I will just say that when I speak to this Prime Minister and this Chancellor, I find that they understand Scotland, and they feel the needs of Glasgow South West. The Budget that they have delivered will give us breathing space for today, but also—more importantly—hope for tomorrow.

3.5 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed). The Chancellor has said that his Budget carries through the Prime Minister's vision, but that there is still much to come, in his 10-year plan and in next year's spending review, so there is still an opportunity to change fiscal policy in a way that could help the Government to achieve their housing targets, and help councils, developers and communities to revive town centres and bring derelict and long-term empty buildings back into use.

I start by congratulating the Friends of Campsie High Kirk, the first group in Britain to take ownership of an A-listed heritage building through the ownerless property transfer scheme run by the King's and Lord Treasurer's Remembrancer. The work of that group has led me to raise this issue today, and I am incredibly proud to have it in Mid Dunbartonshire. It has taken ownership of a derelict A-listed church, with plans to renovate it for community use, but nearly every piece of work that it carries out on the site will be subject to VAT at 20%. Until recently, Scotland's historical churches could claim back VAT on repairs through the listed places of worship grant scheme, but that scheme has closed, and the fund that has replaced it covers England only. The UK Government say that Scotland's share of the money has gone to the Scottish Government, yet no fund has been set up to spend it, so even the buildings that could once claim that 20% back are now caught. Will the Minister take this issue up with the Scottish Government, and press for a fund to be created?

It is not just community groups that face this hurdle to restoring our historical sites. Should a developer wish to restore a similar historical building and make it into housing, they would pay VAT at 5% if the conversion qualified, or at the full 20% if it did not. Meanwhile, if it were to demolish the building and start anew, it would pay no VAT on the new homes. The Government's explanation is that the zero rate on new homes is there to

"stimulate the construction of new homes",

but it should not matter whether or not a home is new; if any building is lying long-term vacant or derelict, bringing it back into a habitable, eco-friendly condition gives us the same benefit as building a new house. On top of that, restoring a building preserves the character and heritage of an area, saves carbon by reusing existing materials rather than making and transporting new ones, and often meets less local opposition. We all know how difficult it can be to get permission to build a new home, and we all know the impact a derelict property can have on a street.

His Majesty's Revenue and Customs has told my office that it does not hold figures on how much VAT it raises from building repair and restoration. Before ruling anything out, the Treasury should be able to tell this House how much that tax brings in. With that in mind, I have three asks of the Treasury. First, I urge the Minister to investigate and publish how much VAT is raised each year from the renovation and repair of historical buildings. Secondly, will the Treasury assess the case for treating renovation, repair and conversion in the same way as new build? Thirdly, will it confirm that Scotland will benefit from its fair share of the derelict buildings fund?

Our historical buildings help us make our communities what they are. The tax system should help people to save those buildings and bring them back into use, not charge people more to repair than to build new.

3.9 pm

Richard Baker (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): I hold the hon. Member for Aberdeenshire North and Moray East (Seamus Logan)—he is no longer in his place—in high regard, but I thought it was very telling that he would not take any interventions. The Scottish National party is desperate to paint the gloomiest possible picture of this Budget, but its argument does not hold. The reality is that the Budget is full of measures that will be very widely welcomed, in Scotland and by my constituents.

Measures such as scrapping the standing charges for gas and extending the freeze on fuel duty will be extremely welcome to my constituents in Glenrothes and Mid Fife. I am delighted that the Budget also means that pensioners will see their state pension rise by nearly £500 a year, and that the Government have acted to ensure that pensioners receiving only that income will not have to pay income tax on it.

I make the case again to Ministers for the nearly 850 retired miners in my constituency who are members of the mineworkers' pension scheme. I hope that Ministers will act swiftly to ensure that all the funds in the scheme go to retired miners. However, we must also remember the context for every pensioner in my constituency—the action taken to increase their pension, and the action on rising energy prices, which, as we approach another cold Scottish winter, have been a subject of deep concern to my constituents.

The £100 energy payment being introduced for households in council tax bands A to D is particularly welcome. Thank goodness the SNP has actually seen sense on one thing, and is ensuring that this policy from the Government will be implemented in Scotland. In my constituency, nine out of 10 households will benefit. That is vital relief from the rising energy prices that we face because of global economic challenges. That is the real, practical support for families that the Prime Minister promised, and that this Budget delivers.

The Budget not only provides breathing space in tough times; it also sets out investment that brings huge opportunities for the future of our communities in Glenrothes and Mid Fife, with the prospect of skilled work and good jobs for our young people. Along with the Defence Secretary, who gave an excellent speech at the start of this debate, the Chancellor has committed the funding for the defence investment plan. His contract decision that the new dry docks for Faslane will be built not in a foreign shipyard but here in the UK is a wonderful opportunity for the Methil yard in my constituency, which was saved from closure by this Government. If the new dry docks are built by the skilled workforce at Methil, that will secure the long-term future of the yard and drive its recruitment even higher. Methil is a community with a proud industrial history but high levels of social deprivation; this is a wonderful opportunity for reindustrialisation in our part of Scotland.

It is not only in defence that there is such potential to grow our local economy. We have thriving renewable energy businesses, and the decision to proceed with the Jackdaw project has been widely welcomed in the Scottish energy sector, because it will provide employment in an industry whose workforce will be vital if we are to succeed in making the transition to renewables, and to sustain skills and employment in our energy sector.

The £18 million pledged to the University of Edinburgh to boost our national capacity to design and test our own semiconductor chips is a decision that will be warmly welcomed across the Forth in Fife, where industry-leading companies such as Clas-SiC Wafer Fab and Semefab are based. Their highly expert staff export their products right across the globe. That is another example of how we are taking advantage of the revolution in artificial intelligence to ensure security, and to realise economic benefits for many of our high-tech, high-skilled industries in Scotland.

This is a Budget for breathing space, a Budget to protect our economic stability and a Budget for investment in the future of our communities. I commend the Chancellor for recognising not only the challenges that we face as a country, and offering families respite from them, but the many opportunities that we have to strengthen growth in our economy in the future.

3.14 pm

Sir John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): Before I turn to the Budget, I would like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to Sue Holt, whose death Mr Speaker announced to the House this morning. I am a member and former leader of the OSCE Parliamentary Assembly delegation, and I worked with Sue over quite a long period. She was always immensely cheerful and efficient, and her death came as a real shock to us all. I send my condolences.

At least there is one part of the Budget that I welcome: the continuing support being given by this Government to Ukraine. That was initiated under the last Government —indeed, over 10 years ago, long before the full-scale invasion by Russia—and we have continued to maintain it. It is a cross-party matter, so that support is very welcome. One of the reasons it is so important that we support Ukraine is that Ukraine is our frontline, and the threat to Ukraine is not just a threat to that country; it is a threat to all of us. That is why it is essential that we increase our defence expenditure now.

The Chancellor has recommitted to spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2030, but that is still some way off, and we have heard from the Secretary of State for Defence about the immediacy of the threat. It is a matter of some concern that while we are still debating how we will get to 3%, allies such as Denmark, Estonia, Lativa, Lithuania, Norway and Poland are already exceeding that level and planning to spend more. Perhaps one of the reasons we have not yet been able to explain how we will meet the target is that the essential measures to fund it—in other words, addressing the welfare budget—have again been ducked by this Government. We await the outcome of the reviews by the Minister and Alan Milburn, but we have reached a position in which 6.7 million people are now claiming out-of-work benefits. That is creating a situation that is not just unaffordable; it is actually immoral that so many people of working age are out of work and living on benefits.

The situation in this country is that all the economic signals for the long term are heading in the wrong direction. Borrowing is going up. Our national debt already stands at £3 trillion and is scheduled to increase further. Tax levels are the highest in our history. The Chancellor claims that he wants to cut regulation, but we have heard today from the OBR that the Employment Rights Act 2025 will result in unemployment standing at over 5% next year. That situation destroys incentives to work, drives away investment and causes entrepreneurs to leave the country. It is an unsustainable situation, yet nothing in this Budget does anything to give confidence that those things will be reversed.

I will quickly refer to a couple of measures. In the Prime Minister's first statement to the House, I raised the situation on our high streets, where so many businesses have been hit by not just the increase in business rates, but the increases in national insurance contributions, energy costs and the minimum wage. Although the measure to increase the threshold for business relief is of some small help, it is nothing like sufficient to help those businesses that are struggling to survive. I regret that there was no mention of VAT, a cut to which UKHospitality has identified as a critical measure that could help, because such businesses have to compete with those in countries such as France, Spain and Italy, which levy rates that are half of those here.

[Sir John Whittingdale]

I will quickly mention hair salons, which the Chancellor talked about. They often face unfair competition from identical-looking salons next door, where the chairs are rented out and the staff class themselves as self-employed. That is depriving the Treasury of proper revenue while also creating unfair competition. I hope that is something that the Treasury will listen to.

I am sorry that the gambling sector is yet again being used as a cash cow, and I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. By increasing the tax on gambling yet again, the effect will hit our high streets even harder, because a lot of betting shops are going to be driven out of business.

Mr Francois: My right hon. Friend has been a staunch defender of Ukraine for many years in this House. Would he agree with what President Zelensky said yesterday, as reported in *The Sun*, when he advised this Government to prioritise UK defence spending and to do so without further delay? Does Zelensky know something the Government do not?

Sir John Whittingdale: I am extremely grateful to my constituency neighbour for making an excellent point—and for giving me another minute. He is absolutely right that President Zelensky once again has spoken words for the Government to listen to, if only they would. It is absolutely right that we should increase our support for and expenditure on defence.

Finally, my right hon. Friend and I both represent relatively rural constituencies, and I regret that the Budget made no mention of the harm being done to the agriculture sector through the family farming tax, nor did it provide any help to those constituents—I have many, and I know he does as well—who are off the grid and rely on heating oil. They will not benefit from the abolition of the standing charges, yet they have faced huge increases.

Perhaps the only thing to celebrate in this Budget is the fact that the Chancellor did not listen to his Back Benchers who wanted him to go even further, with a wealth tax, a mansion tax and an increase in capital gains tax; long may it continue that he listens to us, not to them.

3.20 pm

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I welcome the opportunity to speak in today's debate on the Budget, and to talk about some of the things that will affect my constituents. This Budget does indeed provide the breathing space needed by families, workers and small businesses across the country, built on the bedrock of fiscal discipline and helping families to deal with high living costs. Most notably, looking at energy costs, over 92% of households across the Blaydon and Consett constituency will benefit from the household energy payment, directly delivering £100 to help households with bills this winter, alongside the extension of 0% VAT on electricity. Many of these houses are of course of poor quality and poorly insulated, so it is particularly welcome. For local motorists, tradespeople and commuters, extending the 5p fuel duty cut keeps daily costs down, and many constituents have written to me about that.

When talking to the North East chamber of commerce recently, I heard that our local businesses were concerned about operating with the current system of taxes. For our high street businesses, the £1 billion business rates package ensures that over 52% of retail, hospitality and leisure properties across the north-east will pay no business rates at all next year, giving independent traders room to plan and to invest. Alongside the 35% business rates relief for pubs, the new guest beer legislation will give local landlords the right to serve locally brewed beers on tap, supporting independent north-east brewers such as the Firebrick Brewery in Blaydon and the Thirsty Moose in Ryton, which have spoken to me about these issues.

Anna Dixon: Like my hon. Friend, I have small breweries in my own constituency, including the Saltaire Brewery, the Goose Eye Brewery and SALT. Does she agree with me that, with rising energy costs, the £10 million annual alcohol duty relief for small brewers is very welcome from the Chancellor?

Liz Twist: There are indeed welcome moves in this Budget, and I know that the guest beer one was particularly wished for.

On regional growth, I warmly welcome the new £1.5 billion borrowing facility for mayoral strategic authorities that was announced yesterday. In Gateshead, these devolved borrowing powers will allow us to move forward with the transformation of the Gateshead Quays development. Backed by £24 million in enabling funding from North East Mayor Kim McGuinness, essential site preparation and infrastructure work can now begin. Once these loans allow us to start investing in full, Gateshead will gain a world-class venue featuring a 12,500-seat arena and an international conference centre. The North East combined authority estimates that this ambitious development will attract over 1 million visitors every year, generate a £70 million annual boost to our local economy and create 2,000 good local jobs.

I want to set the record straight on the international investment summit. The Budget Red Book announces that

> "The next International Investment Summit will take place in spring 2027 in Newcastle."

I must gently correct the record for the Treasury. As the Chancellor announced in his speech yesterday, that major summit will actually be hosted on the south side of the Tyne, right in Gateshead. I look forward to seeing Tyneside on the global stage. As we prepare to welcome global investors, my firm hope is that the investment announced at the summit stays directly in Gateshead and the surrounding area, helping to further fund our local regeneration and economic growth, and benefiting my constituents on the Blaydon side and beyond to provide employment opportunities, so that it will affect the whole of Gateshead, not just the quayside.

There is a little-noticed measure in the Budget on the preventive departmental expenditure limit. I particularly welcome the creation of ringfenced preventive expenditure, which establishes a spending category for early intervention in the spending review. We do not have much detail on that, but I am going to get my bid in quite early. I want investment in preventive measures that affect all Departments in relation to suicide prevention and mental health. This is a really important issue and one that

I come back to regularly. I warn those on the Treasury Bench that I will be referring to it many times in future, so that they do not lose the message—if they could take a note now, that would be helpful. Extensive research conducted by Samaritans and Mind demonstrates that every single suicide prevented saves our economy roughly £1.46 million. We cannot reduce lives to figures on a spreadsheet, but that shows that investment in preventive work on mental health and work on suicide prevention is well worth the money.

Across County Durham, 878 local properties will benefit from the real-terms business rates freeze, alongside 377 in Gateshead. To help our young people gain high-quality skills and secure good careers, new apprenticeship brokerage funding and expanded mayoral apprenticeship services will support businesses, including small and medium-sized enterprises, to hire and train the next generation. The derelict buildings fund will help both sides of my constituency, making a difference to our high streets.

3.27 pm

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist). I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) in paying tribute to Sue Holt. I was in Strasbourg with her only a few weeks ago when she was taken ill. It was a great shock to all of us to learn what had happened to her.

I want to cover measures in the Budget that relate to my constituents, the Home Affairs Committee and my constituency, but I realise I have limited time so I will race ahead. It is pretty quick on the Home Affairs Committee side of things, because there was not very much in the Budget about such matters. In fact, there was only one mention in the speech: £15 million over three years for a misogyny prevention fund. We are yet to see what that actually involves, but I worry that priority is being given to perpetrators. Where is the money for victims? A victim-centred approach to violence against women and girls is essential. The Government have already said that £1 billion needs to be spent on tackling violence against women and girls during the life of the strategy, but the Red Book states:

"the government is prioritising £55 million of funding over two years to accelerate delivery of the Violence Against Women and Girls strategy."

Again, £55 million out of £1 billion does not sound too much.

On issues that were not mentioned but relate to home affairs, the Committee is conducting two inquiries at the moment. I am interested in the work that the Government are doing on apprenticeships and so on, but I urge them to look at the work the Committee did with Demos—a piece of deliberative democracy—looking at the public's attitude to work-based immigration. They will find really interesting insights on the need to prioritise upskilling UK workers to take job vacancies, not just looking overseas to fill those roles.

The Committee is also doing to a piece of work on the impact of serious and organised crime on local neighbourhoods. My right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon made some really interesting comments about the high street. It is the case that we have seen the hollowing out of the high street, and the measures that the Government have taken on national insurance, business rates and so on have left a vacuum that is being filled by organised criminality. That is filling our high streets in a way that is inappropriate and that we do not want, so I urge the Government to deal with that issue.

Moving on to issues that affect my constituency, I welcome the £100 for A to D council tax payers. We have a disproportionately high number of properties in bands A to D in Staffordshire Moorlands, so more people will be affected by that than in some other constituencies. However, there was nothing in the Budget for those who rely on heating oil, and they will not benefit from the abolition of gas standing charges. Those people really do need help; the price of heating oil is hideous and, as we come into winter, the numbers that have been quoted to fill a tank of heating oil are astonishing.

Again, I join my right hon. Friend the Member for Maldon in commenting that there was nothing about hospitality and tourism. As the Member of Parliament for Alton Towers and other great local attractions, including the Peak Wildlife Park, I know how much they welcomed the reduction in VAT over the summer and how much they want to see that made permanent. There was also nothing for farmers in the Budget. It would have been very heartening if the Chancellor had mentioned something about the family farm tax, to give farmers the respite that they need.

The Government tell us we need to have local government reorganisation in order to benefit from many of the measures in the Budget. As I said following the Minister for Local Government's statement earlier, if we are going to have a mayor, we do not need to reorganise the structure of our local government as well. Let officials and councillors spend their time and effort on delivering services and let the mayors have the strategic overview. That would be a much better approach.

The Peak Cluster project proposes to enable the cement industry to continue in the Peak district through carbon capture, with plans to transport the carbon to Morecambe bay. This is of great concern. How much carbon is going to be emitted in building the pipelines that will go underneath the Peak district, Cheshire and other areas to get out to Morecambe bay, where the carbon can be put into an empty gas field? Surely, it would just be better to allow the cement industry to continue producing cement in as clean a way as possible in the United Kingdom, without the need to build the pipeline, with all the environmental damage that will cause.

I welcome the comments around new battery storage, and solar farms needing to be connected to the grid to start with. That is a measure that many of my constituents will welcome.

3.32 pm

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): High energy costs are one of the biggest issues facing both my constituents and the small businesses that our economy needs to thrive, so I am delighted that the Chancellor announced that gas standing charges—which we all know are not fair—will be removed. That comes on top of cost-of-living policies already announced by the Prime Minister, such as removing VAT from electricity—a measure that the Chancellor has now extended—on top of a direct £100 household energy payment eligible for band A to D households. On top of the £150 taken off energy bills at the last Budget, these things add up.

[Sam Carling]

Focusing on energy costs is the progressive thing to do. The poorest 10% of households pay the greatest share of their money on energy, at over 12%. The measures provide support for those most in need: the families, and particularly the children, in poverty in North West Cambridgeshire and across the country. Indeed, the whole Budget reflects progressive principles: 80% of households—all bar the top 20%—will have more money in their pockets from this Budget; the ninth decile breaks about even; and it is only the top 10% that are being asked to pay that little bit more—and it really is only a little more, at 0.1% of their income. That is very much the Labour way.

All the support that we are providing must of course be paid for, and a key part of that will come from delivering growth. And we are delivering growth. Our economy was the joint fastest growing in the G7 in the first half of this year. That comes alongside the news that the IMF forecasts that we are set to deliver a bigger reduction in borrowing over the next few years than any other G20 country. We are one of only two G7 countries to cut our deficit this year, despite all the global headwinds that we face.

In many ways, I feel sorry for the Conservatives, because they have the very difficult job of reading a Red Book full of good news and trying to make it sound bad—*[Interruption.]* I welcome the discussion in the Budget about lowering business costs, both through business rates relief and freezes. We have heard a lot of criticism that there is nothing in the Budget for hospitality, but about 50% of retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in the east of England will not be paying any business rates at all. The reforms to regulations will be saving businesses up to £5.6 billion a year if we hit our target.

I encourage the Government to ensure that that also applies to our life sciences sector. I have spoken previously in this Chamber about options for reforming clinical trial regulation such that we save business and the NHS time and money and attract more investment—not necessarily by cutting regulation, but by streamlining it and reducing duplicated effort. An awful lot of different regulators look after clinical trials at the moment, and I think there is a lot of potential to streamline some of that down, save a lot of money and bring more investment into that area.

I will turn briefly to another area I would have liked to see more work on, and something I hope the Government might consider taking forward in the spending review, which is gift aid and the tax exemptions given to charities. There is very little scrutiny over that expenditure, which is sizeable, with more than £5 billion of reliefs for charities in the tax year to April 2026. Of course, the vast majority of charities spend that money well and on good causes, and that is to be commended. However, due to fundamental problems in the law, it is far too easy for organisations that provide very little or no benefit to the public—in some cases, they may even cause active harm—to obtain charity status and, in so doing, claim public money through gift aid and tax exemptions. That fact damages the whole sector and those within it who do such good work.

In July 2025, *The Guardian* reported that the Kasner Charitable Trust transferred £5.7 million to support an illegal settlement in the occupied west bank. In theory, therefore, the UK taxpayer could have funded an illegal settlement by over £1 million in gift aid through that transaction alone. The fact that that was permissible under our current system clearly shows that major reform is needed, including to Treasury rules, and that significant amounts of taxpayer money could be saved, because that is not an isolated example.

There are many similar organisations—taxpayer-funded charities—that are preaching horrendous misogyny, homophobia and other forms of hatred. This is a monumental waste of our constituents' money, which we could be redirecting both towards our public services and to tackle violence against women and girls at the same time. I know that that is a priority for this Government; they are showing it in the measures in this Budget, such as the £15 million announced to create a misogyny prevention fund, which will have a real impact.

However, such measures are hugely undermined when the taxpayer is also subsidising major organisations like this. Earlier this week, there was a report of a mosque in which preachers were advising husbands that they could hit their wives. Just yesterday, I became aware of a church with awful posts on its website that deny the existence of marital rape, alongside all sorts of other horrendous misogyny. That church had an income of £5 million, £1 million of which could be taxpayer funding. That has to stop, and I implore Treasury Ministers to consider what options they have to ensure that it does.

3.37 pm

Steve Darling (Torbay) (LD): Torbay has one very sad accolade: it is the most deprived constituency with a Liberal Democrat MP. The cost of living crisis is therefore close to my heart.

The fact that the Government have reduced fuel bills for some people is welcome, but it is a small step. As the Liberal Democrats highlighted, there were other opportunities on the table that could have helped people with the fuel crisis, which is set to bite really deep come the new year, when those bills go up.

I am only too aware of the challenges that people have getting out and about in a rural county such as Devon. Further support measures that the Liberal Democrats identified were, sadly, left on the table. As our spokesperson, my hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mr Reynolds), said earlier, it is about growing the economy and unshackling ourselves by using what opportunities there are for us; not choosing to keep to those red lines is extremely important.

On the upside, I want to use this opportunity to celebrate the fact that the oldest pub in Torquay, the Hole in the Wall, is set to reopen tonight. I am delighted that my uncle Drew Millin will be performing there on a Thursday and Sunday night—I wish I was going to be home in time to join them.

On a more negative note, like many others in this Chamber, I am disappointed that the temporary cut to VAT that we campaigned for to help our hospitality and tourism industry was sadly not included in the Budget. That opportunity still sits there, and it would give us a boost in a number of different ways. As colleagues have already highlighted, the national insurance hike has also hit that industry. Even raising the level at which it kicks in would be helpful, particularly for those not in education, employment or training and young people by providing those opportunities for their first job in the hospitality industry.

Hospitality is also in fear of the overnight levy. There is an irony in that the VAT rate in Italy, Spain and France is 10%, whereas here it is 20%. Applying an overnight levy is quite perverse unless there is a cut to VAT to put us on more of a level playing field. I have even had Scouts associations that run a campsite in Torbay concerned that Scouts groups and similar youth facilities could be hit by such a levy.

My No. 1 priority as the MP for Torbay is the rebuild of Torbay hospital. It is somewhat disturbing that there is only £190 million in the Budget to support our NHS. That would not even cover the rebuild of Torbay hospital, which is desperately needed. I hope that the Chancellor will continue to push hard on supporting our NHS.

In conclusion, I welcome the changes that have been made, including the taper that is set to be applied to carer's allowance. That is a significant step in the right direction. However, it is a bit of an indictment on the DWP that there is to be a four-year delay in its implementation. I welcome the approach where the allowance will taper away for every £1 earned over the amount, but surely there is an opportunity to be more generous in the long term as the change comes forward.

3.41 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): I am going to give a slightly different speech today, because I think that what the Government are doing with this Budget shows both a material and moral difference between our two sides. For us on the Labour Benches, it has always been clear—indeed, it is in our founding values—that every single person in this country should be able to live a decent life and that out of that we build prosperity for all. Those on the Opposition Benches believe that only some should be able to afford a decent life—a vision that has made us not just materially poorer but morally poorer.

I have written Budgets in the Treasury and in Somaliland. I have seen really difficult Budgets and, make no mistake, this was a difficult Budget at an incredibly difficult time. We face existential challenges, including an affordability crisis, a burning planet, war in Europe—and all of it coming at the same time. Underneath it all is a question that underlines our politics: will we stand strong together to meet this moment, or will we fall apart divided, weaker and poorer?

We made our choice in this Budget: we will see every single person, family and place do even better than before. Families, workers, business and Government will work in partnership to create prosperity. In this Budget we reduced energy bills so that families can afford the basics, but also because when families have more in their pockets, they spend more down the shops, and that helps their local businesses.

We are helping businesses with the things that they require—roads, skills and investment in energy—and we are cutting rates to give them a bit of breathing space as we go into what we all know will be an incredibly difficult winter. For the Government, it is being able to raise the funds that we need in the fairest way possible and in a way that does not damage prosperity. That is why we have a windfall tax on the banks, who have made huge profits in the past few years, and on oil and gas giants. They are making tens of billions of pounds from Iran and Ukraine, so we are making a choice to use some of that money to help cut bills for people in our constituencies across our country.

We know that this works not just because we have the fastest growing economy in the G7 but because it is what our past tells us. We know that it was Bevin's alliance of labour and capital that helped win the second world war. We know that Attlee built common prosperity based on common sacrifice, all of it from common endeavour, and Blair and Brown renewed a nation. All that built upon the fundamental ideal that we hold, included on our founding membership card and, indeed, today, that we achieve more by standing together through our common endeavour.

There are those who believe differently from us. They believe that we should allow oil and gas giants and banks to make huge, record windfall profits, leave that there and not try and help every single person in this country. We have also seen that Reform, which supports racist thugs and masked people on our streets, will use those kinds of tactics to distract from the fact that it wants to give its crypto-billionaire mates tax cuts. That is who we stand against and that is the ideal that we stand against on the Labour Benches.

We choose a different path. The British people are better than that—better than the anger and the division, but also better than the penury that leads to. We know, on these Benches, what we have always known and seen throughout our history: that we build prosperity for all; that we stand together when each of us can stand as tall; that a nation is only as strong as each of the people who has a stake in it; and that they have a stake in that nation if life is affordable for all. That is the choice that we have made in our history—in our greatest moments—that was the choice that helped us win a war and rebuild our nation afterwards and it was the same choice that saw us build prosperity in our past and, indeed, prosperity in our present. That is what this Budget represents, that is the choice that we make and every single one of us is so proud of it.

Sam Carling (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It has just come to my attention that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) made a particularly nasty age-related comment during my speech. I wanted to see, first, if that was in order and secondly, if he might like to say that so that his young constituents can hear what he thinks of them.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. I did not hear any comments in the Chamber and it is not a matter for the Chair—I did not hear it.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. If I caused any offence, I am sorry, but I was reacting to the fact that the hon. Gentleman effectively said that the people on the Conservative Benches could not read, which I humbly suggest is not very polite.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. That is clearly not a matter for the Chair, but a matter of debate. I ask Members yet again to treat each other with the courtesy and respect that we expect in this Chamber.

3.47 pm

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher). The overriding question after the Chancellor sat down yesterday was, "Is that it?" Most Budgets manage to survive 24 hours before they fall apart; his Budget lasted about 24 minutes before it fell apart, as the Leader of the Opposition eviscerated it, quite rightly.

The verdict this morning suggests that living standards will fall over the duration of this Government and that although over the 2010-2020 period household income increased by 12%, in this decade it is likely to increase only by 2%. That demonstrates that this Government and this Chancellor are making Britain poorer, and we have to remember as well that there are baked-in tax increases from the previous Chancellor that are kicking in now.

I will look at four areas of the Budget where there are missed opportunities. First, as my hon. Friend the Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) pointed out, there is nothing in the Budget for young people. There are a million young people not in education, training or work. There could have been an opportunity to reduce national insurance contributions for recent graduates under 25, but there was no action. As a result, graduate unemployment is dramatically up. There could have been action on reducing the amount of interest that ex-students pay on their student loans. That was promised but not delivered. On energy costs, a lot of young people in London share houses in bands E to F, so they will get no relief from the £100 drop-in-the-ocean energy payment that is dished out.

There are clearly taxes on savers, taxes on banks and taxes on landlords. That means that rents will go up, which means that young people will end up paying the price. For most landlords, the problem is they cannot sell their properties because of the inflated stamp duty that applies, and therefore the amount of supply will reduce.

I note that smoking or smoking cessation were not mentioned once in the Budget. Unbelievably, smoking cessation in the national health service is being cut when there are still 4.9 million smokers out there who desperately want to quit. They will not get the support under this Government that they desperately need. That costs the economy £53.2 billion every year through lost productivity, healthcare and social care costs, and smoking-related fires. It is a big issue hitting young and old people.

I welcome the extra money to enable every rough sleeper to have a roof over their head. The commitment was, of course, that they would be taken off the streets before Christmas. It has now been watered down—they will be given an offer of somewhere to sleep. At the same time, the number of people who are homeless or rough sleeping is increasing. Far from dealing with the problem, the Government are not addressing it properly.

It is good news that the Vagrancy Act 1824 has been scrapped, and we celebrated that two days ago. There is much more we can do to help people in this extremely vulnerable position. As I mentioned earlier this week, we still await the implementation of the Supported Housing (Regulatory Oversight) Act 2023 that I introduced three years ago, which would help prevent vulnerable people from being exploited.

There are concerns straight away on the Government's moves to bring empty buildings back into use. The key there is who will pay the cost. Where is the money coming from when councils already have overstretched budgets? Dealing with local authorities, the £100 council tax rebate does not fix the core spending issues. For those who follow these things, the average increase in council tax last year at band D was £111, so the £100 that some people will get back will disappear when the council tax increases come in this year.

The problem now at local authority level is that the demand-led services, which of course are not in the control of local authorities, continue to spiral. I welcome the fact that the Government have given a three-year settlement, but it will still not be sufficient, and in many cases it will lead to huge council tax increases and cuts in services. All in all, this Budget is a series of missed opportunities that could have been easily solved.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I call Adam Jogee, after which I will reduce the time limit to three minutes.

3.52 pm

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am grateful to you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I have already edited out lots of my speech, but I will try to read through my scribbles.

In this Budget, His Majesty's Government are taking the necessary steps to make everyday life that little bit easier for people back home in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and thank goodness. Those steps and that determination stand in stark contrast with the chaos, instability and nonsense that we see at Staffordshire county council. This week we received news that Staffordshire county council is on to its fourth leader at County Hall since the county council elections in May 2025. It is an uninspiring and unfunny game of musical chairs, and my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme deserve much better.

Our community is a great place and is home to good, hard-working, decent people. They deserve every little bit of help announced yesterday to make life that little bit more manageable, and there is much to welcome. I am pleased that more than 40,000 homes in my community will receive the £100 payment, as we have heard from colleagues across the House, to help with their energy bills, and that we have extended the 0% rate of VAT on electricity bills until July 2027. We are finally acting on gas standing charges, and there was more good news on fuel duty, too. We are taking more businesses out of paying business rates by increasing the small business rates relief threshold—important, too, for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in my community. In fact, these changes will mean that around 52% of all retail, hospitality and leisure properties in the west midlands will now no longer pay business rates at all. That will go some way to helping the much-loved and much-used pubs and restaurants in our town centre and communities, as well as boosting our local economy and keeping local people in work.

We saw action on paternity leave, which will make the system fairer—that is excellent. I welcome the £55 million of funding that will be made available to accelerate the delivery of the violence against women and girls strategy—that is important stuff. I look forward to working with

the Chancellor and colleagues from coalfield communities to finally deliver the justice that our coal miners deserve. While I will never shy away from my concerns about local government reform and the impact that would have on my community, I am delighted that the Government have announced that a new mayoral strategic authority for Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire is on its way. It will bring power, investment and decision making closer to those of us who live, learn and work in Newcastle-under-Lyme, and that is to be welcomed.

I have a bit more time left. *[Interruption.]* It would do a disservice to my constituents not to use the time. Since I was elected, I have seen up close how our local authorities have passed the buck at every stage, and my constituents have suffered because of it. The change to a mayoral strategic authority will give us the opportunity to fix a broken transport system, to invest in our young people and to boost the resilience of our region, all with our local communities at the heart of the process.

This Budget is one part of helping communities like mine recover from years of delay, dither and de-industrialisation. We owe it to the hard-working, skilled people who built our town and the young people who will move it forward to keep pushing for better. We have a proud history, a strong identity and huge potential, and with this Budget, we have begun the journey of reinvesting power and control into communities like mine. I will continue to do everything I can, as Newcastle-under-Lyme's representative, to make sure that my constituents' voices are heard loud and proud. There is a minute and 23 seconds back to you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): On a three-minute time limit, I call Dr Luke Evans.

3.56 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I had to check that the Chancellor had said what I thought he had, and it was referred to again today by the Defence Secretary. They said that this is the first 100 days of a Government, with a new 10-year plan. By my calculation, the Government have been in for 847 days, with their third Budget being delivered yesterday, and we are over a quarter of the way through the last 10-year plan. Rather than this being a baby Budget and a fledgling Government, they are more an adolescent Government, and this really is a bum-fluff Budget. It has got wispy bits and patchy bits, but no one really knows what they are, where they are going or even if they should be there. We can see that by the fact that we have 98 announcements within the Budget, which is a record, but the value per project is one of the lowest on record.

When I saw the Budget, I was pleased that there were some bits that I have been working on that have finally come to fruition. First, pensioners are being taken out of paying tax on their state pension. There is also the freeze on fuel duty. Those are in response to things that were warned about, but put in by a Labour Government. The hole was dug by a Labour Government, and they have now had to half-fill it. That is exactly what we see with the NEETs situation.

We have record unemployment of young people, certainly when compared with the EU average, with more than a million people not able to get through into jobs, so what do the Government do? They put on that toxic concoction of tax increases and red tape, and now they turn around and say, "We will give you £3,000 to take someone on." The Government should get out the way. It would be far simpler to let businesses take on people and grow as they need. The same applies to the hospitality industry and the leisure industry. It is welcome that the Government have made some changes to their rates, but we should remember that the Government took away the support in the first place, put up the rates and added the toxic concoction on top. It is a hole that has been half-filled, and we see that time and again.

We often hear about the money that went into the NHS, but we should remember it was taken away with the jobs tax that hit hospices, care homes, GPs and pharmacies, which are all feeling it. With energy, £100 has been given, but we know that Ofgem says the cap will see a more than £400 increase. We should remember that Labour promised £300 lower bills when it came into office. I hope that we see this beard grow into a full bushy shape. Whether it is Keir Starmer's continuation or Andy Burnham's new direction—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Gentleman knows better than to refer to the Prime Minister by name.

Dr Evans: Forgive me. I mean the right hon. Member for Makerfield (Andy Burnham) and his new direction, with a lovely new moustache.

3.59 pm

Nadia Whittome (Nottingham East) (Lab): I welcome many of the measures in the Budget: policies to lower energy bills and the price of a food shop, support for our high streets, the assurance that every penny of the mineworkers' pension scheme surplus will go to former miners, and our continued commitment to supporting Ukraine's defences. The Government are absolutely right to double the fund to end rough sleeping, and the extra £1.5 billion for 10,000 social and affordable homes is very welcome.

I am glad that the Government are tackling this issue with such ambition. However, if we are to reverse 40 years of neo-liberalism, we must apply that same ambition to every area where people are struggling. We have the deepest poverty levels in 30 years. Rents and mortgages, food prices and bills are spiralling, and wages simply are not keeping pace. Despite the increase in funding in recent years, public services are still under severe pressure. We cannot expect people to endure this fall in living standards, and to keep going without, while the super-rich get richer.

I recognise that the Government are in a difficult position as a result of the global economy, but it is their job to shield people from the shocks, and to build stronger protections for the future. That is why we must be bolder in taxing wealth. We could fairly raise billions of pounds to fund our public services, strengthen social security and renationalise essentials, such as water and energy.

I welcome measures to tax banks and raise property income tax, but we must go further and take impactful measures, such as a reform of capital gains tax. The current system encourages people to convert labour income into capital gains, hoard wealth and leave the UK without paying their fair share. This measure could raise £20 billion a year—enough to fund a national care service. We could

[Nadia Whittome]

expand national insurance contributions to cover investment income and partnerships. That could raise £6 billion a year, which could fund higher local housing allowance rates. We could replace council tax and stamp duty with a proportional property tax, which could raise £5.6 billion a year and leave most people better off. And, of course, we could introduce an annual wealth tax at 2% for individuals who have wealth of over £10 million; that could raise £24 billion a year.

As the Chancellor said, we need fresh hope for the future, but hope cannot come from words alone. We cannot paper over the cracks of a rigged economic system. It is this Labour Government's duty to fundamentally transform our economy, so that it is just and resilient, and shifts wealth and power back to working-class people.

4.2 pm

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome). It is fair to say that all Budgets are keenly awaited, speculated about and then scrutinised in great detail. Some herald landmark decisions, such as the initial covid response package in March 2020. Others live in infamy, such as the mini-Budget that crashed the markets in 2022. This one is more difficult to categorise, coming as it does at a time when the unpredictability of the White House and Trump's provocation of foreign wars creates instability in the international markets and for families in the UK, and massive uncertainty. That is why the £15 billion for Ukraine is so important for its defences, for ours, and for Europe's.

There is much more that I welcome in the Budget, partly because this is not the time for disagreeing for disagreeing's sake, or point scoring. The people of this country face massive problems with energy prices and the cost of living, and it is down to us to work together to fix them. Any measures to bring down the crippling cost of energy bills, remove the unfairness of gas standing charges and give families a little headroom in the cost of living crisis should be endorsed.

We must remember that while supermarket shelves are filling with luxuries, for too many people, this winter will be about keeping warm and keeping their children fed. Businesses will also struggle, so I was delighted to see that funding from gambling and vape shops will go to support other high-street businesses, and that the Government are asking the banks that the British taxpayer bailed out two decades ago to return the favour.

It will be no surprise to anyone in this place to hear that I heartily endorse the impetus to create a better working relationship with the EU, as well as the £18 million for advanced chip development led by Edinburgh University and the £6 million for Glasgow's Scottish Event Campus, but I worry, as most Scots here do, that many of the measures in this Budget, which will lead to £600 million of consequentials for Scotland, will disappear into the black hole created by the Scottish Government, given the £5 billion shortfall that their budget now faces.

Yesterday, the Chancellor said:

"This is a Labour Budget for the worker, the sole trader, the parent at the school gate, and the young person desperate to start their first job or…business."—[*Official Report*, 28 October 2026; Vol. 792, c. 314.]

Those are the people who will decide which category this Budget falls into. They will decide whether their lives are better for it. When we come out of the "storms" that the Chancellor talked about, we will see whether this tanker, which will take a long time to turn around, is facing in a direction that families will welcome.

4.5 pm

Chris Hinchliff (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): In our era of perma-meta-poly crisis, the decisions the Chancellor has taken to provide our country with a little breathing space will be welcome to many of my constituents. The longer-term question that remains is what we mean by good growth, because, looking back over the last two decades, it has proven perfectly possible for GDP growth to happen, and yet simultaneously for almost everyone's life to get harder. Our country will drift until politicians can give a meaningful definition of good growth that the whole country can strive for and mobilise around.

Fortunately, we do not have to reinvent this wholly anew for ourselves. John Maynard Keynes, the greatest economic mind our country has ever produced, left us many of the answers we have been fumbling for. Nearly 100 years ago, he warned that a focus on the wrong priorities would keep us

"for ever in the pit of want".

In other words, chasing the chimera of infinite, exponential increases in consumption completely misses the point of what economic policy should achieve. Since Keynes's time, there has been nearly a sixfold increase in UK GDP per capita. We have more than enough wealth to ensure that every one of our constituents is meaningfully employed, can afford decent food and is well housed, yet hardship, reliance on food banks and the housing crisis do not just persist but, in many ways, continue to worsen.

When Keynes wrote about the economic possibilities for his generation's grandchildren, I do not think this is what he had in mind. We may have a growing surplus of AI slop, all the poisonous social media one could possibly want to consume, and the jolly good fun of casino capitalism that does not actually produce anything, but we lack safe, comfortable and genuinely affordable homes for millions of people. We lack food that is both affordable and nutritious for all and, almost everywhere outside London, we lack a public transport network that can reliably get us to where we need to be.

The reason for that economic failure is straightforward: we have not had the self-confidence and determination to mobilise our enormous resources to meet our fundamental problems. Keynes was right when he argued that we already have all the "resources and technical means" to erase economic need in our country; what we have lacked is the organisation to use them. There are literally trillions of pounds managed by UK pension funds and asset management schemes. If we directed just a fraction of that to investing in our actual priorities, our country could finally hop off the nauseating merry-go-round of chasing growth that endlessly forces us to make trade-offs that have brought our natural world to the brink of collapse.

I will end on this. The fundamental fact about all our lives is that they are transient. The promise of consuming more every year than the last is irrelevant to making the most of the time we are each allotted.

4.8 pm

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): The Defence Secretary, who opened the debate for the Government, is undoubtedly a versatile and an entertaining politician, but he did himself a little less than full justice in being so casually dismissive of the remarks made by the Labour Chairman of the Defence Committee, the hon. Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi), who, for the record, I have found to be thoughtful, knowledgeable and patriotic. He deserves to be listened to, just as his predecessors in the role, including me, were listened to with, I believe, respect by Conservative Governments, even when we were criticising them. Criticise them we did. As long ago as June 2018, the Defence Committee published a report entitled "Beyond 2 per cent"—that is HC 818, for those nerds interested in looking it up—which called for a level of defence expenditure approaching the figure of 3% of GDP, which the United Kingdom still maintained as late as the mid-1990s.

The mid-1990s were six years or so after the fall of the Berlin wall, and when Government Members keep saying, as the Chancellor said yesterday and as the Defence Secretary repeatedly said today, although he did not take interventions on it, that they are proud to be part of a Government who are behind the biggest increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, the question we need to ask is this: how much do they think this country spent on defence during the cold war? When the cold war was over, the threat diminished. The threat is now high—as high as it ever was during the cold war.

During the 1980s, as I have said many times, we spent between 4.5% and 5% of GDP, calculated by today's method of calculation, on defence. In June 2025, the Hague summit declaration called for NATO members to spend 5% of GDP on defence by 2035, consisting of 3.5% on core expenditure and 1.5% on wider defence-related items. We are already beginning to hear how the 3.5%, or even the 3%, will be made up by creative accounting. Let us bear in mind that 3.5% is to be on core defence. The creative accounting elements, if they are lucky, may deserve to be included in the 5%, but that is it.

4.10 pm

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I am so pleased to support a Labour Budget that is backing Scotland and backing Edinburgh, despite the best efforts of the SNP to talk down its benefits and talk down my city. In particular, I welcome the announcement, which is of importance to my constituency, of £18 million for a UK advance chip design academy at Edinburgh University. That is how we build hope for the future. Modern iPhones contain at least a dozen chips designed in Edinburgh, and Edinburgh researchers helped to design a crucial sensor used in iPhone cameras, billions of which are now produced worldwide.

Consider this remarkable statistic from historian Chris Miller: last year, in a single year, the semiconductor industry manufactured more chips than humanity had produced of all other manufactured products combined throughout human history. Artificial intelligence might appear digital, but it depends on something profoundly physical: chips, semiconductors and the infrastructure that powers them. We cannot afford to watch from the sidelines while the United States, Taiwan and others lead the field, and thanks to this Budget, Edinburgh will join them in the future.

I have argued for years that Edinburgh can be one of the great powerhouses of the British economy, provided we have a Government who are willing to back its potential. For too long, however, we have had an SNP Government letting us down at every turn. Edinburgh is the local authority with the lowest funding per head in Scotland, and there are more homeless children in Edinburgh than in the whole of Wales. The SNP Government hoard money in Holyrood and starve Scotland's capital city. Yesterday, we heard a Labour Chancellor reject that, and make the decisions that will help Edinburgh to thrive. Support for entrepreneurs, start-ups, scale-ups and founders will mean that the innovation of Edinburgh researchers pushes us into the future.

The SNP position on Labour's investment in Scotland is absurd in the extreme. We heard the hon. Member for Angus and Perthshire Glens (Dave Doogan) attack the removal of standing charges from bills, despite having advocated for that policy in this Chamber only months earlier. The Scottish Government's budget is 12.4% higher, even setting aside new responsibilities. Since Labour came to office, we have delivered £18 billion extra for Scotland's budget. Where has that money gone? Why are my constituents still facing waiting lists, homelessness and potholes? It is because the SNP Government are so keen to look for grievance that they cannot even work out that they have been given more money. Labour is delivering for Edinburgh. What is holding us back are an SNP Government with no plans, no conception of what Scotland's capital city can do, and no notion of how to use government to improve people's lives.

4.13 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Edinburgh East and Musselburgh (Chris Murray), although I suspect that we will have slightly different assessments of this Budget. In my view, this is a thin gruel of a Budget, and with its 98 measures tinkering at tax and spending, it is not un-reminiscent of Emperor Nero in Rome, fiddling while it burned. This is ultimately a Budget of delay: it kicks the big decisions into the long grass; it is anaemic in terms of its assessment and forecast for growth; and it quite simply does not set out a compelling vision for our economic future. That inertia has a cost, which is obvious in two areas.

The first area, of course, is defence. We are living in an increasingly unstable world. It is negligent—a failure of a duty of government—not to properly fund our armed forces. A consequence of having a plan for a road map to 3% of GDP is that there is no strategy whatsoever. I am afraid that the absence of that plan, from this particular Chancellor especially, does nothing to enhance his credibility in front of the British public and the markets. The second area, which I will touch on briefly, is welfare. I will touch on it briefly because there was barely any mention of it in yesterday's Budget, and yet welfare spending is predicted to go up by £19 billion this year, and total welfare spending is anticipated to be £431 billion by 2031-32. That is utterly unsustainable.

I want to concentrate on a particular hidden tax measure in the Budget. It is buried in section 6.147 of the Red Book, but it has enormous implications for those who are self-employed and pay their tax under self-assessment. I am one of those individuals, from my historical earnings at the Bar and my aged debt.

[Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst]

Under the new proposal, individuals will pay their taxes perhaps on a monthly or quarterly basis—it is unclear yet—and some 50% of tax returns will almost certainly be brought forward in terms of when they are paid. The obvious effect for the Treasury is that receipts in year 1 will increase by £1.3 billion and by year 3 that will be £1.8 billion. However, it will be ruinous for the individuals concerned because they will end up paying tax on issues that they have not yet received. It does not reflect the seasonality of payments and it is, quite frankly, a rather silly policy that has been cooked up by those who have no understanding of business at all.

4.16 pm

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): In yesterday's Budget, the Chancellor put in place measures that will put money back into the pockets of my constituents in Shipley, support our brilliant independent businesses, and deliver for carers and families across Bingley, Shipley, Baildon and the surrounding villages. This Budget does that without endangering the strong economic foundations that were laid by the previous Chancellor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves). I echo the Defence Secretary's tribute to her for her actions to restore economic stability after the Tories' economic chaos.

Against a backdrop of global uncertainty, the new Chancellor faced a tricky balancing act rebuilding our public services and maintaining fiscal discipline, but this Chancellor and this Budget got that balance right, delivering security at home, with better public services, and security from threats abroad. I echo what other hon. Members have said and welcome the new energy bills breathing space that will give 36,500 households in Shipley a £100 payment this winter.

I am incredibly proud that, after years of campaigning, the carer's allowance cliff edge will be abolished and replaced with a taper, so carers who earn just a little over the earnings limit will no longer lose their entire allowance. Carers should never be penalised for working an extra shift, so that unfairness ends under a Labour Government. I share our new Prime Minister's ambition to reform adult social care, to ensure that disabled adults and older people get the care they need. I look forward to the spending review and hope that his ambition will be matched by the Chancellor in the spending review.

Briefly, I would like to echo my hon. Friend the Member for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist) and her enjoyment of the PDEL, the new protected prevention spend. It may seem a little geeky, but it could prove transformative. Let us stop paying for failure and crisis, and instead invest in early intervention. Just one example of where that could make a huge difference is in hospice and end of life care. If we funded our local hospices, such as Marie Curie and Sue Ryder, that are currently reliant on charitable funding, they could expand community support. This would deliver reductions in inappropriate and unnecessary hospital admissions at end of life, saving money in the NHS and ensuring more people die at home and in the community.

Finally, I welcome the defence spending. I hope that some of the fantastic, innovative small and medium-sized enterprises in defence in Shipley, such as Radio Design and Slipstream Engineering Design, can use it to grow the number of high-skilled jobs in my area.

This is a fantastic Budget. It shows that the Labour Government are listening to people in places like Shipley and backing workers, carers and our local businesses.

4.19 pm

Sarah Bool (South Northamptonshire) (Con): The Chancellor started his remarks yesterday by praising the previous Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Leeds West and Pudsey (Rachel Reeves). He said:

"She brought fiscal discipline to this country."

He also said:

"She took the decisions required to boost investment".—[*Official Report*, 28 October 2026; Vol. 792, c. 301]—

apparently! However, what he omitted is actually more telling. The previous Chancellor increased taxes on business, crippled farmers with taxes, and ballooned the welfare bill and borrowing. If that fiscal discipline was so great, perhaps she might have been delivering the Budget yesterday.

The Chancellor also talked about giving Britain some "breathing space" on the cost of living and the cost of business. If this is breathing space, he needs to be very careful of a misrepresentation—the Budget was a faulty inhaler at best.

I am particularly concerned by some of the devolution measures in the Budget. There was a lot of discussion about devolution, but Northamptonshire is not being considered at the moment, and we are battling for any provisions around mayors. We are battling to be considered as part of a unit of six, but the Government are looking at Bedford, Luton and Milton Keynes. When so many decisions will apparently be devolved to these authorities, it is important that Northamptonshire has its right place in the discussions. I hope that we can continue to make the case for Northamptonshire to be part of that unit.

The defence of the realm is absolutely essential, and we all know how vital it is that we get to spending 3% of GDP on defence by 2030, but some of the Defence Secretary's comments earlier were incredibly shocking. Conservative Members asking detailed questions about how we will achieve that spending should not be dismissed or joked about. It is absolutely right that this Chamber is the place where those questions are answered, so I ask that the Secretary of State reconsiders his approach the next time that the Opposition ask such questions.

When the Chancellor was the Secretary of State for Defence, he resigned for exactly the reason that we could not necessarily reach that 3%. All that was mentioned yesterday was a target. I remind everyone that a target is defined as something that we aim for; we need a full-on commitment here and now. The Budget was given a title that mentions "Fresh Hope for the Future" but this is not about hope for the future; this is about the Government delivering. Hope, as they say, is a little like a rocking chair: it gives us something to do, but it gets us absolutely nowhere. Actions speak much louder than words.

4.22 pm

Mark Sewards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): In the short time available to me, I will go through a few things in the Budget that will genuinely help my constituents, as well as a few areas where the Government should go further.

Let me start with household bills. I will certainly not be alone in this House in finding that most of my constituents are genuinely worried about the pressure of household bills. It is definitely welcome that standing charges have been scrapped from gas bills, that VAT on energy bills has been suspended for longer and that a new £100 household energy payment is being introduced. That will benefit 40,000 properties in my constituency alone. That is welcome breathing space, but it cannot be the summit of our ambitions on energy bills or bills more generally. That is why I welcome the long-term direction set out on energy by the Chancellor yesterday. However, I assure my constituents and give fair warning to Members on the Front Bench that I will be asking for more support if bills do not come down quickly enough in the short and medium term.

I welcome the support given to businesses. Nearly half of all businesses in Yorkshire and the Humber will not pay business rates, following the announcement yesterday. Alongside that immediate support for families and businesses, the Budget made some investments in my home city of Leeds, not least the £200 million extra to transform Leeds train station. There is a lot in that, such as a new bridge over the platforms, three new entrances and bigger and better concourses, but when I went through that yesterday with my wife, Alice, she was very quick to remind me that the improvements to the lifts are incredibly overdue, and she is absolutely right. The lifts are so painfully slow that people have to factor an extra 15 or 20 minutes into their journey if they have a pram or a wheelchair. As somebody who has a five-year-old, a two-year-old and another one arriving in a few weeks' time, I welcome that investment in our lifts, and I cannot wait to spend the money to make them that a little bit faster for anybody with a pram. I also welcome the £15 million being given to Leeds College of Building for its new campus on the south bank. That campus is going to be used by my constituents; it is going to benefit them and give them the chance to start a new career in an area where we already have skills shortages.

In the very short time available to me, I will also say as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Yorkshire and northern Lincolnshire that we were about to put out a report calling on the Government to give fiscal devolution to the regions, to allow mayors to keep more of the tax revenue that we raise centrally. I was very pleased that the Chancellor beat us to the punch with his announcement. I know that the Prime Minister considers Lord Blunkett to be a personal mentor and hero to him, and he has also been a mentor and hero to our APPG, so I will just say that he took what was in our report and gave it to the Prime Minister, and that is how it ended up in the Budget statement. That is my story, and I am sticking to it.

4.25 pm

Kevin Bonavia (Stevenage) (Lab): This Budget comes at a time when conflict in Europe and the middle east —not of our choosing, not of our making—has hit the cost of living hard here at home, while the threats facing our country make investment in defence and national security more important than ever. As today's debate was opened on the Government side by the Defence Secretary, I want to make a further point, which is that economic security and national security go hand in hand. That is particularly important in my constituency, where the aerospace and space sectors are vital parts of our local economy. Indeed, as I have said many times in this place, over a quarter of satellites in space contain components made in my town of Stevenage.

To have that security in the long term, though, we have to make sure people get through the attack on our cost of living now. That is why this Budget does so much to provide that breathing space, such as helping with soaring energy bills. We have the £100 household energy payment, which will help 36,000 homes in Stevenage and our villages, and the extension of the electricity VAT cut. The lowest-income pensioners will not be paying income tax as a result of this Budget, and our retail, hospitality and leisure businesses in Stevenage will benefit from not facing a real-terms increase in business rates over the next two years. Taken together, these measures all help, and it is no good the Opposition belittling any of them.

When it comes to security, as the Opposition have accepted, the defence investment plan is fully funded. That means that our defence industry can now get on with providing the equipment and support that our armed forces need. We in this House are all united in supporting Ukraine, and I am glad that we all welcome the extra support for Ukraine, but the Opposition had 14 years in government, and they lecture us about defence now. In that time, as I have already said, our armed forces were belittled. The right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) talked about calling on the last Government to increase defence spending, but they never did it, and now the Conservatives say that they will cut welfare. Welfare ballooned under the last Government, and now they say that they are going to cut £30 billion. They have no plans; they ask us for a plan, but there is nothing from them, so why should we believe a word they say?

This is a time to think about providing breathing space for our constituents. I commend this Budget to the House.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions. I call the shadow Minister.

4.28 pm

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): It is a pleasure to sum up for His Majesty's Opposition this afternoon. Perhaps I can begin on a consensual note by pointing out that yet again, as we are debating these important economic matters, including the defence of the realm, there is no Member of Parliament from the Reform party present. They have taken no part in this debate at all. We know that they do not do Thursday afternoons, and they certainly do not do defence either.

Dr Evans: Does my right hon. Friend believe that the reason they cannot be here is that their prayer cards were taken out?

Mr Francois: No, I think it is because they are desperately trying to find someone—anyone—to go to one of their press conferences.

Now, according to the Red Book, working-age welfare spending will increase to £221.5 billion in 2031-32. That is almost a quarter of a trillion pounds and an increase

[Mr Francois]

of over £57 billion since 2024-25. The Prime Minister famously said at the Dispatch Box just a few weeks ago that

"national security…cannot come at the expense of social security."—[*Official Report*, 9 September 2026; Vol. 790, c. 1036.]

That really is a segue to what I principally want to say this afternoon.

What the Chancellor announced yesterday was not a detailed programme for how to spend 3% of GDP on defence, but just a plan to have a plan—which is not really a plan at all. He promised to "begin work"—his words—on how this would be achieved by the time of the spending review next year. The Labour Government have already had two years to answer this question, so why do they need a further year now?

When Labour published the strategic defence review in June 2025, all three authors of the review, led by Lord Robertson, a respected former Secretary-General of NATO, were absolutely adamant that the bill for implementing their recommendations was a minimum of 3% of GDP on defence. Unless and until the Government definitively commit to spending that money, it is very difficult for our armed forces realistically to deter a war with any aggressor, and in particular the Russians—not the Trussians!

At the time of the SDR, we were told that that level of detail would be provided in the subsequent defence investment plan. The House was promised this in the autumn, then by Christmas, then by the new year, then in the spring, and it was finally published only in late June 2026. Nevertheless, when the DIP was eventually published, the Government kicked the can down the road for a second time and still failed to provide a definitive date for when, and crucially how, this country would spend 3% of GDP on defence. Indeed, the then Defence Secretary, now the Chancellor, famously resigned, seemingly on a point of honour, because the Government had failed to give a date for 3%. I have here his resignation letter, dated 11 June, and I quote from it directly:

"After explaining to you that I would not be able to accept a DIP settlement that does not give our Forces the resources they need, I am now left with no other option than to submit my resignation as your Defence Secretary."

It is also worth recalling that the then Veterans Minister, the hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns), resigned in company with him, partly over this and also because of his very severe reservations about the Northern Ireland Troubles Bill—a wicked Bill—which he famously described as "unfit for purpose".

Once the previous Prime Minister then fell, miraculously, having resigned as Defence Secretary, the right hon. Member for Rawmarsh and Conisbrough (John Healey) was immediately reincarnated as the Chancellor of the Exchequer. However, he then found himself with the boot very much on the other foot. Given his understanding of defence, and the solemn terms in which he wrote his letter, it was not unreasonable to assume that, having now seized control of the bridge at the Treasury, he would be ideally placed to meet his own request to name the date for 3% and how to finance it. Otherwise, why did he resign? I am therefore genuinely deeply saddened to see that, yesterday, he failed his own test. All we were given was an offer to produce a plan for 3% in the Government spending review, which will take place next year. In other words, a man who seemingly resigned on a point of honour, when he had the perfect chance to put that problem right, completely ducked it. All that Labour has done is kick the can down the road for a third time.

Our armed forces therefore cannot realistically plan because they do not know how much money they will really have to spend on this nation's defence, and they are now going to have to wait at least another year before they do. The House need not take it from me; Chris Mason, the political editor of the BBC, in summarising the Budget on the 6 o'clock news last night, said, "The biggest questions this Government still faces, such as the long-term funding of defence, this Budget didn't answer."

In fact, it is even worse than that. When the Defence Secretary agreed the SDR, he also signed up with the Treasury for almost £11 billion of efficiency savings. This was a Labour deal—a Faustian pact—between two warring Government Departments, but the effect of those in-year efficiency savings, or "spending cuts" in pub English, is now proving debilitating for our armed forces. The in-year cuts were some £2.5 billion in the previous financial year and £3.5 billion this year, 2026-27.

One of the reasons it took nearly a month to get HMS Dragon to sea was that maintenance cuts occurred under the efficiency savings programme. We now see the vast bulk of the Royal Navy tied up alongside the quayside, partly because of maintenance issues but also to save money. For many months, we had a period in which not a single one of our nuclear attack submarines was at sea. The Minister might intervene and chide me for discussing submarine movements on the Floor of the House, but I am not—I am discussing the absence of submarine movements on the Floor of the House.

We have also seen Army exercises cancelled on Salisbury plain and flying hours reduced for some of our RAF pilots. These are exactly the wrong things to be doing if we are trying to send messages to Vladimir Putin, a former KGB colonel, to deter him from further adventurism—for instance, in the Baltic states. Yesterday, the Labour Chair of the Defence Committee—I am afraid I am going to quote him again—excellently summed it up by saying that

"some of the key decisions on defence spending have lamentably been delayed until next year's spending review. There is a cost to inaction. Investment in our nation's defence and security cannot be kicked into the long grass. Our adversaries are not bound by fiscal years and spending cycles."

He should know.

Yesterday we even learned from the depths of the Budget Red Book that the Chancellor has effectively cut the overall MOD budget by £1 billion in each of the next two years by pocketing reduced spending estimates on MOD pensions for the Treasury, rather than allowing the MOD to retain the cash and spend it on bolstering our defences. The Treasury has described these two £1 billion cuts in the defence budget as an "accounting adjustment". Well, it is Enron accounting. It is smoke and mirrors, and it only helps our adversaries, not our armed forces.

On defence housing, there is a similar story. I served for some five months on the Armed Forces Bill Committee, and we were told repeatedly that the money for housing would not be raided for short-term efficiency savings.

In fact, the hon. and gallant Member for Birmingham Selly Oak told us in the Select Committee on the Armed Forces Bill on 18 March:

> "The £9 billion has been ringfenced; it has absolutely been secured for defence housing. Nothing in the DIP process will stop us getting on with the job of making these improvements and getting the job done. We have made that commitment to not just the armed forces community but the nation. We have said it in the House, and we will see it through."

That is completely unambiguous, so imagine our anger when we then saw a letter from the permanent secretary to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee, dated 25 September, which said not only that some £850 million of that money will be deferred to the next Parliament, but that an additional £1 billion of upgrades to single living accommodation for soldiers will be deferred as well. What the Government have done is cut nearly £2 billion of that investment in this Parliament, in a desperate attempt to meet exactly the Treasury-imposed efficiency savings target that, for five months, they swore blind to us they would not do.

The Defence Secretary, who opened this debate, neglected to mention the MOD's £3.5 billion efficiency savings target for this year. He talks about being ready for war within 1,000 days, while at the same time imposing crippling cuts on the operations and training of our armed forces, who are there to deter war in the first place—si vis pacem, para bellum. The Budget totally failed to answer the question of how the Government will actually spend 3% of GDP on defence, and they are listening in Moscow, Beijing, Tehran and Pyongyang. This is a dereliction of duty by a Government who will the ends but do not will the means, who talk tough but act weak, who have let down the people of this country and will not defend them properly, and who must be held to account at the ballot box for their abject failure in defence of the realm.

4.39 pm

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Lucy Rigby): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions to this Budget debate. It is an honour to respond on behalf of the Government.

Yesterday, the Chancellor delivered a Budget that will steer Britain through a period of global volatility and the economic storm that has increased pressures on families and firms across this country. It is a Budget that doubles down on our fiscal discipline, and that strengthens our economic resilience and national security, making responsible choices in an uncertain world. It is a Budget that offers households and businesses breathing space from cost pressures in the here and now, and one that makes critical structural changes that will drive our future prosperity.

Over the course of the debate, the Defence Secretary and Labour Members, including my hon. Friends the Members for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson) and for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist), have rightly emphasised the importance of our commitment to fiscal responsibility, which underwrites every promise this Government make to the British people. As was made clear yesterday, in this Budget the Chancellor has met his fiscal rules, and for the first time this Government are meeting them in the third year of the forecast. The headroom against the stability rule is £15 billion, rising to £22 billion in 2030-31. Last year, we cut borrowing to its lowest level in six years, and the OBR's economic and fiscal outlook confirms that borrowing will fall over the forecast.

Madam Deputy Speaker, you will forgive Government Members for taking the advice of the shadow Chancellor, the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), with not so much a pinch of salt, but a whole bucket of it, because not only is he the architect of the mini-Budget, but he maintained just a few weeks ago that the mini-Budget, as the Defence Secretary said, contained lots of good things. Perhaps the shadow Chancellor would like to tell us what those good things were. Were those good things the sky-high mortgages for millions of people right across this country, including in my constituency, the disastrous market impact, or the cratering of our international reputation?

Britain's economic reputation was so badly damaged under the Conservatives that the IMF publicly warned them to change course. *[Interruption.]* You can tell that they do not like to be reminded of it, Madam Deputy Speaker. The shadow Armed Forces Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), does not like that either, because he was one of the mini-Budget's chief architects and, indeed, one of its most ardent fans. The reality is that the contrast between their approach and ours could not be clearer.

Dr Luke Evans: Talking about structural problems and difficulties, a press release has just come out from the Labour party that says: "Exclusive. Chancellor tells Krishnan Guru-Murthy that Labour will not bring welfare bills down in this Parliament". Does the Minister stand by that?

Lucy Rigby: We are reforming welfare, and the Prime Minister has made it clear today—*[Interruption.]* The welfare Budget ballooned under the Conservative party. The Prime Minister has been very clear today that the welfare bill will come down.

As I have said, the contrast between our approach and the Conservatives' could not be clearer. The IMF forecast earlier this month that our deficit would be the lowest in the G7 by 2029. Fiscal strength matters because our economic security and our national security are inseparable. That is why this Budget strengthens Britain's capacity to withstand global volatility. It funds the defence investment plan by reprioritising capital budgets, so that Britain can respond to a more dangerous world. It also strengthens our defence industrial base and supports skilled jobs across the country. As has been pointed out by the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) and the hon. Member for Edinburgh West (Christine Jardine), it also—

Steve Barclay: On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Economic Secretary has just said at the Dispatch Box that the welfare bill will come down. The BBC has been reporting, following the Chancellor saying the same thing this morning, that No. 10 and the Treasury have informed the media that that is not the case, and the welfare bill will not be coming down. How do we ensure that the House gets the true position, because it is rather hard to keep up when the message keeps changing?

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the right hon. Member for his point of order. He will know full well that it is not a matter for the Chair, but I am sure those on the Treasury Bench have heard his point.

Lucy Rigby: Let me talk now about energy security, because it is part of our national security, too. We are reforming our energy system so that Britain is less exposed to volatility. We will freeze new policy costs on bills, pending a comprehensive cost control framework. We are accelerating investment in the grid and we are procuring clean power only where it lowers bills and can connect properly.

When it comes to our public services, this Government have stabilised spending after years of under-investment by the Conservative party.

Mr Francois: I am sure the right hon. and learned Lady can confirm to the House that she is a Treasury Minister. I have here the press release issued by—the Treasury—which says, "Exclusive. Chancellor John Healey tells Krishnan Guru-Murthy Labour will not bring welfare bill—"

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Mr Francois, we refer to him as the Chancellor, not by his name.

Mr Francois: I apologise, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was reading the press release, but I accept your admonition.

Anyway, it says that the bloke who is in charge of the Treasury has told Krishnan Guru-Murthy that Labour will not bring the welfare bill down in this Parliament and the Economic Secretary to the Treasury—to give the right hon. and learned Lady her correct title—has just said that it will. Who is right? Is it the right hon. and learned Lady, or is it her boss? They cannot both be, can they?

Lucy Rigby: The Prime Minister confirmed earlier today that we will bring the welfare bill down as soon as possible. I am very happy to confirm that.

As the Chancellor said yesterday, when it comes to public services we will insist on reform, prioritisation and value for money. That is what resilience looks like: sound public finances, secure energy, strong defence and a state that is able to act when the country needs it to.

As hon. Members have made clear, including my hon. Friends the Members for Gloucester (Alex McIntyre), for Shipley (Anna Dixon) and for Leeds South West and Morley (Mark Sewards), the measures in the Budget will provide breathing room for families and businesses now, while also helping to bring bills down over the long term. We know that energy pressures are not just felt by families but by businesses, too. That is exactly why we are increasing the small business rate relief threshold for retail hospitality and leisure properties, taking around 70,000 more businesses out of business rates altogether. For other businesses in the sector, rates will be frozen in real terms for two years.

We are supporting high streets and the businesses that give them life. We are backing pubs, clubs and music venues. We are reducing the supply-side barriers that firms repeatedly tell us hold them back: energy costs, slow infrastructure decisions, red tape and access to finance. And because of our commitment to fiscal responsibility, all those measures are fully funded.

Anna Dixon: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend for her closing remarks and for responding to the points raised during the debate. Will she confirm that business rates relief will not apply to the vape shops that are popping up on our high streets and blighting them?

Lucy Rigby: I can.

On that commitment to sound finances, our plan is to double down on the conditions that will allow for the growth that will drive this country's future prosperity. We are determined that Britain will be an even better place to start a business, to scale it and then to stay. A new founders' relief will offer a 10% capital gains tax rate on eligible lifetime gains of up to £10 million for founders of high-growth companies. We are doubling the CSOP—company share option plan—limits and we are tripling the trading allowance, too.

Recognising that artificial intelligence is the defining technology of our time—it is already turbocharging productivity—we are putting more than £700 million behind making it safer, more secure and easier to adopt. I am pleased to confirm to the hon. Member for North Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) that we will continue to safely adopt AI within the public sector, improving public services and productivity while securing better value for taxpayers.

The Chancellor also talked yesterday about significant change to our energy policy, because we know that affordable, secure energy is a platform for growth. By accelerating grid connection, controlling costs and lowering electricity bills, we will strengthen industrial competitiveness and unlock investment across the country.

We are putting our public finance institutions at the heart of Britain's growth mission with an additional £20.4 billion of capital for the national wealth fund and the British Business Bank.

To conclude, in the first half of this year, our economy was the joint fastest growing in the G7, alongside the United States. The OBR has raised its forecast for growth this year. Whole economy investment, business investment and productivity are all up. That progress is being tested by global pressures, which is exactly why the Chancellor has delivered a Budget that will steer us through the storm. It is a Budget underpinned by fiscal discipline, it provides support to families and firms now, it will strengthen our resilience, and it will put this country on the better, more secure and more prosperous course that the British people deserve.

Ordered, That the debate be now adjourned.—(*Liam Conlon.*)

Debate to be resumed on Monday 2 November.

PETITION

Hair and Beauty Sector

4.50 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Hairdressing and barber businesses are a core component of our high streets. They bring millions of repeat visits every year, provide local jobs, improve our emotional wellbeing and cannot be replaced by artificial intelligence or moved online. However, they are in crisis, with apprentice starts reduced by 84% since 2015, employment likely to fall by 93% by the end of this Parliament, and salon owners seeing the VAT rate as a penalty for employment and growth.

The more than 2,000 signatories of the petition request

"that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a permanently lower VAT rate of 10% for professional hairdressing, barbering, beauty, spa and aesthetics services."

Following is the full text of the petition:

[*The petition of residents of the United Kingdom,*

Declares that hairdressing and barbering businesses are vital for local economies through employing locally, providing training to young people and bringing millions of repeat visits to high streets throughout the year; further declares that these businesses provide people-powered services that cannot be moved online, automated, replaced by Artificial Intelligence or relocated overseas; further declares that the hair and beauty sector lost one in five employees in 2025; further declares that this loss was the largest loss of employment of any occupation in the UK, leaving just 68,500 employed workers; further declares that this is the equivalent of 20 employing salons closing every working day; further declares that apprenticeship starts have fallen by approximately 84% since 2015; further declares that CBI Economics warned in 2025 that employment in the hair and beauty sector could fall by 93% by the end of this Parliament if these trends continue; and further declares that the 20% VAT rate on salons is viewed by the sector as a penalty for employment and growth as, for businesses operating on narrow margins, VAT registration can make recruitment and apprenticeships financially impossible.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a permanently lower VAT rate of 10% for professional hairdressing, barbering, beauty, spa and aesthetics services.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003255]

Sodium Valproate

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Liam Conlon.)*

4.52 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Wyre) (Lab): It is not the first time that I have had an Adjournment debate on sodium valproate in my 11-and-a-bit years as a Member of Parliament. It continues to be an issue that affects so many, and for which justice still feels so far away.

Given the history of this House debating the topic, I do not intend to spend much time going over the history of the drug, which has been used to treat epilepsy and bipolar disorder since the early 1970s. For the benefit of anyone who is tuning in for the first time, I will go over the brief facts of what happened. The drug is teratogenic and was known to be teratogenic from the time it was first licensed. Despite that, doctors were initially advised that the risk did not justify

"discouraging a woman who needs anticonvulsant treatment from having a child or changing a satisfactory drug regimen when the epilepsy is well controlled."

The result has been that we have been playing catch-up ever since, with the Valproate Pregnancy Prevention Programme only being launched in 2018, following tireless campaigning from women affected, such as my constituent Janet Williams—who is in the Public Gallery—and her friend and colleague Emma Murphy.

It is difficult to calculate the number of children exposed to valproate in utero since its 1973 licensing. The Patient Safety Commissioner has made an estimate of around 14,000 for the period from 1972 to 2017 in England. Diagnosis often gets picked up when clinicians, or in some cases parents, recognise facial dysmorphic features. Children born with foetal valproate spectrum disorder can have a wide range of physical and mental health symptoms, including but not limited to weak muscles, visual problems, hearing difficulties, difficulties with balance, social anxiety, low energy, heightened sensitivity to noise and difficulties in regulating emotions. One of the biggest health conditions facing people with foetal valproate spectrum disorder is autism. A significant number also have attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, or ADHD, dyspraxia, sensory processing disorder and epilepsy.

It can affect children in very different ways. In some of the most severe cases—I know that the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has a constituent who is very severely affected—the individual can end up bedbound and very severely disabled. For some children, autism and sensory processing may be more of an issue.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the hon. Member for introducing this long-awaited debate. I have a constituent, Karen Buck, whose daughter, Bridget Doyle, was born paralysed, is bedbound and suffers from autism. The reality is that there are many victims out there who suffer from a variety of conditions, as the hon. Lady quite rightly points out—not least spina bifida, which she has not mentioned. The problem here is that legal aid for the court case, which was established to try to get recompense for those victims, was withdrawn some 20 years ago. Unfortunately, although commitments have been made time and again to help these people, these mothers are now advanced in age, and the children they have supported will desperately need support when their lives end. Does the hon. Lady think there is now a need for a proper compensation scheme?

Cat Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising the case of his constituent Karen and her daughter, Bridget. I agree entirely that the time is now. He raises an important point that because this scandal has been going on for so long—the drug was first licensed in the 1970s—the babies who were harmed are no longer babies or even children, but adults with disabilities, whose parents are getting older every year. When I speak to those parents, one of their biggest anxieties is about who will look after their children when they no longer can. That is why we need compensation to be paid out sooner rather than later, because it has frankly already been too long.

I turn to the case for compensation. The case for redress from the Government for the families affected by this maladministration has been conclusively made. This is not the first debate we have had in this Chamber on this matter, and there have been multiple reviews on it. In 2020, the Cumberlege review, established by the previous Prime Minister, Theresa May, found that

"the state and manufacturers have an ethical responsibility to provide ex gratia payments to those who have experienced avoidable damage".

These payments should be made to cover costs such as

"travel to medical appointments, respite breaks or emergency payments where a parent has to stop working to cover care."

I pay tribute to the former Prime Minister for her work on this issue, because she really is a doughty campaigner on this.

Liz Twist (Blaydon and Consett) (Lab): I also have constituents affected by the sodium valproate issue. I wonder whether she agrees that it is a double injustice—first, that the parents, Emma and Janet, had to fight to get recognition and change in the prescription of sodium valproate; and secondly, that they have to fight again to get compensation for the very real damage caused.

Cat Smith: I totally agree with my hon. Friend, but I would go further still. For parents of children with additional needs, the last thing they need is to be fighting a national campaign for justice. They already have enough on their plate trying to cope with their child and ensuring they are accessing the support they need without having to run a national campaign, but that has been the reality for many of the parents—primarily mothers—of children who have been harmed by valproate. That is exactly what they have had to go on and do.

I turn back to the history of the reviews into this scandal. The Conservative Government initially rejected the recommendation that I have just set out; however, in 2022, they had a change of heart when the then Health Minister, Maria Caulfield, tasked the patient safety commissioner with providing options for financial redress. That felt like a real step forward for the campaign at that point.

The commissioner produced the Hughes report in February 2024. It reiterated what we already know. It says:

"The Government has a responsibility to create an ex-gratia redress scheme providing financial and non-financial redress for those harmed by valproate".

The Hughes report recommended that the Government create a two-stage—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—*(Liam Conlon.)*

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Before I call the hon. Member to continue, I would just like to say what a pleasure it is to see the Clerk of the House at the Table for his last ever Adjournment debate.

Cat Smith: The Hughes report recommended that the Government create a two-stage financial redress scheme, comprising an interim scheme and a main scheme, with the interim payments commencing in 2025. Those who are paying attention will realise that it is now somewhat later than that. The commissioner further recommended that the payments be made by an independent body that commands the confidence of patients. That point is particularly important. The patients who have been harmed have lost so much confidence, so it is really important to have an independent body administering the scheme, to give them confidence in it being done properly.

Both the Cumberledge review and the Hughes report stressed the need for speed when responding to this issue. That is to a large extent, as the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) set out, due to the time and nature of the scandal. We now have a cohort of adults with foetal valproate spectrum disorder whose parents are finding it increasingly difficult to support their needs, due to their own health and care requirements.

Sadly, over two years on from the Hughes report, the Government have yet to formally respond to it, despite a clear recommendation that interim payments were to have commenced last year. The previous Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), gave a television interview with ITV Granada's Líse McNally in February this year in which he indicated that he wanted to commence compensation payments before the end of this Parliament. It is therefore troubling that, as set out in answers to parliamentary questions from me and colleagues, the Government's line today remains that

"a decision to provide compensation has not yet been made."

I want to touch on the responses that colleagues and I have been getting to our written parliamentary questions, because they are increasingly frustrating. It almost feels as though, when Ministers see a written parliamentary question come in with the word "valproate" in it, a stock answer gets lifted off the shelf and given to Members. Some victims have told me recently that they feel quite gaslit by some of the answers to written parliamentary questions; they keep referring back to the same answer. We really need to make progress on this issue.

Does the Minister understand the considerable distress that such uncertainty and inconsistency causes, and will she today make it unequivocally clear that the Government accept the case for financial redress for the victims of sodium valproate, and put in place a clear timetable for delivering financial redress?

My right hon. Friend is a good Minister and will want to do the right thing, but if she needs any more persuading, she can tune into BBC Two at 9 pm on 9 November and watch "Mums v Big Pharma", which was produced by the

same people who made the programme about the Post Office scandal. It shows the human cost of the scandal for so many families, some of whom are in the Gallery tonight. The programme is the perspective of two Lancashire mams who have absolutely had enough and are fighting for justice. If I know one thing about Lancashire women, it is that when we have got our teeth into something, we tend to stick at it, and we will persevere. That especially goes for Janet Williams, who has been campaigning for justice since 1996. It really is time that justice was brought forward for these victims.

In addition to the conversations I have had with victims of the scandal, I have heard concerns raised by those living in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, who feel that the Government have not engaged as well with victims in the devolved nations. Part of that will be because health is devolved to those nations, but although health is a devolved matter, the regulation of human medicines and medicinal products remains reserved. Those victims, too, deserve to be taken seriously and brought with English victims on that journey towards redress, both financial and non-financial. The Government have previously put in place UK-wide schemes for redress, such as for infected blood, and I know that the Minister is well aware of that. Will the Government therefore commit to working closely with victims from Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland, and with the devolved Administrations, on this matter?

Anna Dixon (Shipley) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for her campaigning on behalf of the victims of this scandal. Is she aware of the report from the Public Accounts Committee that makes recommendations about Government compensation schemes? We looked at schemes, including for the infected blood scandal, and our recommendations were that schemes needed to be designed with the victims, and that there should be independence, just as there is in the case of infected blood. I hope that the Minister, in responding, will take note of that report, and will say how such a compensation scheme could be set up that provides quick redress to victims, in the way that my hon. Friend hopes.

Cat Smith: I commend my hon. Friend for the work that she does, along with others, on the Public Accounts Committee. That report is right to stress both independence as a means of giving confidence to victims, and schemes being designed with victims. These families have already had so much done to them that it is important, when it comes to redress, that they are part of designing the solution. Part of redress, and of getting justice, is no longer having things done to them, and instead being part of designing the solution.

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): Apologies, Madam Deputy Speaker, for being late to the debate. The early start caught me somewhat by surprise. As my hon. Friend is aware—she may have touched on this already—the Hughes report is excellent. It gave a blueprint, right down to the amounts involved, for how a redress model could be put in place and facilitated. It has been over two years since the Hughes report. I know that there has been a change of Government, but this Government have been in for over two years now. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is about time the Government came forward and accepted the recommendations of the Hughes report?

Cat Smith: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work that she has done over a number of years on this issue. She has been a doughty campaigner on sodium valproate, and she has the confidence of many of the victims and is very well thought of. I entirely agree with what she says about the Hughes report. It is a very good report that should have been acted on already. It is frustrating that we have been waiting as long as we have.

There were many things in the report on redress, including on non-financial redress. As part of that, we have the pilot clinics in Manchester and Newcastle, which support children and adults who have been affected by valproate. They are pilots, however, unlike some of the other clinics. In the case of mesh, the clinics are permanent, and they are able to provide psychological support as well. The clinics for the victims of valproate are still in trial, and we do not have any outside the north of England. As a north of England MP, I am very glad that the clinics are local to me, but victims of valproate live right across the United Kingdom, and accessing support should not become a postcode lottery. Will the Government update the House on whether the clinics will be made permanent and perhaps expanded to cover a wider geography?

Finally, will the Minister meet me and victims, especially those from the campaign organisation INFACT, to discuss in detail the Government's long-term intentions in this area? Many of the victims feel that they have been in the dark about what is happening for an awfully long time. We have been in government since 2024, and the time has come; we can no longer drag our feet. Justice needs to be done, and redress needs to be put in place. The families affected are owed no less than that.

I am so glad that you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, because you, too, have been a doughty supporter of these victims, and I know that you are fondly thought of, especially by those in the Public Gallery, for your support on this. I am grateful for the interventions from Members on both sides of the House. This truly is an issue that cuts across party politics. Regardless of what colour rosette we wear, we cannot fail to see the injustice that has been done to these families. I would like it to be a Labour Government who deliver redress to these victims.

This scandal has been going on since the 1970s. The time for just talking about this has passed—we need to start acting. The families who have been affected are owed nothing less. I hope that in the Minister's reply, she will give them some hope, because I am told that hope is back. Let us make sure that means something, and let us have some hope from the Dispatch Box tonight.

5.10 pm

The Minister for Public Health and Patient Safety (Dame Diana Johnson): May I too say how nice it is to see the Clerk of the House in his place? I pay tribute to him for his long service in this place, and wish him the very best for the next chapter.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre (Cat Smith) on securing this important debate, and thank all hon. Members who have contributed on this sensitive and important topic. We have had important contributions from my hon. Friends the Members for Blaydon and Consett (Liz Twist), for Shipley (Anna Dixon)

[Dame Diana Johnson]

and for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), and the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman). You too, Madam Deputy Speaker, have been a long-standing supporter on this issue.

My hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre has been working tirelessly for many years on behalf of her constituent Janet Williams and all the campaigners and the families, including Emma Murphy, to whom she referred. We need to ensure that the voices of women and families are heard, and that they are at the heart of our discussions and debates. I agree with my hon. Friend about the perseverance of women, and there is clear perseverance here. I have been very moved by the stories I have heard, including before coming into office, and the more I look into this matter, the more tragic it appears to be. I will watch that television programme on 9 November that my hon. Friend referred to.

As my hon. Friend would expect, since becoming the Minister for Public Health and Patient Safety, I have been briefed by officials on the Hughes report and the progress we have made so far. Of course, I am happy to meet my hon. Friend and the families affected. I am also determined to make progress on the Government's response to the Hughes report, and I will of course work closely with devolved Governments in doing that because, as has been said, this affects all parts of the United Kingdom, so we need to work together. My predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Dr Ahmed), established a direct line with the Patient Safety Commissioner to start to drive this work forward. I think that was the right approach, and I look forward to meeting Professor Hughes shortly.

I am conscious that it has been more than two years since Professor Hughes published her report, and more than five years since the independent medicines and medical devices safety review was issued by Baroness Cumberlege. We know that the lives of women, children and their families have been profoundly changed. Their voices must be heard as we address these issues with the urgency demanded.

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): My constituent Matthew Cox has foetal valproate syndrome. This time last year, he wrote to the Prime Minister. It took several months for him to get a response. He wrote again to No. 10 in March, and I wrote to the Health Secretary in July. There have been no responses, and the response that Matthew did receive was not an appropriate response for someone with learning difficulties. Will the Minister take Matthew's case away specifically, and ensure that he gets the response he has been looking for? He and his mum welcome the hope that a new Labour Government brought on this; it is essential that we deliver for them.

Dame Diana Johnson: I will of course take that away. As a Minister, I have made it clear that we should respond in a timely way not only to Members of Parliament, but in other correspondence, and in a way in which people can understand what is being said to them. I absolutely take my hon. Friend's point.

Moving on, we are determined to build a system that listens, that hears and that will act, and we need to do that with speed, compassion and proportionality. As someone who has fought hard for the compensation due to the victims of the infected blood scandal, I fully understand the strength of feeling on this matter, and I can also appreciate the frustrations of the families and the campaigners. This is a complex and sensitive issue that requires careful co-ordination across Government.

The support we offer to those who have suffered profound harm must be meaningful and responsive to their needs. The Government are clear that those affected have already waited far too long for answers. While a decision has not yet been taken to provide financial redress, my priority is to drive these discussions forward with greater urgency, while ensuring that any decisions we take are underpinned by a thorough assessment of the available options, with continued engagement across Government. Our discussions so far have considered the scope, affordability and practical challenges of a redress scheme, so I will say a few words about non-financial redress.

Cat Smith: I seek some clarity. The Minister says that the decision has not yet been made, yet a previous Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the right hon. Member for Ilford North (Wes Streeting), told ITV that he was expecting financial redress by the end of this Parliament. Can the Minister just clarify that, because it seems inconsistent?

Dame Diana Johnson: My understanding of what the previous Secretary of State said is that he wanted to see progress within this Parliament. I am mindful of the Hughes report, which set out clear recommendations around redress, and I have just tried to set out that that is the avenue I am pursuing with some speed, looking at what the options are. I hope that that answers my hon. Friend.

Liz Twist: I know from the Minister's previous work that she will be conscious of the issues, but we are two years on from the Hughes report, which made it clear that we need to act. This is an important issue, and it feels like a group—primarily of women—are being left to one side to wait their turn or bide their time. Can the Minister assure me that she will be in the Department, making sure that we get a real answer on financial and other redress? I am sure she will be doing that, but we need to see some action.

Dame Diana Johnson: I fully understand and appreciate the frustration, because it has been two years since the report was published. I will do my very best. I know that my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South, who is in her place, was also looking at what more we could do to speed up matters. I give an undertaking to this House that I will do my very best to make sure that we make progress on redress and all the recommendations in the Hughes report.

Mrs Hodgson *rose—*

Dame Diana Johnson: I can see that my hon. Friend wants me to give way, and I am happy to.

Mrs Hodgson: I know that my right hon. Friend, with her experience of leading the infected blood campaign, is best placed to deliver for all these victims of mesh and valproate—maybe Primodos as well, although that was

not covered in the Hughes report. I would like to add one other thing to her list, if I may, and that is payments from big pharma to the health sector. They really do have to be disclosed. At the moment, they are ambiguous and misleading, and lump sum payments can hide a multitude of payments. Does she agree that, to prevent future injustices, it is time for the Government to enact a statutory approach to payment transparency in the health sector?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am very happy to discuss that with my hon. Friend and see what we can do.

I want to deal with non-financial redress. It is important to recognise that people need support now. The Department is working with the NHS to put in place a range of measures to support the women and their families, alongside action to strengthen the safe prescribing of sodium valproate. In February, on the second anniversary of the Hughes report, the Minister for Secondary Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth), set out how the Department is addressing their needs by improving the clinical services and treatment that patients receive, commissioning further research and initiating long-term preventive measures. I would like to update colleagues on those initiatives.

First, on the improvements to services and treatment, the number of women who have been prescribed sodium valproate has gone down since 2018, although there is a cohort who have already been affected and require specific treatment. We must ensure that our healthcare system is shaped around their needs and experiences. Shortly after the Government came to office, NHS England began operating the foetal exposure to medicines pilot service in hospitals in Manchester and Newcastle, to which my hon. Friend the Member for Lancaster and Wyre referred. The project is providing multidisciplinary assessments, diagnosis and treatment planning, and its findings will inform the way we do this at a national level.

The proposed extension of the pilot project includes setting up a third site and an independent evaluation of the pilot, because we should not be marking our own homework. That should give us the evidence we need to determine whether a nationally commissioned service could be implemented across England. This approach balances the need to improve support for affected individuals and families with the requirement to ensure that any future national service is evidence-based, clinically effective and financially sustainable.

Bob Blackman: It is good news that the Minister is considering a national proposal. Will she undertake to have a meeting with the long-suffering victims of this scandal, who have been caring for their children for many years without support, in such desperate times, to show her commitment to doing what needs to be done for them? I think she will learn quite a lot from such a meeting.

Dame Diana Johnson: Of course I will. I would be very interested in doing that and learning more, and I am sure my office will be in touch with the hon. Gentleman about that.

Secondly, on research and development, we are working with clinicians from the pilot and other experts to see how we can improve the services available to affected patients.

Finally, on prevention, NHS England and the Medicines and Healthcare products Regulatory Agency have introduced strict measures to minimise valproate exposure during pregnancy, including pregnancy prevention programmes, and prescribing controls and specialist counselling for women who may become pregnant while taking the medication.

Let me close by again paying tribute to all the families whose lives have been changed forever by sodium valproate and the other issues that were set out in the Hughes report around pelvic mesh. I hope I have made clear how determined we are to respond to the Hughes report with the urgency and the compassion that those families absolutely deserve.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I was overseas when the tributes to the Clerk of the House were made last week, so I would just like to correct the Minister: the Clerk of the House cannot be very long serving, because he is clearly an incredibly young man and far too young to retire. I add my thanks to him for all the support and help he has given me in this role.

Question put and agreed to.

5.23 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 29 October 2026

[Sir Alec Shelbrooke *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Major Trauma Centres: Helipads

1.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the potential merits of mandatory safeguarded 24/7 helipads at major trauma centres.

It is a pleasure, as always, to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec, and I say a big thank you to all the hon. Members for coming along today. I particularly thank the Minister, the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson), who has kindly agreed to step in and answer the debate, the subject of which is not her direct responsibility.

What always unites us is the fact that we come together on things that we see as good and necessary, and I am sure that everyone here would say the same. I thank the Backbench Business Committee for allowing us to debate this important issue relating to our urgent and emergency care system—hospital helipads, the barriers that can prevent them from being used when needed, and the case for a strategic national policy. The Minister already knows that I have three asks, but the main one is to have a strategic national policy. I welcome the Government's 10-year health plan, and I hope that such a policy will be part of it.

Perran Moon (Camborne and Redruth) (Ind): Cornwall Air Ambulance undertook almost 1,000 missions last year, many in my Camborne, Redruth and Hayle constituency. The front helipad directly outside the emergency department at Treliske hospital, which is the only general hospital in Cornwall, was closed in March 2023 and patients have since faced longer transfers, despite assurances that the rear helipad would be upgraded. Does the hon. Member agree that the Government must accelerate a permanent solution so that lives are not put at risk by avoidable delays?

Jim Shannon: The hon. Gentleman is right to underline that issue. I understand that he has a very dispersed community, and an air ambulance in that location can shorten journey times—I will mention this in my speech in relation to an issue back home. A journey that maybe takes an hour and a half by road can be done in 15 minutes in an air ambulance. That 15 minutes can save lives. An hour and a half in an ambulance fighting to save the person in the back sometimes just does not work.

I thank the Members who are here to support this debate. I also thank the all-party parliamentary group for air ambulances for bringing this important issue to Parliament in the past, and I am happy we can have this debate today for them. I acknowledge the work of Air Ambulances UK, which provides the APPG's secretariat, the HELP Appeal and the University of Liverpool's flight science and technology group in developing the evidence underpinning this work, alongside the UK's 21 air ambulance charities and the wider group of stakeholders who have contributed their expertise and support. I also thank Air Ambulance Northern Ireland for what it does. I can vouch for the air ambulances and the lives that they have saved. As I will explain later, I know people who live today because of AANI and the quick response of staff.

When someone is critically ill or seriously injured and needs specialist hospital care, can we be confident that the receiving hospital has the facilities they need that will be available when required? The same question applies during a major incident, as we have seen on several occasions this summer in my constituency and across this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, when hospitals needed to respond to a sudden surge in demand. For too many hospitals, that cannot be taken for granted.

Air ambulances across the UK play a vital role alongside the NHS in bringing specialist clinical teams to patients and helping transport them to the hospitals that are best equipped to treat them. That relates to an ask I have of the Minster, and I have shared that ask with other Members of the same mind. Across the United Kingdom, air ambulance charities attend an average 137 missions each day. For 365 days of the year, that is what they do. An estimated 23,248 helicopter missions take place annually, at an average cost of £4,748 per mission. That gives us an idea of the work they do, but there is also a cost factor, which is an important part of the debate. Those 137 missions, 365 days a year, represent around £110 million in annual costs.

Behind those figures are patients, families, clinicians and crews working in extremely difficult circumstances, but it is also important to recognise how these services are funded, and that is part of this debate. The UK's 21 air ambulance charities operate independently of the NHS and receive no day-to-day Government funding, but the people of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are incredibly generous. The charities rely on some £200 million in public donations each year to provide lifesaving pre-hospital care.

Despite that fact, public understanding of the independence of air ambulance charities remains limited. Research done in 2025 by Air Ambulances UK found that 53% of the public did not know that these charities operate independently of the NHS. However, they still depend on reliable NHS infrastructure, including hospital helipads, to transfer patients to the care they need. Their ability to deliver a consistent service is therefore affected by NHS infrastructure and operational arrangements beyond their direct control.

This is the thrust of the debate: when a helipad is unavailable, has restricted operating hours or cannot operate safely, additional challenges can arise in getting patients to the right place at the right time for treatment to save their lives. In some cases, staffing arrangements or restrictions outside normal operating hours can limit access even when a helipad already exists. This is an urgent and emergency care issue that requires co-ordinated leadership from the Government and the NHS.

I want to be clear that this is not a call for every hospital to have a 24/7 on-site helipad. I recognise that in Northern Ireland. I was asked by one of the officials whether we want a helipad in every hospital. No, we do not, but we want one at the Royal Victoria hospital in Belfast because that is the No.1 accident and emergency hospital. It has the surgeons, doctors and care available,

[Jim Shannon]

and from a regional point of view, that is what I am after. Decisions must reflect clinical evidence and operational requirements. We need national leadership and a consistent policy framework to support safe, reliable, 24/7 on-site hospital helipad access whenever there is a clear clinical and operational need, which must be informed by evidence.

I will focus on three practical areas: a national policy and implementation framework, or road map, to address inconsistent provision and establish a data-led approach to safe, reliable, 24/7 on-site access; clearer NHS standards and stronger planning safeguards; and a national emergency hospital helipad infrastructure contingency fund to support urgent infrastructure needs that cannot be met through charitable funding alone.

The APPG for air ambulances has launched a report, and I have no doubt that the Minister has had a chance to look at its recommendations. I commend the APPG members, some of whom are present, for what they have done in outlining the case for safeguarded, 24/7 on-site hospital helipads at major trauma centres and specialist hospitals.

Some hospitals need infrastructure improvements, and hon. Members will speak to that. Others face restrictions in operating hours, while some require further assessment of their clinical and operational needs. Although solutions may differ for the helipads in each hospital, they should be considered within a consistent national framework. One thing we hope to come from this debate is a national framework within the NHS 10-year plan, which I very much welcome—indeed, everyone in the Chamber does. Although the report provides an initial assessment of major trauma centres and specialist hospitals, the need for a national approach extends well beyond those sites.

Air Ambulances UK's assessment of 47 major hospital sites, updated on 10 September 2026—about six weeks ago—illustrates the scale of the issue. Six sites, or 13%, require priority action, while 16 sites, or 34%, require further action or monitoring, and 25 sites, or 53%, were assessed as being in a good position. That means that 22 of the 47 sites assessed were identified as requiring priority action, further action or monitoring. That is the target that we hope to achieve. The wider picture should be considered as the national policy develops. Air Ambulances UK's 2026 public survey found that 83% of respondents supported a national policy to ensure that major hospitals can receive air ambulance patients at any time via an on-site helipad.

I will tell the story about my introduction to Air Ambulance NI and the wonderful people who work there. I live in a village called Portaferry at the bottom of the Ards peninsula, where the AANI service is the thin line between life and death. If a child in Portaferry suffers a critical trauma or a sudden, life-threatening medical emergency, a blue-light ambulance land journey to the Royal Belfast hospital for sick children takes well over an hour, done safely and in the best road conditions, with no cars in front or behind. In a paediatric emergency, when every single second dictates a child's survival and long-term recovery, a 60-minute delay on a winding rural road is a luxury that those families simply do not have. I know some of the families in the Ards peninsula whose children's lives have been saved by the presence and response of Air Ambulance NI. When it comes to transferring a vulnerable child to the regional trauma centre in less than 15 minutes, they can do it—an ambulance on the road cannot.

We cannot allow this lifeline to be taken for granted. Securing robust, long-term funding for the air ambulance service is not a bureaucratic policy debate or something that will divide us in this Chamber. It is a moral imperative to protect the lives of our children in the most rural corners of Strangford. It is not just somebody being injured on a farm or having a road traffic accident; that can happen, but it could be a boating accident where the air ambulance comes to the rescue. Some of the air ambulance team are in the Gallery, and I thank them for all their information and comments.

I will refer next to Bristol. Given Bristol royal infirmary's role as a regional paediatric major trauma centre and a specialist children's hospital, the case for operating its helipad 24 hours a day, 365 days a year, should be properly assessed against clinical and operational need. That is important for all of us in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. Any policy must recognise the particular needs of major trauma centres and specialist hospitals while taking a broader view of the hospital helipad network across the United Kingdom.

Many other hospitals have helipads that support emergency transfers and wider patient pathways. A national policy must recognise their contribution and ensure that their operational requirements are not overlooked. The framework should provide a consistent way to assess clinical and operational need, taking account of each hospital's role, local circumstances and the consequences of restricted access. That means identifying where clinical and operational need justifies 24/7 access and understanding the barriers that prevent it, whether that relates to infrastructure, restricted operating hours, staffing or out-of-hours arrangements. Sometimes, it can be about planning issues relating to the safety of the helicopter coming to the helipad in the hospital. That may impact on the situation.

Decisions should be based on robust data. That would allow the Government and NHS partners to prioritise action proportionately, rather than adopting a blanket requirement for every hospital. The policy should identify where new infrastructure is required, where existing facilities need improvements, where operating arrangements create barriers, and where facilities need stronger protection from surrounding development, as I was saying. In England, the NHS 10-year health plan and the medium-term planning framework of 2026-27 to 2028-29 set out ambitions to improve care, reduce delays, strengthen productivity and support more integrated services. I welcome that—it is good news, and how could anybody not welcome it? That is the sort of programme and strategy that we want, but the new hospital programme and the UK's 10-year infrastructure strategy also provide a wider context for modernising and planning resilient infrastructure.

Tessa Munt (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): Thank you for chairing this debate, Sir Alec. I benefit from Dorset and Somerset Air Ambulance and the Great Western Air Ambulance. They are both fantastic, but they have raised concerns with me about existing helipads that they may not be able to use in future. Will the Minister—I ask him through the hon. Member for Strangford—

consider whether there needs to be some protection and development of the town and country planning direction 2002 so that flight paths are protected from development and infrastructure? It is not just the new hospitals that we need to be concerned about; we need to make absolutely certain that existing helipads can be accessed by the air ambulances.

Jim Shannon: The hon. Lady is right; that is the thrust of my contribution. I know that others will make contributions on that issue, including my colleague on my left, the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire).

Helipad provision should be considered as part of delivering on wider ambitions. Reliable access could support more direct transfers to appropriate special care, help to avoid unnecessary additional road journeys and ensure that hospital infrastructure reflects clinical and operational needs. As the hon. Lady mentioned, being operational means that helicopters need a free and safe path to where the helipads are. That is particularly relevant for major trauma networks, but also for the wider network of hospitals that receive air ambulance patients and contribute to emergency care.

I am conscious that other Members want to speak, and I want to ensure they have ample time to do so. I have three asks of the Minister. Will the Government commit to working with NHS partners and Air Ambulances UK to develop a national policy and implementation roadmap for hospital helipads, using clinical and operational evidence to identify where safe, reliable, 24/7 on-site access is needed, and address the inconsistencies in provision that we unfortunately have across the United Kingdom? We all know that the purpose of this debate is to come up with solutions, so we look to the Minister to help us to achieve our collective goals.

The Bristol example demonstrates that having a helipad does not necessarily mean that patients can access it at all times. Improvement is needed. Operational arrangements must be considered alongside the physical infrastructure. Where 24/7 on-site access is clinically and operationally necessary, we should expect the practical arrangements required to deliver it, including staffing, safe operating procedures and out-of-hours availability. That would help to ensure that the presence of a helipad translates into reliable access where patients need it.

There is also a need to protect existing and planned helipads from surrounding developments that could compromise safe operations. The planning around helipads and the flight paths for helicopters is an integral part of that. The Government should work with NHS England and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to review whether current planning arrangements provide sufficient protection and whether stronger safeguards are needed. That should include considerations to change the town and country planning direction 2002. That is not the Minister's responsibility; as so often happens, other Departments need to feed into this issue.

This is not about preventing development; it is about making sure that development can proceed in a way that does not impact unfavourably on air ambulances and helipads. It is about ensuring that planning decisions properly consider the operational requirements of hospital helipads and their role in supporting emergency care. Planning authorities and Departments should help to protect those facilities and provide greater certainty for hospitals that are planning for the future.

My second ask is: will the Government work with the NHS and MHCLG to establish clear expectations for hospital helipad provision and availability in the NHS estates standards and commissioning arrangements? That includes addressing staffing, restricted operating hours and out-of-hours barriers where 24/7 on-site access is clinically and operationally necessary, and strengthening planning safeguards to protect existing and planned helipads.

The Helicopter Emergency Landing Pads Appeal provides charitable funding for the vast majority of local hospital helipad projects and has made a vital contribution to developing and improving infrastructure. However, charitable funding cannot be expected to meet every urgent or emerging requirement. Charities should not be left to address every infrastructure gap through fundraising alone. The Government must—hopefully they will—consider establishing a national emergency hospital helipad infrastructure contingency fund, which would enable air ambulances to make the health delivered in the NHS even better. The funding could help projects that address barriers to safe, reliable, 24/7 on-site access where that access is clinically and operationally necessary. The fund should complement the HELP Appeal's work, not replace charitable investment.

Thirdly, will the Government consider establishing a national emergency hospital helipad infrastructure contingency fund to support urgent, evidence-based infrastructure requirements, including essential upgrades or new facilities, where safe and reliable 24/7 on-site access is clinically and operationally necessary, but where charitable funding cannot meet the need? The Government do not need to start this work from scratch; the APPG has done much of the hard work already. Its report and recommendations have established an initial national picture of provision at major trauma centres and specialist hospitals, and have identified areas requiring further action. The Government's next stage can build on that evidence and help to form a broader national approach that also considers other hospitals with helipads.

Lots of the spade work has been done. Air Ambulances UK represents and supports the UK's 21 air ambulance charities. The HELP Appeal also brings considerable experience of supporting hospital helipad projects and understanding infrastructure funding requirements. Both should be involved alongside NHS organisations. They all want to do the same thing and have the same objective, so we should bring them all together—they are all singing from the same hymn sheet. I believe that there is an opportunity to do this collectively. They should be involved alongside the relevant Government Departments to ensure that the resulting policy is evidence-led, proportionate and capable of being implemented and monitored. The objective should be a practical framework that recognises the difference between hospitals, identifies where action is needed and ensures that the contribution of the wider hospital helipad network is not overlooked.

While major trauma centres and specialist hospitals are a clear priority, the wider network of hospitals with helipads must not be overlooked either. The UK's 21 air ambulance charities provided lifesaving care through public donations, but their ability to transfer patients

[Jim Shannon]

depends on NHS infrastructure, which they do not control. There is a wider emergency care issue that requires Government and NHS leadership, and we need a data-led national policy to identify where safe, reliable, 24/7 on-site access is clinically and operationally necessary. It needs to address the gaps in provision, strengthen the NHS standards and planning safeguards, and support urgent infrastructure needs where charitable funding cannot meet the need.

In conclusion, this sector has provided substantial evidence and stands ready to help. I thank the Minister for all that she does for health and the campaigns that she has led over the years, which I have been honoured to support. I urge her to work with the NHS, Air Ambulances UK and the HELP Appeal to turn this debate into a practical, sustainable policy and implementation roadmap. I look forward to hearing other Members' speeches and the Minister's response.

1.53 pm

Jayne Kirkham (Truro and Falmouth) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Alec. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this debate. I am grateful to be able to speak today.

As the Member of Parliament for Truro and Falmouth, I know at first hand how indispensable our air ambulance services are to rural and coastal communities across Cornwall and the south-west. The reason I came to Cornwall was because I was married to a naval pilot who came to fly search and rescue planes for the Navy there. I remember one incident when I took my newly born baby to the crew room to eat broken biscuits with the crew. I went to the bathroom and when I came back, the baby was lying in the middle of the floor on his own—they had all gone out for a shout. That was quite a thing. Of course, that is no longer part of the Navy's job, and the hon. Member for Strangford talked about the charities that do this amazing work now.

The coastal and rural nature of Truro and Falmouth gives my constituency its beauty, but also makes it dangerous when someone injures themselves. When a critical incident occurs in Cornwall, whether it is on a rural road, a cliff path or one of our farms, the speed with which a patient can get to specialist clinical care can absolutely be the difference between life and death. Earlier this year, I wrote to the Secretary of State about fuel resilience and operational safeguards for our air ambulance charities. The basis of that message remains the same today: our air ambulances are an essential component of NHS emergency care pathways, and their operational needs must be treated with the seriousness and national policy support that they deserve.

Cornwall Air Ambulance is so well supported by the local population—it does a fantastic job—and now has two helicopters that have been fundraised by the local population, because we realise how crucial it is to our communities. That is why I strongly support the call in this debate for a consistent national policy to establish safeguarded 24/7 on-site helipad access at major trauma centres and specialist hospitals across the UK. In Cornwall, we have seen considerable local progress and investment in the Royal Cornwall hospital at Treliske. However, key challenges still remain locally, in ensuring that outstanding infrastructure works and the access routes at Treliske are concluded without delay, and in ensuring that operational access and refuelling, both on site and at bases such as Cornwall Airport Newquay, are fully supported and future-proofed.

When 83% of the public expect major hospitals to be able to receive air ambulance patients at any time via an on-site helipad, we cannot rely on a patchwork of local arrangements or leave critical infrastructure recommendations unfulfilled due to administrative transitions in trusts, for example, or highways authorities. A national policy will provide much-needed clarity on safeguarding helipads from surrounding planning developments, standardise how 24/7 clinical need is assessed and help to unlock target funding when charitable support needs national backing. That would have a lifesaving impact in Cornwall's rural and coastal communities. This is about equality of access, removing unnecessary transfer delays and ensuring that wherever someone falls critically ill in our country, the air ambulance crew can land safely on site, 24 hours a day, seven days a week. To conclude, I urge the delivery of a consistent national policy to safeguard vital landing sites and ensure that our air ambulance crews can continue saving lives across Truro and Falmouth, Cornwall, the south-west and the entire country.

1.56 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) on securing this vital debate.

The Cornwall Air Ambulance is a vital service for many of my North Cornwall constituents, many of whom live over 50 miles from their closest major hospital, and I am extremely proud that it is headquartered in my constituency—it was great to see its second helicopter recently. The air ambulance is critical to accessing uneven terrain that ambulances simply cannot drive over or reaching the most remote areas, ensuring that nobody is locked out of lifesaving care because of where they live. That is particularly vital in my North Cornwall constituency, with our vast moorland, rocky cliff lines and many remote villages. It is essential that we ensure that our emergency services are equipped to manage the rurality of our region, ensuring that urgent lifesaving care is not based on a lottery postcode.

The Cornwall Air Ambulance is on the frontline of getting people who may otherwise be stranded for hours to hospital for lifesaving treatment. It is also equipped with medical equipment and personnel who can save lives at the scene of an emergency. Cornwall's Air Ambulance chairman David Richards has described the air ambulances as "flying doctor services", offering far more than just transportation. I want to briefly highlight two cases that demonstrate the invaluable service that Cornwall's Air Ambulance provides.

In my North Cornwall constituency, 15-year-old Lewie received lifesaving care from the Cornwall Air Ambulance after falling from a cliff in Bude and becoming trapped in an inaccessible cove in the cold water. Lewie was hypothermic and drifting in and out of consciousness. He had suffered severe injuries, tearing two ligaments in his wrist, breaking his hand in three places, his thumb,

right elbow and right ankle, shattering the left side of his pelvis, breaking two of the seven plates in his neck, five of the 12 plates in his back and several ribs, suffered a punctured lung and lost half a kidney. Lewie credits the Cornwall Air Ambulance with saving his life that day, stating:

"I wouldn't be here without them".

After Lewie was winched to the clifftop by the coastguard, critical care paramedics onboard the air ambulance helicopter were able to administer pain relief, apply a pelvic binder and transfer him safely into the helicopter. While flying to the hospital they gave him high-flow oxygen and intravenous fluids because he had low blood pressure, reduced oxygen saturation and a weak pulse. Lewie's story demonstrates just how effective the Cornwall Air Ambulance is at not only transporting critical patients to the hospital but ensuring that they make it to the hospital in a stable condition.

Three-year-old Mia became unresponsive amid a sudden seizure while on a family holiday in Cornwall. A helicopter with two critical care paramedics and a doctor was able to land in a nearby field. Mia received lifesaving treatment on the roadside because her condition had worsened and she had suffered a second prolonged seizure while her family tried to rush her to the hospital. Mia's mother Carissa later said:

"I believe that Cornwall Air Ambulance saved Mia's life that day and I don't know what we would have done without them…You really don't know how much Cornwall Air Ambulance do and how much they are needed until it is you that needs them."

Representatives of Cornwall Air Ambulance have told us that they are deeply concerned about the delays to the works to aid access to the rear helipad at Royal Cornwall hospital, Treliske, in Truro. The delay has severely affected the service that Cornwall Air Ambulance can provide to people across Cornwall who rely on its lifesaving work. With the Treliske A&E helipad closed, landings now take place at the rear helipad and require a transfer by road of around 400 metres to the emergency department. That obviously introduces delays and safety risks in what are often life-critical situations for patients being flown in from across the region. It entirely undermines the strength and efficiency of our brilliant air ambulance service.

Additionally, increasing traffic and footfall around the site, including from nearby housing developments and additional car parking, will continue to place more and more pressure on the already constrained route. I and my Cornish MP colleagues, including the two in the Chamber for this debate—the hon. Members for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) and for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon)—have argued that there is a strong case for targeted transport interventions to ensure that patient transfers are as swift and as safe as possible. We have called for measures to be implemented that could provide secure, reliable access for ambulance transfers, including a safe road crossing from the helipad to the hospital.

Cornwall Air Ambulance has stated that the prolonged delays and more complex routes for transporting patients have imposed operational challenges on clinical teams, creating an additional burden that teams delivering critical urgent care should not have to face. It has said that improved collaboration between the NHS and regional air ambulance charities could help to create a more seamless process, increasing resilience to challenges through shared resourcing and more cohesive long-term planning.

Will the Minister please commit to call for more systematic and formalised collaboration between NHS teams and air ambulances, to ensure more cohesive and seamless care for patients arriving at hospital via air ambulance? Will she commission a report into the collaborative frameworks of the nation's air ambulance charities and their work with the NHS? Such a report should engage with regional charities and air ambulances across the UK to explore potential partnership structures. Finally, will the Minister please work with Cornwall Air Ambulance, Cornwall council and others to ensure that a safe crossing can be installed between the helipad and Treliske hospital?

On behalf of my constituents, I place on record my thanks and admiration for the whole team at Cornwall Air Ambulance, including the tireless clinical staff and the incredible volunteers and fundraisers. It is an incredible service that, quite unbelievably, does not receive any Government funding.

2.4 pm

Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I congratulate the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who represents a beautiful part of Ulster, on securing the debate. I thank him for doing so and for his keen interest in debates that I have secured in the past. I have one in Westminster Hall next Tuesday on train services; I hope to see him there.

When somebody is seriously injured, every minute matters. For people living in or visiting the most rural parts of my Cannock Chase constituency, getting to the right hospital can already mean a long journey. Air ambulances do an incredible job: they bring expert care to the people who need it most, often in the most frightening circumstances imaginable.

My husband's family have personal experience of this because, 20 years ago, when my niece was just a year old, she came down with a nasty pneumonia infection. It got to the point where she was in a critical condition and doctors said she needed to get to A&E as quickly as possible. I think there was some trouble on the roads that night, so she was taken by air ambulance from Evesham in Worcestershire all the way to the Royal Stoke university hospital. She had to be in hospital for a few weeks after that, such was the severity of that infection, but the air ambulance undoubtedly saved her life that day, and she lives to tell the tale as a brilliant 21-year-old.

In January, I went to the Cosford airbase, headquarters of the Midlands Air Ambulance Charity. I met its CEO, Hanna Sebright, and one of my constituency predecessors who is working with them. I heard about the challenges that the sector faces. Air Ambulances UK's review has identified significant gaps in hospital helipad provision across the country. Royal Stoke, which serves many of my constituents, has been given an amber rating, meaning that further action is needed. New Cross hospital in Wolverhampton has been given a red rating, meaning that priority action is required. That is genuinely concerning for patients.

[Josh Newbury]

New Cross does not currently have a hospital helipad, which means a patient who needs urgent specialist care might face a long journey by road, or air ambulance crews might need to fly them further to another hospital, as was the case for my niece. Every extra minute matters, so the longer a crew spend getting from one hospital to another, the longer they may be unavailable to help the next person who needs them.

We have seen a similar problem at Birmingham children's hospital, which provides specialist major trauma care for children right across the west midlands, including Staffordshire. There is no helipad at the hospital, meaning that children brought in by air ambulance need a further road transfer, just like that described by the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire), typically adding 10 to 15 minutes to the journey. That is despite the fact that the hospital sits right next to Queen Elizabeth hospital Birmingham, which has a helipad.

For families facing what might be the most frightening day of their lives, those are precious minutes. In some cases, crews from Staffordshire might need to consider flying a child to Alder Hey children's hospital in Liverpool, because that often offers a quicker route to getting the care they need. I am very concerned about that. These are hospitals that people across my region and in the wider west midlands rely on at the worst moments of their lives.

Where a helicopter cannot land directly, patients might need to be transferred. As we have heard, that can have disastrous consequences. For someone with, for example, a serious head injury, major trauma or another life-threatening condition, this is the time we should be doing everything we can to save their life. I think about my constituents in our rural villages who are already likely to be further away from emergency services. They deserve the same confidence as anyone that, if the worst happens, everything possible is being done to get them the right treatment quickly.

I know how strongly people in Cannock Chase feel about access to healthcare. We have lost our minor injuries unit, so local people know what it means when a service they once relied on is no longer there. That is one reason why I am really pleased to see this Government's focus on improving access to healthcare, including through neighbourhood health centres, because bringing services closer to people's homes really matters. I welcome that ambition.

However, we also need to think about what happens when someone needs emergency treatment that cannot be provided locally. Our neighbourhood services must be backed up by hospitals that can receive patients quickly day or night. A helipad that cannot be used around the clock can leave a gap in that journey, and when an emergency happens at 2 am, a patient cannot wait until the hospital's facilities are fully up and running.

I appreciate that not every hospital has the same needs. We have heard very different cases from across the country, but we should have a clear understanding of which hospitals need helipads, which need improvements to their helipads, and which have facilities that cannot be used at all hours. We also need to make sure that recommendations are followed through. If an assessment identifies a problem, there should be a plan to address it, rather than the same concerns appearing in report after report, which we have seen for many years.

I too have a few questions for the Minister, which echo some of what she has already heard this debate. Will the Government look at a clearer national approach to hospital helipads, so that hospitals and the NHS trusts that look after them know what is expected of them when it comes to access around the clock? Will the Minister work with relevant trusts to look at the concerns raised around Royal Stoke and New Cross, and make sure that any necessary improvements are properly considered? Will the Government look at how essential helipad improvements might be funded where charities cannot meet the full cost?

Nobody wants to think about the moment in which a family member is seriously injured and an air ambulance has to be called, but those moments do happen. When they do, people need to know the system is ready for them. For my constituents in Cannock Chase, particularly those living in rural communities—or those in trouble in the forest itself—this is about knowing that that distance will not count against them when they need urgent care.

We are right to focus on bringing more healthcare closer to home, but we must also make sure that, when people need specialist and emergency treatment, there is a clear and reliable route to get them there. Thanks to air ambulances, that is often the case—they often step in and do incredible things for our constituents. If they can save someone's life, we should be doing everything we reasonably can to make sure that a hospital is ready for them when they arrive.

2.9 pm

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec. I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing this important debate, which is very timely because exactly this issue is affecting my local hospital. I want to tell Members about it, but I first want to set the scene by reiterating some of the things that other hon. Members across the House have already said. When someone is critically injured, every single minute—in fact, every single second—counts. Air ambulances, with an average journey time across the country of 17 minutes, can get patients seen by specialist doctors and nurses as quickly as possible. That is why it is critical that major trauma centres have helipads that are open 24/7.

Tessa Munt: I went out with the South Western ambulance service to a cycle accident in my constituency, where a young man had fallen off on a road and was unconscious. When the air ambulance came, the doctors on board were able to stabilise him. I then went with him in the ambulance to the hospital in Bath. Air ambulances can sometimes stop the progression of injuries as well as take people to hospital. They are brilliant.

Marie Goldman: My hon. Friend makes an important point. Air ambulances have specialist expertise on board, so they do not just provide transportation; they provide lifesaving interventions along the way.

The advantage of the speed of an air ambulance can be completely lost if it cannot land on top of a hospital. Broomfield hospital, run by the Mid and South Essex foundation trust, is the main hospital that serves my

Chelmsford constituency—it is not in my constituency, but it is just outside it—and it has a helipad. I pay huge tribute to Essex and Herts Air Ambulance; the crews and the communities that fund it are doing absolutely phenomenal work. However, when I met representatives from the air ambulance, they told me that every day when they do their briefing to the crews, they hold their breath a little bit and roll their eyes, because they know the answer to the question, "Will Broomfield's helipad be open for long today?" is usually no.

Frustratingly, I have tried to persuade Mid and South Essex foundation trust to work with Essex and Herts Air Ambulance, Air Ambulances UK and the HELP Appeal to implement a solution—which does exist; it is just about getting the will for it—but I have met with so much reluctance from the hospital trust to do that or even to have meetings and listen to the problem. I get pushback and pushback, and it is incredibly frustrating. That is one of the reasons why we need to have national leadership on this issue. Although we can individually try to influence it, sometimes we just get pushback.

I know that hospitals and hospital leaders are under lots of constraints, but the solution seems so obvious when we already have a helipad at Broomfield hospital. Yes, it needs upgrading, but there is a solution for that, and yes, it needs to be staffed, but there is a solution for that. Getting pushback from the hospital itself is incredibly frustrating. I should say that Broomfield hospital is a major trauma centre, and its helipad is listed in the APPG report as one that needs to be open 24/7—but it is not. The hospital also has a specialist burns unit, so it is part of the national asset list. Of course, with burns, like so many other things, the speed of treatment is incredibly important.

When Essex and Herts Air Ambulance helicopters cannot land on top of the hospital, they have to go elsewhere. Their alternative landing site is Chelmer Valley high school, which is a few minutes down the road. There is a lot of traffic around the hospital a lot of the time, which adds to journey times, but landing there also means that an ordinary ambulance has to come to meet the helicopter. That takes up the time not just of an air ambulance, but of an ordinary road-based ambulance.

There were 12 or maybe even 14 road-based ambulances queuing up at the A&E department at Broomfield hospital just a few days ago. Members will know that we are not awash with loads of ambulances. If an ambulance's time is being taken up unnecessarily—or necessarily, as it turns out, but it should not be the case—by having to meet an air ambulance, then it is not available to do other work. That ambulance transfer is also estimated to cost anywhere between £200 and £600 per journey. That is crazy. We are throwing away money when, if we just got the helipad at Broomfield open 24/7, it would be so much better.

Burns patients sometimes do not even end up coming to Chelmsford; they end up going to Thames Valley instead, which I find ridiculous. We also need to think about national security and the assets that are around London. Broomfield is not very far from our capital city. If there were a major incident in London, Broomfield hospital, just outside Chelmsford, would surely be one of the centres asked to respond, so having its helipad open would make so much sense.

Other hospitals in the east of England—I am an east of England MP—are also in the report, such as Addenbrooke's, which has a red rating because it has serious problems with 24/7 access. It is the only major trauma centre for more than 6 million people, and yet new building on its own campus is set to make its helipad inoperable. How mad is that? We have invested in a helipad, and then we are saying, "Oh no, let's just build some more houses around it and stop it operating." That does not make any sense whatsoever. We have invested public funds in this, and we are wasting them.

The scale of the problem is set out in the APPG report and by the hon. Member for Strangford, so I will not go through all of it. I know that others have highlighted rural issues, but this is not only a rural problem: none of the three London hospitals assessed has 24/7 helipad access. My word, what are we doing? Why does this access matter for patients? It matters a lot: a Kent, Surrey and Sussex study identified five extra survivors for every 100 patients treated at a hospital with a 24/7 helipad. That is a pretty good case for doing something about it, surely.

We have talked about planning and the Government's position, but we need central data so that we understand exactly what is going on. The APPG has actually done loads of the hard work, as has Air Ambulances UK. I want to massively thank the air ambulance crews, and the public for funding them. Members across the House have said that this should not be a matter of charitable funding alone. We do, but should not, rely on the charitable sector to step in all the time for these sorts of things. Yes, the sector can help, but it should be helped by Government as well.

Air ambulances are obviously experiencing the increase in fuel prices, which is massively putting up their costs. London Air Ambulance's fuel costs have gone up by 116%. That is huge and so difficult; think of the extra fundraising that needs to be done to cover it. We need to step in and make sure that all the fuel being used is taking patients directly to hospital, not elsewhere. What would the Liberal Democrats do? We would integrate air ambulances into the NHS emergency response through a national commissioning framework, while keeping their charitable fundraising status. That would expose and fix exactly the problems that I have mentioned. Of course, we also need to end ambulance handover delays, but helipad access is a very specific problem.

I have some questions for the Minister. Will the Government collect and publish 24/7 helipad data for every trauma centre? Will hospital helipads be safeguarded in planning, like aerodromes are? Specifically, what is being done to keep Addenbrooke's helipad operational? That is a really important question for the east of England in particular. Will the Minister help me get the helipad at Broomfield hospital open 24/7 as well? If she or one of her colleagues would be willing to meet me on that subject, I would be very grateful. Will the Government also publish how many air ambulances are at risk of closure or of cutting services because of the challenges they face?

I want us to recognise that hospital helipads are absolute lifelines. Survival should not depend on whether a helipad happens to be open at that time of day, or on where people live, and yet that is what is happening at the moment. Patients—our constituents—deserve better.

2.19 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Alec, and to be speaking on behalf of the official Opposition in this debate called by everybody's friend, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—the Member of Parliament above all others for whom the term "indefatigable" could have been coined. It is a very important debate, and I commend him on the clarity of the three asks that he has put to the Government; we look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

On an average day, air ambulances undertake 137 missions. We have heard in the debate about the great work of air ambulances across the country. The hon. Member specifically mentioned their work at Strangford lough at the end of the Ards peninsula. It is a part of the world that he knows I know well and is a very good illustration of the importance of being able to move people quickly when the roads are slow to pass.

In my constituency of East Hampshire, we are very lucky to have a fantastic team at the Hampshire and Isle of Wight air ambulance, which can reach almost anyone in Hampshire or on the island within 10 minutes from take-off from its new airbase and headquarters at Southampton airport. They have flown 907 missions so far this year. In the single month of August, their doctors, pilots and paramedics responded to 250 missions. During the August bank holiday weekend, the teams were deployed eight times a day on average, coming to the rescue in the aftermath of car crashes, cardiac arrests and accidental injuries.

I know all Members join me in commending the work and generosity of air ambulance charities and their supporters. The supporters are very important. As a number of colleagues have mentioned, air ambulances are not part of the national health service; they are charities. Yet, as the hon. Member for Strangford highlighted, most people do not know that they are independent from the NHS. I hope that this debate plays a part in addressing that lack of awareness.

Fundraising is a vital activity for air ambulances. It costs the Hampshire and Isle of Wight service £17,750 a day to keep their vital service operational. They are particularly creative fundraisers—from the clothes recycling points and the charity lottery to "brew for the crew" coffee mornings and the "dash in the dark" and many corporate and commemorative fundraising initiatives. I commend everyone involved with the Hampshire service and with air ambulance charities right across the country for their amazing—indeed, in many cases, lifesaving—efforts.

In code red cases, where there is a medical emergency such as cardiac arrest or internal haemorrhaging, the minutes saved by air ambulances can really make the difference between life and death. When a patient has suffered skeletal head, chest or abdominal injuries and local hospital facilities are not sufficient, air ambulances can fly the injured to major trauma centres that would take a long time to reach by road. Of course, for this to work, hospitals need suitable helipads for crews to take off and land, and here lies the issue that we are discussing today.

Research from the all-party parliamentary group for air ambulances—I thank those who support that group, some of whom are with us today—highlights that access to safeguarded on-site hospital helipads is inconsistent across the country. More than a third lack either 24/7 access or an operational helipad. When helicopter transfers are not possible, it then costs hundreds of pounds in secondary ambulance transfers, with delays to care leading to longer hospital stays and more intensive treatment.

In 2019, Health Ministers allocated £10 million to nine ambulance charities supporting air ambulance services to move towards 24/7 operations and improve seven airbase facilities. During the pandemic, we provided £6 million of emergency funding to air ambulance charities to help them with the pressures they were then facing.

Members often speak about postcode lotteries and it is a phrase that has come up again today. Given the nature of the incidents that air ambulances respond to, patchwork coverage really can make the difference between life and death. It is one of the most sharply important postcode lotteries to address. Since taking office, what have the Government done to reduce unwarranted variation in emergency care by place? Specifically, what are they doing to provide the reliable infrastructure that air ambulances need?

A written question was posed to the Minister in the other place asking whether the Government had considered a contingency fund to secure future helipad provision. The response was that a fund was not under consideration and NHS organisations must consider competing priorities within available resources. Can the Minister confirm that the Department of Health and Social Care underspent its capital departmental expenditure limit by some hundreds of millions of pounds in the last financial year? Was any of the underspend considered for helipad projects?

We talk about prioritising within available resources, but overall, people working in the health service note that available resources are reducing. Integrated care boards are pencilling in cuts to services and NHS trusts are planning to axe many jobs. Yesterday's Budget deepened the cuts to the NHS to around £1 billion of capital cuts over the next four years. Can the Minister tell us what the impact of that will be? Which programmes will be cut and, specifically on the subject of this debate, what are the implications for helipad capital?

To ensure that no good deed goes unpunished, this Government decided to reward air ambulance charities with a new jobs tax. For every employee on average earnings, air ambulance charities, alongside others of course, must pay an extra £900 to HMRC. Is the Minister willing to raise the plight of air ambulances with Treasury Ministers? Does she think it is wrong that money that has effectively come from charitable donations should have to be diverted to help pay for the cost of the previous Chancellor's mismanagement of the public finances?

As colleagues have noted, air ambulances are also suffering the consequences of soaring energy prices. The cost of aviation fuel surged more than 80% this spring, adding tens of thousands of pounds to air ambulance charities' annual fuel bills. Earlier this summer, my right hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins) wrote to the Government asking Ministers to ensure that air ambulances are included in fuel resilience planning and recognised in NHS emergency services fuel access arrangements. Can the Minister update Members on actions taken by her Department since receiving that correspondence?

The Government rightly have high ambitions for the health service: reduced ambulance times, shorter hospital waits, faster discharges. We of course share those ambitions, but there is a huge gulf between where the NHS is now on some of those key performance indicators and where we all want it to be. The National Audit Office estimates that 1.2 million patients waited between 12 and 24 hours in A&E last year. NHS waiting lists have been climbing, with the number of trauma and orthopaedic cases with a decision to admit higher than at the time of the change of Government.

Charities providing critical medical transport are having to cope with the weight of the extra taxes from the Government on top of those pressures from high energy prices. In this debate, Members from across the House have called on the Government to act by putting forward a clear framework and road map for hospital helipads, establishing clear standards for NHS estates and exploring options for financial support so air ambulances can afford to stay in the air and keep saving lives. Again, I commend the hon. Member for Strangford for the clarity with which he set out his three asks.

I urge the Minister to listen to air ambulance charities, their supporters and all those who are delivering high-quality emergency care. We look forward to her response.

2.28 pm

The Minister for Public Health and Patient Safety (Dame Diana Johnson): As always, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Alec.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) for securing the debate—he must contribute to more debates than any parliamentarian I have ever come across—and for giving us the opportunity to discuss the important role that hospital helipads play in supporting urgent and specialist care. My hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care, who has responsibility for this policy area, is always happy to meet Members, in particular the hon. Member for Strangford, and I know she will look at *Hansard* to read the contributions of other right hon. and hon. Members.

The hon. Member for Strangford is a long-standing supporter of air ambulance services. He has regularly talked about their importance, particularly for rural and coastal communities, where the geography can make it harder to reach patients quickly. In his excellent opening speech, he paid tribute to the important and vital work of the air ambulance service in Northern Ireland. I too recognise its invaluable work.

I also recognise the work of the air ambulance charities around and across the United Kingdom, which provide a vital service helping seriously ill or injured people. Across England, air ambulance charities carry out more than 50,000 missions each year. I am very grateful to everyone who works and volunteers in the sector, and to the communities that support them. As a Yorkshire MP, I have to give a shout-out to my local air ambulance—Yorkshire Air Ambulance—for its brilliant work.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) asked about the Royal Cornwall hospital. Although decisions on capital investment are a matter for local NHS systems, I understand that work is under way to look at options to improve the air ambulance access at the hospital. I also understand that the hospital is investigating alternative options so that coastguard helicopters can land safely.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) talked about the necessity of the service in rural and coastal areas. She and a number of other Members raised fuel resilience. We routinely engage with air ambulance charities on contingency planning, and as part of that we have addressed fuel resilience. The Government will continue to work with fuel suppliers to make sure that essential services are supported.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) said that Cornwall Air Ambulance is based in his constituency. He brought the whole debate to life when he talked about 15-year-old Lewie, who suffered horrific injuries, and about how the service saved his life. He also talked about how important the service was when three-year-old Mia had a seizure. I send my best wishes to them both—I am sure all Members would like to do the same—and I hope they have made good recoveries.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) gave the example of a family member—I think it was his niece—who needed an air ambulance. I was pleased to hear that she is now 21, and hopefully she is in good health. There were some very good contributions to the debate. I heard what the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) said about Essex & Herts Air Ambulance, and the issues with the local hospital. I will relay those points to the Minister for Secondary Care.

I recognise the concerns raised by hon. Members and the all-party parliamentary group for air ambulances. The points are well made. In June, the APPG published its report making the case for safeguarded 24/7 on-site hospital helipads at major trauma centres and specialist hospitals, which is a very good piece of work.

We all accept that getting seriously ill or injured patients to the hospital quickly matters. Air ambulance teams work alongside NHS ambulance service and hospitals to provide specialist care at the scene and help patients to reach specialist treatment quickly. We also need to think about what happens when the aircraft reaches the hospital. If direct landing is not available, a patient may need an onward transfer by road ambulance, which can add time to the journey and place additional demand on ambulance vehicles and crews.

Alternative landing sites are an important part of resilience when a hospital helipad is unavailable, so clear local arrangements are needed to minimise delays. Hospital helipads therefore have an important role to play, but the current picture is not the same everywhere. Helipad provision has developed locally, over many years. There has not been a single national approach setting out where helipads should be provided, what the provision should look like and how it should be funded.

Currently, responsibility for hospital helipads sits with local NHS organisations, working with planning, aviation and local authority partners. Decisions about investment, including improvements to allow night-time operation, are generally made locally, as part of a wider NHS estates and capital planning programme. But I recognise the arguments made today that we need to look again at whether those arrangements remain right for the future.

[Dame Diana Johnson]

NHS England has identified challenges, including changing aircraft and aviation standards, secondary ambulance transfers, and differences in landing infrastructure. Work has also started to strengthen safety arrangements. Following the tragic incident at Derriford hospital, NHS England worked with His Majesty's Coastguard, the Department for Transport and the Civil Aviation Authority to strengthen assurance. Sites are now required to have a named accountable manager, a site-specific risk assessment and a helipad operating manual. Chief executives have been asked to confirm that appropriate safety standards are being met.

NHS England continues to work with the air ambulance sector and regularly meets the DFT and Air Ambulances UK. It also takes part, when needed, in the onshore surface landing group, which brings together organisations including the Civil Aviation Authority, the DFT and the devolved nations.

I want to be clear about what we are doing next. I am pleased to announce that the Minister for Secondary Care has instructed the Department of Health and Social Care and NHS England to scope a strategic review of air ambulance resilience, including hospital helipads and landing sites. That work is starting, and I do not want to pre-empt what it may find or any recommendations that it may come up with. It will give us the opportunity to look at current landing facilities, onward transfers, future clinical and aircraft requirements, and the condition of existing infrastructure.

The hon. Member for Strangford rightly recognised that different hospitals have different clinical needs, geography, landing arrangements and planning constraints, and that the same solution will not be right for every site. I agree that any future approach needs to be proportionate and informed by clinical and operational need.

Let me turn to the concerns, raised by a number of hon. Members and the APPG, about the impact of the planning system—

Jim Shannon: I want to clarify one wee matter. First, I very much welcome the national review that the Minister has described. On some occasions, there are issues with planning. Will the national review be able to address specific issues and ensure that, where there may be planning objections, there can be an arrangement to ensure that helicopters can safely access helipads? We would not want to see planning holding that up.

Dame Diana Johnson: I will set out the position on planning. The Government share the concerns about the potential impact of new developments on the operation of hospital helipads. That is why our new national planning policy framework, published in August, makes it clear that existing public services should not face unreasonable restrictions on their operation because of development that takes place around them.

The framework is clear that where a new development could be affected by an existing activity nearby, the impacts should be identified and suitable steps taken to address them. It also gives substantial weight to the benefits of new or improved public service infrastructure, including healthcare facilities. Work is happening on that now, and I am sure that if the hon. Gentleman wants to discuss it further, we will be able to facilitate that.

Work is happening on aviation standards, too. The CAA's civil aviation publication 1264 provides guidance on the design and operation of hospital helicopter landing sites. This matters, because safe access depends not just on having a landing site but on whether an aircraft can use it safely. The guidance is not currently mandatory, but the DFT and the Civil Aviation Authority are working towards the formal regulation of hospital landing sites, which is currently expected around 2028.

NHS England and the DFT are also working to build a clearer picture of which hospital landing sites comply with the existing guidance. Currently, helicopter operators make their own decisions about where they can safely land. That can depend on things such as the aircraft being used, the weather and the obstacles around a landing site. The DFT is working with NHS England, the CAA, the air ambulance sector and His Majesty's Coastguard on those issues. There is obviously much more work to do, and I absolutely recognise the concerns raised in the debate and through the APPG report.

The Opposition spokesperson, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), asked about capital spend in previous years, and I will have to write to him about that. On his comment about announcements in the Budget, our contribution to the defence investment plan, including at the extended level set out yesterday, will avoid impact on frontline NHS services, patient safety, investment in technology and the delivery of the new hospital programme.

Ben Maguire: I am pleased to hear about the review the Minister has announced. Can she give us any sense of a timeline for when that review might conclude?

Dame Diana Johnson: I am not the Minister for this policy area, but I will ask my hon. Friend the Minister for Secondary Care what information might be available about timescales. I understand Members' interest as to when the review might conclude.

We have had a useful debate and I am very grateful to the hon. Member for Strangford for bringing the debate before the House. I again thank the APPG's members and the air ambulance sector for all their continued excellent work.

2.42 pm

Jim Shannon: I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions.

The hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (Perran Moon) set the ball going with his contribution. He referred to the 600,000 people in and around his constituency and the need to have the helicopter and air ambulance available. The Minister was kindly in her positive response to that intervention.

The hon. Member for Wells and Mendip Hills (Tessa Munt) referred to safe routes for air ambulances coming into helipads. She rightly set the marker down in raising the impact of future development. Again, the Minister responded to that point, and we thank her for that.

I thank the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Jayne Kirkham) for her contribution. She shared personal knowledge of how her local air ambulance is an essential part of the NHS, and spoke about quality of access, planning and development.

The hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) referred to the air ambulance headquarters in his constituency. He is doing extremely well for the air ambulance. He spoke of access to uneven terrain, clifftops and dispersed moorland, and described it as the "flying doctor service". That is what it is.

The hon. Gentleman also gave two supreme examples of how the air ambulance saved young 15-year-old Lewie and three-year-old Mia. My goodness, if we ever need a story to illustrate the case, it is the examples Members give from their constituents. Those are lives saved. I could give similar examples of my own constituents —all Members probably could—because we all know people who are alive and walking around the streets in our constituencies today, still with their families. I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. He also referred to better NHS and air ambulance co-ordination, with partnership structures in place. All those things are incredibly helpful.

The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) shared examples from his own life, including the supreme example of his niece, who is alive and well today because of the air ambulance. Examples like that convince us all of why we are here and the importance of these debates. He also referred to country roads, how different hospitals have different needs, how we need clearer approval for helipads and how trusts need to work together with the air ambulance.

The hon. Member for Chelmsford (Marie Goldman) shared the problems she is having with her own trust. She said that the NHS should work better with the air ambulance. I always say that it is our job to find solutions, and the hon. Lady referred to solutions. Helicopters need helipads. It can often be a problem for an ambulance to reach an incident safely by road, but there would be no need for that if there were a helipad. The hon. Lady gave the figures for that too.

The shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for East Hampshire (Damian Hinds), is always very kind with his comments. We are all here for the same purpose: to try to help our people. His air ambulance service has flown 907 missions this year, including eight times in one day. My goodness, them guys are on overtime, if there is any in the air ambulance, though there probably is not. The right hon. Gentleman illustrated the cost of running the service in his constituency. We need a plan for helipad funding in the next year. To be fair, the Minister gave the shadow Minister some of the answers he sought. We appreciate that. He also requested a clear standard and financial support.

I will move on to my conclusion, Sir Alec. I am mindful that although I have 14 minutes to speak, usually we only get two minutes to wind up no matter how long is left, so you have been very kind. I thank the Minister incredibly much for her positive response. I do not want to give her a big head, but she always tries to encourage us all. We come here as MPs to fight battles on behalf of our constituents. That is the job that they task us with. I am always at peace whenever a Minister gives us some of the answers that we sought, and today, the right hon. Lady did that.

The Minister referred to the importance of air ambulance charities across England, and the 50,000 missions flown each year. She also referred to fuel resilience for air ambulances, and the ongoing discussions among air ambulances and the NHS. On air ambulance access to helipads and the national approach, work has started to address some of the outstanding improvements. The Minister then gave us the one that we really hoped for: the national review of air ambulance services, their resilience and helipads. We thank her for that.

The Minister referred to the new planning policy framework, and the hon. Member for North Cornwall sought the timescale; although not responsible for that, I know that the Minister will seek to get a timescale. Whenever I go to a meeting, whether it be with the roads service or hospitals, they always tell me what they are going to do and I say, "When will it happen?" That is the question. Today, we ask, "When will it happen?" but we have been very privileged to have had such a responsive Minister. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions. As always, I thank the civil servants who keep the Ministers right, and I thank the Hansard Reporters for their patience with this boy from Northern Ireland who speaks at 100 miles an hour.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the potential merits of mandatory safeguarded 24/7 helipads at major trauma centres.

2.49 pm

Sitting suspended.

Ofcom

[Sir Desmond Swayne in the Chair]

[Relevant documents: Second Report of the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee, The regulation of postal services, HC131, and the Government response, HC624.]

3 pm

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the role and effectiveness of Ofcom.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir Desmond. Ofcom's mission is to make communications work for everybody. According to the Ofcom website, it helps people to get the most from their post, mobile, broadband, landline and online services, as well as

"keeping an eye on TV and radio."

Yet as our methods of communication have broadened and the pace of technological change has increased, I have become increasingly concerned that Parliament has repeatedly given Ofcom new responsibilities without first asking whether it has the powers, resources or institutional culture necessary to fulfil those it already had.

In preparation for this debate, I spoke with Citizens Advice, which raised concerns that Ofcom's principal duty to further the interests of citizens, in relation to communications, and consumers, in relation to markets, creates a bias against intervention, meaning that action to protect consumers is often delayed, limited or treated as a last resort. I will focus on four areas: broadcasters, scam calls and messages, broadband infrastructure, and—I apologise, as this is the third parliamentary debate on this in a week—Royal Mail. Although those areas appear different, they all point to the same question: does Ofcom have the powers, appetite and focus to fulfil the role that Parliament expects it to?

As we know, UK broadcasters are rightly respected around the world. Although the media landscape has become more complex, any organisation wishing to operate on television or radio must be subject to Ofcom regulation. The Ofcom broadcasting code is not optional, and it exists to protect the public from harm. Section 2 of the code covers harmful and offensive material, and section 3 covers content likely to incite crime or disorder. Those sections are crucial. We have all seen what happens when dis and misinformation published online or on TV spills over into violence in our communities. Just last year, Ofcom found that GB News breached the code by broadcasting discriminatory misinformation that linked LGBT people with paedophilia, yet only a year later, we see further investigations being made into similar GB News content that makes highly offensive claims about LGBT people. The fact that such behaviour is occurring again, on the same channel, so soon after regulatory action raises serious questions about whether that intervention was effective in the first place.

Section 5 of the code covers impartiality and accuracy. Constituents regularly raise issues on that, and, I will be honest, those are not related just to GB News. Some people believe that the BBC has a left-wing bias, while others believe that it has become increasingly right wing—some might say that that suggests the BBC has got it about right. I have found myself shouting at the TV, particularly during certain programmes, asking why the outrageous comments made by one commentator or another have not been shown. I am regularly asked why the activities of certain parties that have only a handful of MPs seem to get disproportionate coverage, and whether the media are now more interested in ratings than in impartiality on current affairs.

But I am afraid that allegations made against public sector broadcasters such as the BBC pale into insignificance when compared with the regulation of GB News. A recent investigation, involving experienced journalists and specialists in the field, reviewed GB News's output and found repeated examples of content that they considered inconsistent with the Ofcom code, yet in many cases, no regulatory action had followed. A former Ofcom director of standards said:

"This was a test case for how Ofcom regulates broadcasters on due impartiality. It has failed that test."

He went on to say:

"It now appears that Ofcom has abandoned any pretence that meaningful regulation of broadcast content is still being maintained."

That criticism deserves to be taken seriously.

In 2024, Ofcom investigated GB News's use of politicians as presenters, and concluded that politicians presenting news

"risks undermining the integrity and credibility of regulated broadcast news."

In its response, it warned that repeated breaches could ultimately lead to sanctions, including fines or the loss of a broadcast licence. And yet today, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who has been notified that I intend to refer to him, is advertised by GB News on its website as a presenter offering viewers the latest news, opinion and analysis. That appears to conflict with rule 5.3, which states:

"No politician may be used as a newsreader, interviewer or reporter in any news programmes",

and rule 5.9, which says that

"presenters must not use the advantage of regular appearances to promote their views in a way that compromises the requirement for due impartiality."

The hon. Member is also a shareholder in the channel and has received significant payments from it—this is all in the public domain. Even the channel's founding chairman, Andrew Neil, has publicly questioned why Ofcom permits the arrangement. So I ask the Minister: what discussions has she had with Ofcom about the effectiveness of the broadcasting code, and will she consider launching a review into whether sitting MPs or political party leaders should be permitted to present news and current affairs programmes at all?

I realise that this is a slight jump in tone, but the same questions about enforcement arise when we look at scams. I welcome the recent fine imposed on a telecoms provider for failing to prevent the misuse of telephone numbers, and I recognise the work that Ofcom has done to block scam messages in transit. However, my constituents continue to suffer due to the failure of Ofcom to enforce. Melchior from Broadstone receives scam calls from people claiming to be police officers, using genuine police station telephone numbers. Neil from Canford Heath reports receiving up to five scam calls every day from people pretending to be from Government

bodies. Judith lost thousands of pounds to rogue traders before a kindly neighbour intervened to help her. Another constituent, Paul, lost more than £60,000 to a romance fraud, where he believed he was communicating with Kate Beckinsale before he sadly died.

My constituents are rightly asking why ID spoofing remains so prevalent when the technology exists to verify and authenticate communications. Five years ago, Ministers pointed to developments in the United States—in fact, it was the right hon. Member for Maldon (Sir John Whittingdale) who wrote to my constituent saying that they intended to look at systems in America and bring them over here—yet residents continue to lose money and there does not seem to be any progress. Can the Minister explain what progress has been made through the migration to digital telephony, which concludes in January, what evidence exists that scam tracing is now improving, and how Ofcom intends to enforce protections more effectively in the years ahead?

That brings me to the issue of connectivity. Although Ofcom's figures show considerable improvements in gigabit broadband, the headline statistics mark the reality in rural and coastal communities. The most vulnerable of our residents are often the most digitally disconnected. Some are unwilling or unable to use broadband and internet, and it is important that we do not leave them behind, but when someone chooses to be digitally connected, they cannot be priced out of the market simply because they live in a rural area. People in rural communities such as mine are isolated when the wind blows or because their property is in a small hamlet, or even because, as I heard this week, it is the "last property" in the line in a village.

According to Ofcom's data, gigabit-capable broadband is now available in 88% of homes and businesses, with 4 million premises still without coverage. I recognise the significant improvement since 2020, but in some areas, properties have been dropped from the edge of a gigabit scheme, with the alternatives being simply laughable. Residents living on rural lanes between Wimborne and Sturminster Marshall were missed out of the scheme and told that they can get a voucher from Building Digital UK to spend on a commercial connection. That left them with two problems. The vouchers have been suspended in Dorset for at least the last two years, and even when they are available, no commercial provider will provide internet to six properties if the UK Government-sponsored provider does not feel that it is viable either.

In Pamphill and Shapwick, the local church warden has just been quoted £4,000 plus VAT by BT Openreach to install broadband because they need a pole—a pole that will serve only one building because it is the last building before the river. The irony is that there is already a pole there, but BT's failure to maintain its infrastructure means that it has decided to pass the cost on to the customer, which in this case is a church with about 20 people in the congregation.

What is Ofcom doing to make sure that small rural communities can get the broadband availability they need? These small communities often do not have a bus, mobile service or even a village shop, so when they need help, the only option they have is the internet.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Lady has outlined some of the problems that her constituents are having with BT. I want to be kind to BT if I can, but I have to be honest as well: BT falls short. An organisation that does exceptionally well is Fibrus. Over the last couple of years, although it has had almost 200 complaints, it has genuinely sorted out 199 of them—I am not making that up—and it is doing its darndest to sort out the outstanding one. BT unfortunately falls short every time. The hon. Lady is right to highlight that and I will highlight it as well.

Vikki Slade: I will share a similar tale of the failure to sort out a problem. In August, the village of Bloxworth, which has only about 80 houses and has poor mobile signal, no bus and no shop, was cut off completely when a tree took down their BT Openreach infrastructure. Despite allegedly having a 48-hour service standard, the repair took more than a week to complete. Residents were not even contacted and were later told that they should have been contacted by their individual provider, which is ridiculous. When the water goes down, the water board is responsible and when the electric goes down, it is the infrastructure provider—Scottish and Southern Energy in our area—that is responsible, not OVO or Octopus or whoever provides the electricity. In a data age, with resilience being much of the Government's focus, it is utterly ridiculous that the main provider of infrastructure is allowed to pass on the responsibility and not communicate. It is somewhat ironic that when the communication goes down, there is radio silence.

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): The hon. Lady makes a powerful point about villages. In my constituency, a number of villages do not have a shop or a bus, and so on, but they did have the public switched telephone network. Ofcom has overseen the switch-off of that old copper network infrastructure, but it has not placed an obligation on Openreach to communicate with the people who are losing their telephony. Does she agree that it is not too late in the day for Ofcom to put Openreach on the hook for communicating with people who are about to lose their copper network?

Vikki Slade: I am glad that the hon. Lady intervened because that is apparently the root of the problem with my church. BT Openreach sent out an installer who was able to deal only with copper, but that is all being turned off in January, so he went away again. They came back and said, "You need someone with fibre," and then they came back and said, "Oh, the pole's not good enough. You need to replace the pole, but you have to pay for it." The requirement to have fibre is because of the BT Openreach plan to turn off the PSTN and go on to the Voice over Internet Protocol, yet BT Openreach demands that the customers pay the costs because it has not prepared for that. You could not make it up.

Are we still on track to turn the PSTN off in January, and what consideration has been given to those people who are still on the emergency systems? What will be done to make sure that BT Openreach is not passing on unfair costs to people who did not ask for that change in the first place? On resilience, what are the Minister and her team doing with Ofcom to ensure that the issue of communication is included in the plan for national resilience, and how is Ofcom holding the telephone companies to account when they pass on the costs?

I could not possibly complete a debate about Ofcom without mentioning the post. I am aware that there have been two recent debates on the subject and I would be

[Vikki Slade]

here for as long as it takes my residents to get their post if I shared every story with the Minister, but I must repeat the comments made by the right hon. Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) at the end of Monday's debate. As chair of the Business, Innovation, Science and Trade Committee, he talked about giving Ofcom until November to show that it is improving its performance.

My residents tell me time and again about the length of time between their deliveries and how, miraculously, when someone on their street goes down to the delivery office to challenge the missing mail, bundles turn up in elastic bands. It is simply not credible that they all turned up on that very day. When I write to Royal Mail about this, I, and I am sure hon. Members alike, get a templated reply that basically feels like gaslighting. It never answers the question. I know, because I have spent a couple of shifts down at the sorting office, that local sorting offices have to tell their regional offices which frames did not get delivered. They have to report when vehicles break down or staff do not turn up for shifts. Royal Mail has the data about why that post is not being delivered; it just chooses not to share it with us or its customers. My question is, is it sharing it with Ofcom?

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): The hon. Member is making a really important speech about many of the ways in which Ofcom's regulation touches everybody's lives, especially through Royal Mail—I am sure she will be aware that I am doing some work in this space. A number of other Labour MPs and I spoke to Ofcom at a meeting just last week where we asked what other powers it needs. Fines are clearly not working: the fines that Ofcom is levying on Royal Mail are not leading to any improvement. I was really disappointed at the response, which was that Ofcom has not really thought about what other powers it needs. Does the hon. Member agree with me, and with the Business Committee, that Ofcom really needs to think about what other powers it needs to regulate the market more effectively? It is failing to, currently.

Vikki Slade: The hon. Member is absolutely spot on. We know that the Minister is raising our concerns, but we need Ofcom to have the right powers, and we need to know what powers the Minister is seeking to give Ofcom if the situation persists.

I have to share one other example to do with the post. I recently had a problem in the village of Sturminster Marshall, where they had no post for two weeks and a flood was blamed. I surveyed them all; I had 159 replies, and 149 of them shared their horror stories about Royal Mail. Royal Mail blamed the flood, but the flood happened at the end of the two weeks for which they had been waiting. If Royal Mail will not be accountable to us and tell us the truth, and if it is hoping that we will not notice, that prompts the question of what other things it is saying that could be misinterpreted.

Jim Shannon: I cannot let a Royal Mail comment go by without speaking on behalf of my constituents in Strangford, who have problems with mail delivery on a daily basis. Some of that delayed post unfortunately includes hospital appointments, bank statements and things that they have to action. Does the hon. Lady agree that Ofcom's capacity to effectively oversee Royal Mail needs to be reassessed? It is very clear from the examples that she and other Members have given that it is just not up to the job.

Vikki Slade: The hon. Member comes to my point about whether Ofcom is fit for purpose and needs to be broken up. He mentions the fines for people getting their bills late and missed hospital appointments, yet there is no real compensation scheme for customers. My train is 15 minutes late on a weekly basis—I am sure you will agree, Sir Desmond, as I think you use the same line. I do not think that there has been a week in the past year where I have not arrived home at least 15 minutes late at least once, but there is delay repay. If someone's post is weeks late, they cannot go down and get any sort of claim from the local delivery office. Perhaps if there was, Royal Mail would take a little bit more action.

Finally, today Ofcom released its recommendations for the most effective way to implement the social media ban. We know that that will be complicated and controversial. We know that it is the biggest issue of our time, really. Yet the job has been given to Ofcom. With everything that we have talked about, it is not lost on me that we are adding another very complicated and controversial thing when there is no evidence that Ofcom is able to manage.

Under the new Prime Minister, a new Minister for AI has been created, recognising the importance of dividing up some of these jobs to groups who can focus on the big issues of our time. Perhaps this should be a watershed moment for Ofcom too. Throughout the debate, I have raised four very different issue: broadcast impartiality, scams, broadband access and Royal Mail. They all point to the same concern. Ofcom is increasingly being asked to regulate some of the most powerful organisations in our society while protecting some of the most vulnerable people. Yet again and again, constituents encounter a regulator that appears reactive rather than proactive, cautious rather than assertive and too often willing to accept poor outcomes for consumers.

I ask the Minister to commit to a formal review of Ofcom's powers, duties and enforcement framework, including whether its current structure is fit for purpose. If consumers cannot rely on the regulator to challenge broadcasters, tackle scams, secure connectivity or hold Royal Mail to account, it is not enough to ask whether they are doing their job. Parliament must also ask whether it has given Ofcom the tools to do it.

3.21 pm

Ms Julie Minns (Carlisle) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond, I think for the second time this week. I thank the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) for securing this important debate. She made a critical point in her final remarks about the effectiveness of Ofcom and whether we are overdue a review. It is 26 years since Ofcom was set up, and the changes in modern communication that we have seen in that time have been profound. It is a very valid point.

Before entering Parliament, I worked in mobile telecommunications for 13 years. During that time, I saw how Government policy and regulatory frameworks shape competition, investment and consumer choices

and outcomes. One lesson that I took from that experience is that spectrum policy matters enormously. Spectrum is not simply a technical issue for regulators. It is one of the most powerful tools available to support competition, investment and innovation in mobile.

Back in 2000—I am that old—the UK's 3G spectrum auction demonstrated that point very clearly. Competition sat at the heart of the then Labour Government's policy. The result was a highly competitive mobile 3G market that encouraged substantial investment in infrastructure, rapid innovation and major benefits for consumers. Over time, and I am afraid to say particularly due to the decisions taken in the early 2010s by Conservative Ministers, that competitive landscape shifted. Spectrum holdings that were held for the use of mobile data became increasingly less equal, and the opportunities to strengthen genuine infrastructure competition were missed. As a result, some of the benefits that came from a competitive 3G market were lost.

Much is said about competition in telecommunications, and rightly so. Consumers can choose from a wide range of broadband and mobile providers. That competition helps drive innovation, service quality and value for money. However, we should not confuse retail competition with infrastructure competition. True competition depends not only on the number of brands selling services, but on competition between the networks that underpin those services. Without effective infrastructure competition, consumers might appear to have plenty of choice, but what they do not have is plenty of coverage—certainly not in rural areas such as my constituency.

Spectrum sits at the heart of that challenge. It is a finite national asset, on which every mobile call, message and wireless data connection depends, and the way it is allocated has a profound impact on investment coverage and long-term market structure. Ofcom, therefore, has a critical responsibility to ensure that spectrum policy promotes genuine competition, supports investment and delivers benefits to consumers in every part of the country, including rural and hard-to-reach communities. Spectrum policy should strengthen rather than simply reinforce the position of the operators that already hold significant advantages in low-frequency spectrum in particular, which is critical for delivering rural and indoor coverage.

However, I do not believe that responsibility rests solely with Ofcom. Spectrum is one of the most valuable public assets this country possesses. Decisions about how it is used shape competition, investment, innovation and coverage for decades. Those decisions should be informed by a clear national strategy set by Government. We have long-term strategies for transport, energy and digital infrastructure. There is a strong case for a clear, long-term spectrum strategy that sets out how spectrum allocation will support economic growth, innovation, network resilience and genuine infrastructure competition.

Infrastructure competition is not, on its own, enough. We must also look at the resilience of our mobile networks, because mobile connectivity is now an essential service. People rely on it to access banking, public services, transport information, employment and emergency assistance. Businesses rely on it to operate, communicate and serve their customers. When networks fail, the consequences are no longer merely inconvenient. Outages can disrupt livelihoods, affect public confidence and leave people unable to access services on which they depend. That makes Ofcom's work on network resilience critical. Mobile operators must be expected to maintain robust infrastructure, communicate clearly with customers when problems occur and learn lessons when failures happen.

Resilience should not be treated as an aspiration; it should be a core obligation. However, currently, it is left simply to Ofcom guidance. Reliable mobile connectivity is now part of our critical national infrastructure. It underpins growth, services and everyday life, and the public rightly expect networks to be dependable. I ask the Minister: is guidance on something as critical as mobile resilience sufficient? Should Ofcom not instead require the mobile networks to have back-up power to their mobile masts? That does not have to be permanent back-up; it could be a fleet of electricity generators that can be taken to masts in the event of power outages. I do not believe guidance is sufficient.

My second question is: do the Government believe that citizens and consumers, which Ofcom has a dual duty towards, would benefit from a clearer national spectrum strategy from Government working alongside Ofcom? Thirdly, does the current regulatory framework provide sufficient tools to promote infrastructure competition? Ultimately, consumers need more than a choice of provider; they need confidence that the networks on which they depend deliver the coverage they need, that they are resilient and reliable, and that Government, regulators and industries are working towards a clear, long-term plan to fully utilise one of the most important assets our country has.

3.29 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 Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) for securing this timely debate.

I want to focus on Ofcom's role as the regulator of postal services. That is a different aspect from its work ensuring that news is impartial or keeping our young people safe online, and therein perhaps lies the problem—it is being asked to be a jack of all trades and, as a result, it is the master of none. Earlier this week, I spoke about the effectiveness of Ofcom during a debate in the Chamber on Royal Mail, and I have come here today to reaffirm that argument.

Since 2022, Ofcom has fined Royal Mail £5.6 million, then £10.5 million, then £21 million for failing to meet its targets. In the year to March 2026, only 75.7% of first-class mail arrived the next working day, against the target of 93%. Ofcom opened an investigation into that failure on 1 June. Nearly five months later, we are still waiting for the outcome. Meanwhile, the targets themselves have been lowered, to 90% for first class and 95% for second class, and second-class deliveries have moved to alternate weekdays. The public are being asked to accept a reduced service, measured against easier targets, from a company that has not even managed to meet the old ones in years.

In May, the Business and Trade Committee concluded that Ofcom is failing as a statutory regulator, and that its approach has for years failed to deliver the step change in performance that the public deserve. Part of the problem is that fines are simply not a deterrent. The law allows Ofcom to fine postal services up to 10% of turnover,

[Claire Young]

but its largest penalty is a small fraction of that, and every penny goes to the Treasury. Nothing reaches my constituent who missed a hospital appointment because the letter arrived a day after the actual appointment. Where is their opportunity for recourse?

At the moment, Royal Mail's own complaints process is aimed at the sender of the mail and is all about compensating them for the cost of postage by giving them books of stamps; it does nothing to compensate recipients of mail for the consequential losses from that mail not arriving on time, which can be significant. Aside from missed appointments, there can be financial issues, and we had an example where someone had received a court summons too late, which obviously had very serious consequences.

If a constituent makes a complaint to Royal Mail and they are not happy with the outcome, they cannot go to Ofcom and make a complaint about the individual case. We have been told that Ofcom will not look into local cases and will look only at the picture across the country as a whole. We need a regulator with teeth, legally binding penalties that can actually change a business's behaviour, automatic compensation and a proper complaints system. A regulator ready to use its powers could solve this problem.

I have raised this issue in questions and letters to Ministers, but each time the response is essentially a regurgitated, "This is a matter for Ofcom." However, Ofcom's powers are set by this Parliament, and I do not believe they are working, so Ministers have a responsibility to intervene. Either Ofcom's postal powers and its approach must be fundamentally reset or its responsibility for postal regulation should move to a dedicated independent regulator that will take it seriously.

Surely, that is what Ministers must now be considering. If the Minister stands here today and again tells us that Ofcom is an independent regulator, and Royal Mail a private company, so nothing can be done, it will be utterly embarrassing. Where are the Government's teeth? Are they seriously taking the same lacklustre approach as Ofcom?

I have two direct questions for the Minister. First, do the Government accept the Select Committee's conclusion that Ofcom is not effectively regulating Royal Mail's performance? Secondly, will the Government commit to a review of Ofcom's postal powers, including whether those powers would be better held by an independent postal regulator? Too much time has been spent bringing Royal Mail's failures to Ministers' attention. They have heard enough. Will they now act?

3.33 pm

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): It is a genuine pleasure to follow three excellent speeches, with which mine will overlap to some extent.

Ofcom's role is vast. It has grown exponentially since it was set up in 2003, and it now has in its clutches online harms and the whole minefield of regulating social media, but my focus today will be on broadcasting. Parliament decided that—uniquely—broadcast news should be impartial, and it is more important than ever that the airwaves provide a vital counterbalance to the partisan, clickbait world out there online.

Arguably, nowhere can Ofcom's ineffectiveness be seen more than in that most glaringly obviously anomalous broadcaster of them all, GB News—the telly wing of the Reform party. Some of these criticisms apply similarly to its close bedfellow, Talk TV and radio.

The Communications Act 2003 laid down the law, quite literally, on impartiality in "news in whatever form"—those are the actual words used. Sections 319 and 320 set out the Ofcom broadcasting code. However, GB News and Talk TV and radio flout these rules daily, and they make no pretence at all of objectivity. This question has already been raised by the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade): what other channel would platform a serving MP and party leader—the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who has been emailed—with a regular show? That would not happen anywhere else. Other hosts include ex-MEPs from what used to be called the Brexit party and a Reform MP, the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson), who has also been emailed. It is all part of a one-sidedly right-wing roster; Jacob Rees-Mogg is as leftie as it gets.

On the rare occasions when airtime is afforded to someone from the other side, they are set up as a punchbag to be pilloried. Let us remember how Gary Lineker was pulled up for his tweets. BBC directors general have always insisted that their presenters leave their politics at the door, but there is no such rule for GB News. In fact, to have right-wing politics appears to be a prerequisite to be a presenter. Look at the subject matter: rape gangs, small boats and Muslims—the Reform party's greatest hits.

Section 2 of the Ofcom broadcasting code spells out the duty to protect the public from "harmful and/or offensive material", section 3.2 explicitly forbids "hate speech", and section 3.3 stipulates:

> "Material which contains abusive or derogatory treatment of individuals, groups, religions or communities, must not be included in"

broadcast television and radio services, yet all those occur daily on these Ofcom-regulated services, in contravention of the rules.

Manifold examples exist. Some have already been mentioned. In January, GB News host Josh Howie said that

> "the full inclusion of LGBTQ+ persons…includes paedos".

What! Ofcom received 70,000 complaints and ruled that GB News had breached its broadcasting code, but after an on-air apology there was no further action. In June, right-wing influencer Based and Bougie claimed on the channel that gay men are "more prone" to "sexual deviancy" and "child sexual assault". Ofcom received 3,000 complaints and opened a formal standards investigation to which there is no conclusion yet. In July, Caroline Farrow, a well-known anti-gay rights and anti-abortion activist, stated that pride

> "is not about gay rights"

but has become about celebrating "bestiality" and "paedophiles". Ofcom received 12,000 complaints, and we are still waiting. Those are not examples of rogue guests; they are people invited for their extreme views in the age of clickbait.

The story is the same with presenters. On Talk radio last year, Mike Graham stated of dinghies that we should

> "destroy them, set fire to them, flamethrow them, do whatever you want with them."

There is no published Ofcom action. It has twice upheld complaints against that anchor, but there are no published financial penalties or statutory sanctions. This August, Talk radio presenter Kevin O'Sullivan spoke of the

"infestation of thousands and thousands of illegal migrants in our country".

Ofcom decided after assessing it that there was no breach.

We know that similar remarks have been made by Reform politicians after ITV's secret filming led to resignations. In normal life, public figures who make or are associated with inflammatory or hateful remarks face professional, social and organisational consequences; with Ofcom, don't hold your breath. In fact, as its remit has expanded, Ofcom's published investigations have shrunk; there are fewer and fewer, and long delays. In 2019 there were 142 editorial cases, but by 2025 there were just 36, and decisions in recent years have been glacially slow.

How can Ofcom justify this steep decline and abject lack of urgency, accountability and transparency? Why do these channels feel so able to act with impunity? There is a clear pattern, and unless Ofcom imposes meaningful sanctions to prevent recurrence, it is just going to happen again and again. Clearly, Ofcom is not doing its job. It is not feared and breaches just seem blatant.

Ofcom was once an arm's length regulator, but it has turned into a curious mixture of free-speech warrior, drum-banger for those lot and passive complaints handler. It often says, "People didn't complain in the official form, so we are not doing anything about it." It has defended at all costs channels that style themselves as disruptors but are actually echo chambers lazily putting out the same old content.

In April 2022, Boris Johnson, as Prime Minister, was interviewed by a husband-and-wife couple of his Back-Bench MPs. It all looked very cosy, but Ofcom took no action. Even when Ofcom found that an interview with the Chancellor on the same show—they had a regular show at the time—breached its due impartiality rules, as the programme had failed to present an appropriately wide range of alternative perspectives, no fine was issued. What is the point when broadcasters know that there will be no consequences?

What is Ofcom's answer to all this? We had the new chair, Sir Ian Cheshire, before the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee the other day, and he said that Ofcom's critics should

"set up a left-wing version of GB News."

What? That fails to understand the problem. I must say that Stewart Purvis and Chris Banatvala, the original founders of Ofcom, did not like the way they were named in that response. Sir Ian said, "Stewart and Chris should make their own left-wing show," but they have never been political. They just want the truth—they want proper journalism—and they had genuine criticisms. Parliament did not legislate for due impartiality to be achieved by balancing one unbalanced broadcaster with another—one partisan with another—so that response smacks of ignorance and arrogance.

I hate to say I told you so, but when Lord Michael Grade did his pre-appointment hearing for chair of Ofcom—I have been on the Committee for that long—I said that his outspoken opinions on the BBC and other culture war issues meant that he was politically partisan. He went through and served his term, and now we have this other one, who is described by the *Financial Times* as a "City grandee". He is on £120,000 a year for a three-day week—not bad, is it, to get work like that? He told the pre-appointment hearing that he would take these criticisms seriously, and that he would make it his priority, but like all these regulators, once he got his feet under the table, he appears to have gone native. He is reinforcing Dame Melanie Dawes, the chief executive officer—who is apparently on half a million pounds and is reportedly connected to *The Daily Telegraph*—whose usual standard answer is, "I do not accept that." That was the answer that we got the other week, sadly.

Sir Ian said he would look at the blurred distinction between news and current affairs, which is how GB News gets around the requirements. He said that he would make it an immediate priority. He made all these solemn promises to the Committee, but none of it has happened. In fact, the remarks suggest that he does not understand the regulatory framework that he is responsible for overseeing. He said that he would look into politicians presenting shows. I had to say back to him that if a leftie GB News happened and it was as unbalanced as the real thing, I would be the first to complain.

This is not about left and right; it is about right and wrong. Andrew Neil, whom the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole mentioned, resigned from GB News, describing it as the "biggest mistake" of his 50-year career, because of its descent into bizarre conspiracy theories and its love for the nuttier end of politics. He is no leftie, but he is a journalist, and journalism seems to have been lost in all this lazy opinion stuff that is pumped out.

Ofcom—what is it good for? It is supposed to be a communications watchdog, but it feels overly reactive, ultimately pointless and toothless. Why does this matter? Like everyone in the Chamber, I have been deluged by correspondence from constituents who want a social media ban, so it is all the more important that Ofcom effectively regulates the broadcast world. This is not Fleet Street; these are public service broadcasters. Ofcom should create a safe space for the young online and offline, because the two coalesce and overlap to a great extent. Young people get their news from feeds. Our news media environment has changed—it is far beyond the "One", the "Six O'Clock" and the "News at Ten". When Ofcom was first conceived in 2003, social media was not even a glimmer in anybody's eye. Nobody would have imagined it. The internet still made a noise—that sort of funny sound. In the years since we have seen the influence of traditional broadcasters disrupted by online news and the two things are intertwined.

Ofcom must pull its socks up. There is no incompatibility between freedom of expression and impartiality, but the Ofcom-created rule seems to have been fabricated by some of the right-wing elements within it: under the spurious divide between news and current affairs, a politician cannot read out the news but they can front a current affairs show. In the Boris Johnson era, that divide seems to have been retrofitted on top of the Communications Act in order to green-light GB News, Talk radio and their ilk. They are not public service broadcasters by any stretch of the imagination.

For Ofcom to effectively function, there must be rules and consequences when the rules are broken. Ofwat has abjectly failed because it allows the cowboys of Thames Water to leave a burst water pipe through the summer in

[Dr Rupa Huq]

my seat, put in place a hosepipe ban for the rest of us, and put a fee on our bills. Ofsted was named in a coroner's report as a factor in the suicide of a headteacher. Ofcom too is a regulator with which we can find a multitude of faults—maybe its brief has become too big. Presumably my hon. Friend the Minister will know more, but it is probably unfashionable for Governments to create more players on the regulatory playing field. Even so, the world has changed and regulation must keep up. In the meantime, it would appear that the woefully inadequate Ofcom is a regulator that is simply not regulating.

3.46 pm

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) on securing this important debate. We have heard some very good speeches that demonstrate the sprawling remit of Ofcom. As has been eloquently demonstrated by everyone who has spoken in the debate, the size of that remit is, to a large extent, the reason Ofcom is not proving very effective as a regulator. Whether we are talking about Royal Mail, broadband access, the landline switchover, online safety or broadcasting standards, too many people feel that they are being let down. Too often Ofcom appears slow to act, reluctant to use the powers available to it, and unable to provide the robust enforcement that the public expect.

I want to focus most of my comments on one of Ofcom's largest failings: its failure to protect children from online harms. By Ofcom's own admission last week, there has been no significant change in the severity or frequency of instances in which children encounter harmful content since the children's safety duties came into force in July 2025.

Each hon. Member in this debate has heard deeply distressing accounts from constituents, including parents, carers and young people, about the damage caused by content that young people should not have seen online. It is striking that young people themselves often understand the problem better than those who regulate it. In evidence given to Ofcom for its report on the Online Safety Act, one 16-year-old said:

"we need the algorithms to recognise how dangerous these things are, because it only pushes things for them to go viral, it doesn't consider the safety."

That young person has identified the heart of the problem: left unregulated, social media companies will continue to prioritise engagement and profit through addictive algorithms. That is why we Liberal Democrats called for a parliamentary review within the first six months of the Act, and why the Government must urgently implement film-style age ratings for harmful social media platforms, which should consider not only the content but the risks posed by addictive algorithms, in order to better protect children online.

I am conscious that Ofcom today announced its recommendations for age verification ahead of the under-16s social media ban, as referenced by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole. Although Ofcom has set out options including banking-based checks, photo ID or digital ID, it has made it clear that the onus is on social network providers to come up with their own solutions and comply.

Keeping young people safe online is essential and we cannot do that if we expose their personal information to big US tech platforms. Leaving social media companies free to choose their own methods incentivises the most intrusive checks, undermining trust in much-needed online safety regulations. As I will set out, the problem with Ofcom allowing social media companies to choose how they comply is that Ofcom does not appear to have the resource to audit companies where risk is identified and then actively enforce high standards. We cannot squander the opportunity to make the internet safer through poor implementation. Ofcom must go back to the drawing board and ensure that age verification is effective, proportionate and privacy preserving, because the reality is simple: social media tech giants do not care about our children's safety; they only care about how they can profit from them. If we do not act, they certainly will not.

The response to the Grok scandal last year illustrates that perfectly. When Elon Musk's AI tool, Grok, was used to generate sexualised images of children and women, we Liberal Democrats called for an immediate temporary business disruption order to shut down the site and protect victims. Instead, Ofcom's investigation dragged on—amazingly, it remains ongoing to this day—while the material continued to circulate. Action was taken only when public outrage forced the platform itself to act. That raises an important question: if Ofcom was unwilling to use its strongest powers in that case, when will it use them? I am not confident that Ofcom has learnt from the incident or that it would use a business disruption order if a similar incident occurred again.

Under the Online Safety Act, Ofcom has the power to impose financial penalties of up to £18 million, or 10% of global turnover. Ofcom publishes press releases announcing headline fines against non-compliant platforms, but it does not publish data showing how much of those fines is actually collected. It was only during a recent Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee session that Dame Melanie Dawes, chief executive of Ofcom, revealed that of the 11 fines issued since March last year for breaching the Act, only two have been paid. If nine out of 11 fines remain unpaid, that raises serious questions about Ofcom's effectiveness and suggests that fines are not acting as a meaningful deterrent.

That is why we Liberal Democrats believe that Ofcom should publish clear data not just on how many fines are issued, but on how many have actually been collected and how long enforcement really takes. Parliament and the public deserve to know whether these powers are working in practice. When platforms facilitate the creation or circulation of illegal material, including child sexual abuse material, Ofcom must use all its powers to stop that material from spreading and immediately issue a business disruption order to shut down the platform.

Those concerns about enforcement extend to broadcasting regulation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole and the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) laid out. When MPs and members of the public write to Ofcom flagging systemic breaches of the broadcasting code, including racist language, disinformation and partial coverage, they are routinely met with a refusal to open a formal investigation. That was also the case when my hon. Friend the Member for Frome and East Somerset (Anna Sabine)

—the Liberal Democrat spokesperson for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport—asked for an investigation into coverage by GB News, a broadcaster that is repeatedly let off the hook despite clear breaches of the broadcasting code.

As the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton said, the chair of Ofcom, while giving evidence to the DCMS Committee last week, suggested that a left-leaning alternative could combat GB News—you couldn't make it up. That is such a problematic statement, which not only acknowledges that GB News is not politically impartial, but reveals that Ofcom does not believe that the solution is to regulate properly. If a broadcaster is failing to meet standards of due impartiality, the regulator's job is not to hope that another broadcaster can balance them out; the regulator's job is actually to regulate. We cannot let GB News propaganda turn our Britain into a version of Trump's America, but I fear that is the way we seem to be going.

Misinformation and partial news must be tackled, so either the Government rules are not fit for purpose or Ofcom is not properly enforcing them. At a time when misinformation spreads rapidly with alarming consequences, and trust in our political system is increasingly fragile, effective and impartial regulation has never been more important.

In conclusion, we Liberal Democrats have serious concerns about Ofcom's ability to enforce its regimes overseeing the Online Safety Act and the broadcasting code, as well as a number of other examples that been referenced, such as Royal Mail, broadband and the landline switchover. We believe that the Government must take those concerns seriously and assess options to increase Ofcom's effectiveness.

I am very happy to echo the call from my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole for a review. We think that options could include splitting Ofcom into two regulators: one to regulate online and broadcasting content, and the other to regulate communications infrastructure. They could also include the creation of a new online crime agency to effectively tackle illegal content and activity online, which we have been calling for. The public deserve a regulator that acts swiftly, enforces consistently, puts safety first and instils trust in the public.

3.55 pm

Rebecca Paul (Reigate) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) on securing today's debate. This is a really important topic, and it is clear how passionate she is about it. I really enjoyed her speech and I would love to see her on GB News, creating some of the balance that she was talking about. In fact, a number of Members here would contribute to that important balance, so I look forward to seeing them all on there at some point.

Before I get into some of the detail that has been raised today in compelling contributions, it is important to recognise Ofcom's extraordinarily broad remit. From broadcasting and telecommunications to postal services and online safety, it regulates communication services that impact British consumers every day. Independent regulation in all those spheres is important. It is right that we should take this opportunity to consider whether Ofcom is delivering on its statutory duties and is well placed to take on the additional responsibilities allocated to it, particularly given how important they are. Across Ofcom's considerable remit, we often hear the same concerns: the regulator is too slow to act, too reluctant to intervene and too often unable to secure meaningful improvements. We have heard that across the board today.

Broadcasting is the area of regulation that Ofcom is best known for. Ofcom's broadcasting code requires that news be reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality, and significant mistakes should normally be acknowledged and corrected promptly. It also makes it clear that, save in exceptional circumstances, politicians must not act as newsreaders, interviewers or reporters in news programmes. Those are important safeguards. The public should be able to trust that the news on their screens is being reported accurately and without editorial bias.

That said, there is a really important nuance: "due impartiality" was never intended to mean the rigid allocation of equal airtime for every point of view. Ofcom's rules recognise different programme formats and the importance of context. The exchange of different opinions and political views is both legitimate and healthy when done in line with the code. But rather unsurprisingly, Ofcom finds itself walking a fine line. The regulator must be robust when rules are broken, but without becoming so restrictive that broadcasters shy away from difficult subjects or controversial opinions, and those rules must always be applied consistently, regardless of a broadcaster's political outlook. The perception that the rules are enforced inconsistently can be as damaging to public confidence as a lack of enforcement.

Ofcom says that it closed nearly 66,000 broadcasting complaints last year and found breaches in 14 cases, following 25 investigations. Those figures demonstrate activity, but tell us much less about whether the final decisions were fair or effective. Interestingly, I can find no record of Ofcom issuing fines where politicians have been involved in reading the news, despite the code's clear position on that and some high-profile examples. I therefore ask the Minister, bearing in mind the regulator's operational independence, whether the Government are satisfied with its regulatory performance in respect of broadcast. Are they satisfied that Ofcom, in performing its duties, strikes the right balance between impartiality, accuracy and freedom of expression?

I turn now to online safety. Ofcom's responsibilities are growing rapidly, particularly when it comes to protecting children from online harms. That is an immensely important area. We will all be aware that Ofcom has reported under section 63 of the Online Safety Act 2023 that it found no statistically significant reduction in the proportion of children encountering harmful content during the first nine months after the new children's safety duties took effect. This is an early measure, and we know that some platforms have introduced stronger age checks since; none the less, that initial report is disappointing and concerning. I hope the Minister will update us today on her view on the recommendations in the report and what further actions the Government are considering, if any.

Enforcement in the online sphere can be incredibly challenging. Giving evidence to the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee earlier this month, Ofcom's

[Rebecca Paul]

chief executive said that only two out of 11 online safety fines had been paid. In the case of 4chan, it was fined £520,000 in March for breaches, including failing to introduce effective age checks to stop children accessing pornography. Its US lawyer responded to demands for payment with an image of an AI-generated hamster. Unfortunately, that example shows how difficult it can be to enforce against overseas entities, putting Ofcom in an extremely difficult position. I would be grateful if the Minister gave her views on the type of enforcement action that should be taken in these difficult cases, such as last-resort business disruption powers, and whether she would like to see those powers used more.

Let me turn to social media restrictions for under-16s, an area where the Government have done the right thing, albeit belatedly and following huge pressure from the Opposition and the public. Ofcom is expected to oversee compliance here and has acknowledged the challenges posed by circumvention, including through VPNs, and told the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee that it will need additional resources for the task. I hope the Minister can respond to that directly by outlining what assessment the Government have made of Ofcom's staffing, technical expertise and current enforcement capacity. What lessons are being learned from Ofcom's work on existing online safety duties, and what measurable outcomes will the House be able to refer to in 12 months from now to ultimately judge how effectively Ofcom has discharged this important new function?

I mentioned Ofcom's extremely broad remit at the outset, and it would be entirely remiss of me, in my capacity as the Member for Reigate, not to acknowledge its responsibility as the regulator for postal deliveries. Royal Mail is ultimately responsible for running its network, but it is painfully clear to my constituents that repeated fines from Ofcom have done very little to secure the reliable service that we should all expect. I recall a Government Member decrying Ofcom as "utterly toothless" on postal services when we considered this issue earlier in the year. He is certainly not alone in taking that view, as we have heard many times over in Members' contributions today. When the Minister speaks, I hope we will hear about how we can ensure that sanctions from Ofcom meaningfully translate into more letters arriving on time. Otherwise, really, what is the point?

Before I finish, I want to draw attention to the Public Accounts Committee report of 11 September, which identified the critical role that regulators such as Ofcom play in ensuring that vulnerable customers and those struggling financially are better supported. Its report specifically recommends that regulators need to do more to ensure take-up of discounted social tariffs and other support for consumers on lower incomes. Fewer than 9% of eligible broadband customers are on social tariffs and only a third of customers are aware that they even exist. More urgency from Ofcom could create scope for a more joined-up approach that would avoid customers in vulnerable circumstances having to repeat personal information to multiple service providers. I would be very interested to hear the Minister's thoughts about the recommendations in that report.

That final point brings me back to the purpose of today's debate. Whether it is ensuring impartial news, children's safety online, reliable postal deliveries or affordable broadband, Ofcom's effectiveness has real consequences for the people we represent. Its operational independence is important, but that independence must go hand in hand with accountability. As we continue to expand the regulator's responsibilities, I hope that the Minister can explain how the Government can measure its success and what more can be done to ensure that Ofcom delivers the improvements that the public rightly expect.

4.3 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship once again this week, Sir Desmond. I congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Vikki Slade) on securing this important debate on the role and effectiveness of Ofcom. I also welcome the shadow Secretary of State to her place, the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul). I do not think we have faced each other across the Chamber, so it is great to see her here today.

The range of issues raised today shows how important Ofcom's work is to people's everyday lives, whether that means getting a phone signal, staying connected, having a broadband connection that works, knowing that their children are safer when they pick up a phone or go online, or, of course, having their post delivered. Ofcom's decisions affect people all across our country. As the UK's independent regulator for the communication industries, Ofcom's principal duty is to further the interests of citizens and consumers, promoting competition where appropriate. Ofcom helps to ensure that people can access reliable communication services, that broadcasters meet appropriate standards and, increasingly, that people, particularly children, are protected from online harm.

Given that Ofcom's responsibilities have never been wider or more significant, it is understandable that today's debate has covered a number of topics, and I will attempt to speak to each of them in turn. I am pleased to be responding to this debate on behalf of the Minister for Creative Industries, Media and Online Safety, and I will relay the issues raised in this debate to him directly.

As the shadow Minister rightly pointed out, broadcasting is probably what Ofcom is most well known for, and that is where I will begin. Broadcasting regulation has existed in the UK for 100 years. Since its creation in 2003, Ofcom has had the vital role of regulating the UK's broadcast media, helping to ensure that TV and radio audiences are protected from harmful material. Through legislation, Parliament requires Ofcom to draft and keep up to date the broadcasting code, which sets out clear rules and guidance including the protection of children and ensuring that the broadcast of news remains accurate and impartial. Through the Government's media Green Paper, we are considering how to ensure that Ofcom continues to have the right powers to protect audiences and regulate TV services into the future. All Ofcom-licensed broadcasters are subject to the broadcasting code and are Ofcom-regulated. When it comes to news, that means that news in whatever form is reported with due accuracy and presented with due impartiality.

When broadcasters may have breached the broadcasting code, we of course expect Ofcom to investigate promptly without fear or favour.

I am sure that hon. Members will not expect me to comment on ongoing cases, but a question was raised about politicians presenting television programmes. Ofcom's broadcasting code sets out that politicians may not

"be used as a newsreader, interviewer or reporter in any news programmes unless, exceptionally, it is editorially justified."

The Government have expressed concerns about the blurring of fact and polemic and about politicians presenting programmes that could reasonably be interpreted as news or current affairs. There is a clear rationale for strengthening these rules. We are currently considering a range of options to tackle this issue and will set out more information and a decision in due course.

I will take away the point that a couple of Members made about communication regarding complaints to Ofcom. A number of people gave examples of Members of Parliament writing to Ofcom and not feeling that they got an acceptable letter or communication back. I will certainly take that to the Media Minister.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq) spoke about prominence measures—*[Interruption.]* I thought she was going to intervene; I am about to answer some of her questions. Our "Watch this space" Green Paper sets out two distinct prominence regimes to safeguard UK media online. The first is prominence for trustworthy news. In an era of infinite online information, quality journalism is vital to holding power, including the Government, to account. We want social media platforms to make reporting from high-quality news providers easy to discover. This is not about censorship; it is about defending a free, pluralistic press across the political spectrum. We have not finalised the criteria for trustworthy news and will continue to engage with the sector as we develop proposals.

The second is prominence for wider public service media content on video sharing platforms. From children's programmes to culture, that content reflects our national story. Our preference remains for sector-led, voluntary agreements on fair commercial terms. The consultation closed on 31 August. Officials are currently analysing the responses, and no final decisions have been made on the regulators.

A number of Members spoke about postal services. Under the Postal Services Act 2011, Ofcom is an independent regulator responsible for postal services. That includes regulating Royal Mail as the UK's designated universal service provider, and mandates that major parcel companies including Amazon Logistics, DPD, DHL, Evri, Parcelforce and Yodel must have clear complaints procedures, accessible contact channels, defined timelines and trained staff. The Government do not have a role in its regulatory decisions on postal services.

The Government have been clear that Royal Mail's performance has been unacceptable for too long. The Minister for the Future of Work was in the Chamber earlier this week during a debate on Royal Mail performance—indeed, I think an hon. Member said that there have been three such debates this week. We value Ofcom's role as the independent regulator, but that independence must go hand in hand with accountability for the outcomes it delivers. Business Ministers recently met the regulator, and they agreed that more needs to be done to tackle persistent service issues. Ofcom is currently concluding its investigation into the company's 2025-26 performance. We will continue to press Ofcom and Royal Mail to ensure that our constituents receive the service they are entitled to.

A number of questions were put to me on additional powers for Ofcom. The Government expect Ofcom to use the full range of its existing tools to secure better outcomes for postal services. The Secretary of State reaffirmed the importance of Ofcom's role as the independent regulator in an appearance at the Business, Innovation Science and Trade Committee on 20 October. He was clear that the Government would be pragmatically considering any future requests for additional powers where they are needed.

Vikki Slade: Can the Minister confirm whether those powers might include compensation and a formal complaints system? It seems quite ridiculous that when someone's mail is not going anywhere, the only thing they might get is more stamps.

Stephanie Peacock: The hon. Lady makes an incredibly interesting point, and I will certainly reflect that to the relevant Department. She will appreciate that I cannot be drawn on even the creative policy ideas that she puts to me today, but she has put that on the record, and I will make sure that the relevant Department hears about it.

Online safety is one of the defining issues of our time. The internet has changed how we live, learn and connect, often for the better, but there are clear challenges and dangers that come alongside that. I would like to quote the Secretary of State on this issue:

"This is not the first time in history that new forms of technology have upended society. But what is unique to this moment is that that technology has been developed almost exclusively in the private sphere – so I want to be clear that there is a central role for government in shaping that technology for good."

Through the Online Safety Act, Parliament gave Ofcom the responsibility of delivering that, and it is right that this House asks how it is progressing. The Government have asked Ofcom to publish a clear enforcement strategy and present it to Parliament so that its priorities and outcomes can be properly scrutinised. Additionally, Sir Ian Cheshire, the Ofcom chair, is reviewing Ofcom's enforcement capability, and we will consider his findings carefully. If more changes are needed, we will not hesitate to act.

Ofcom's role will grow further with our decision to ban social media companies from offering their services to under-16s—a decision shaped by the more than 116,000 responses to our consultation. Enforcing both the Act and the ban must be Ofcom's top priority, including robust action against circumvention. The first social media regulations will be laid before Parliament by the end of the year. I am sure that the Media Minister would be happy to meet hon. Members to discuss this further, and particularly the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole, who raised a number of points on this. I will ask him to reach out to every Member who has attended the debate, and, if Members would like to, I am sure he would be happy to meet them.

Moving on to issues around telecoms, there was a specific question on the closure of the PSTN. That is on track for 31 January 2027. Hon. Members spoke about the difficulties that some of their constituents face in

[Stephanie Peacock]

getting a reliable broadband connection, and they are right to raise that. National coverage matters, and I have seen that in my area of Barnsley. Ofcom's regulatory regime has facilitated significant investment and growth in the fixed telecoms market. As of January 2026, gigabit broadband coverage stands at 88%. Ofcom's telecoms access review, published in March this year, provides a stable regulatory framework for the coming years, and continues to support competition and investment across the sector. This infrastructure is critical to households and businesses alike and underpins the delivery of essential public services.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole raised a number of concerning issues in her constituency around connectivity, particularly around rural broadband. I will ask officials to look into the specific points she raised. The Government are committed to ensuring at least 99% gigabit broadband coverage by 2032, including in rural areas.

Dr Huq: I am grateful to and have a lot of time for the Minister—she has helped me sort many constituency issues. The issue of broadband is not just a rural thing. In my seat, Ealing Central and Acton, which is in London in zones 2 and 3, we have appalling broadband. We have been told that fast fibre will be rolled out, and it would be great if the Minister looked into that. Also, is the distinction between news and current affairs being looked at? It is something that seems to have been invented in the last 10 years for GB News.

Stephanie Peacock: I will reflect my hon. Friend's second question to the Media Minister, but she is absolutely right that broadband is not just a rural issue. When I was the shadow Media Minister, I did a visit to central London that explained some of the issues around broadband connectivity. We want the whole of the UK to be connected.

The hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole raised the issue of scam calls and texts. I have seen tragic and difficult cases of that in my area of Barnsley. Ofcom's work to tackle scam calls and fraudulent text messages is an important part of its consumer protection role. It has introduced measures to block calls originating from abroad from using UK mobile numbers and to disrupt scam mobile messages. Those will come into effect in 2027. Alongside the Government's 2025 telecoms fraud charter and wider fraud strategy, those measures will help to protect consumers. Of course, criminals continue to adapt their tactics, and we expect Ofcom to continue using its powers effectively as the threat evolves. The hon. Lady gave a specific example from the USA; I will raise that with the Media Minister and ask officials to write to her.

My hon. Friend the Member for Carlisle (Ms Minns) spoke in detail and with great experience about the issue of spectrum. Spectrum policy should not be considered in isolation from the Government's wider objectives for growth, resilience and national capability. The Government sets the strategic direction for spectrum principally through the statement of strategic priorities, while Ofcom independently carries out its statutory functions. Our approach is clear: spectrum management should support investment, competition and innovation while helping to ensure the connectivity and services that the UK relies on are resilient. We keep both our approach to spectrum and the wider regulatory framework under review to ensure that they remain fit for a rapidly changing communications market. My hon. Friend asked a number of other questions; I will make sure she gets a letter from the Media Minister—he is going to be busy following this debate.

It has been a pleasure to speak on behalf of the Government on this important issue. In conclusion, Ofcom's responsibilities have never been broader or more important. From supporting growth and investment to promoting competition, protecting consumers, strengthening network resilience and implementing online safety regulation, it occupies a central place in the UK's regulatory landscape. I am grateful to hon. Members for their contributions to this important debate and to the hon. Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole for securing it.

4.16 pm

Vikki Slade: We have done very well to debate for an hour and 15 minutes with so few of us in the room. The passion that has been shown and the scope of issues with Ofcom shows how important this matter is. I remain concerned about the capacity of Ofcom to deliver on such a wide range of services and I hope that when the Minister reviews this debate, she will think about extending powers in the media Green Paper and potentially giving a separate role to the postal regulator. I would like to thank everybody for their fantastic speeches.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the role and effectiveness of Ofcom.

4.17 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Thursday 29 October 2026

EDUCATION

Local SEND Reform Plan Outcomes

The Minister for School Standards (Georgia Gould): Every child and young person should have the opportunity to fulfil their potential, whatever their needs or circumstances. This Government inherited a SEND crisis, and we are determined to fix it. The Government programme of SEND reform is intended to deliver a more inclusive system that delivers for children and families—one that identifies needs early and provides the right support at the right time. Local leadership and strong partnership working will be central to achieving that ambition. It was against this backdrop that, in March 2026, this Government commissioned all local area partnerships to develop and submit a local SEND reform plan jointly with education, health and care partners.

I want to express my thanks to all local partners for the engagement and dedication that they have demonstrated through this process.

The Department for Education, working with Department of Health and Social Care, and NHS England, has reviewed all submitted plans against a consistent quality assessment framework shared with local area partnerships at the point of commission.

Today I am confirming the outcome of that process.

The plans of 139 local area partnerships have been approved upon first submission. This includes both areas with a strong track record of SEND delivery and those where improvement is still needed to secure better outcomes for children and young people. Approval of a plan is not an endorsement of current performance; it reflects the Government's assessment that the plan has met the required threshold for approval and provides a credible foundation for accelerated delivery. Over 90% of local area partnerships—covering almost every part of the country—have now set out how they will improve support for children and young people with SEND in their local area.

Approval of a local SEND reform plan is a condition of payment of a local authority's high needs stability grant allocation. The grant will meet 90% of each local authority's high-needs-related dedicated schools grant deficit and forms a central part of the Government support for local authorities as we move to a reformed SEND system.

Local area partnerships with approved plans must now move swiftly from planning to delivery, implementing their commitments with pace and securing tangible improvements for children and young people with SEND and their families. Approval is a starting point for delivery, not an indication that that further improvement is not still required. Where performance remains inadequate, we will take decisive action. I will shortly publish improvement notices for a number of local areas, setting out the improvements required to strengthen delivery and secure better outcomes for children and young people with SEND.

Twelve local area partnerships' plans were originally deferred pending revision and resubmission. We have made enhanced, hands-on support available to these areas, focused on helping the partnership to respond to the identified areas for improvement within their plans. We expect these local areas to resubmit their plans by 30 November 2026. Two local areas have already done so, and their revised plans have subsequently been carefully assessed and approved.

Government officials, together with SEND and financial advisers, will continue to engage closely with local partnerships throughout this process. Local areas whose plans have been approved, but where concerns about their delivery capacity and existing performance remain, will receive closer oversight and support focused on helping the partnership translate their plan into sustained improvement and better outcomes for the children and young people with SEND in their care.

As local areas move into accelerated delivery, officials from the Department for Education, Department of Health and Social Care and relevant NHS England teams, working alongside expert advisers, will continue to support and challenge local authorities and integrated care boards. Local delivery will be kept under regular review through the Department's local area SEND performance and delivery framework. The framework brings together evidence on outcomes for children and young people with SEND, local partnership readiness and capacity, and progress in delivering each local SEND reform plan. We will publish this framework later in the year, setting out transparently how local performance and improvement will be assessed.

Each area's overall assessment will determine the level of monitoring, engagement and support it receives and, where necessary, the intervention required. All local areas will attend a quarterly review with officials to consider progress against their commitments, the steps that they are taking to strengthen partnership maturity and early evidence of improved experiences and outcomes for children, young people and families. My Department will also use quarterly data on local area progress and dedicated resources to closely monitor performance across the country. We will not hesitate to intervene where local delivery is failing to secure the outcomes children and families should expect.

Delivering this ambitious reform will require sustained collective effort across local government, the NHS, education providers, central Government and the wider sector. We will work alongside local area partnerships—providing the support, investment, challenge and national leadership needed to turn local plans into lasting change—and continue to put the experiences of children, young people and their families at the heart of delivery. Together, we can build a more inclusive, responsive and sustainable SEND system that earns the confidence of children and young people with SEND and their families, and enables every child to achieve and thrive.

Full details of high needs stability grant allocations have been published on the Department for Education section on the gov.uk website here:
https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/high-needs-stability-grant-2026-to-2027

Areas with approved local SEND reform plans

Barking and Dagenham and NHS North East London ICB; Barnet and NHS West and North London ICB; Barnsley and NHS South Yorkshire ICB; Bath and

North East Somerset and NHS Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire ICB; Bedford and NHS Central East ICB; Bexley and NHS South East London ICB; Birmingham and NHS Birmingham and Solihull ICB; Blackburn with Darwen and NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB; Blackpool and NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB; Bolton and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole and NHS Dorset ICB; Bracknell Forest and NHS Thames Valley ICB; Brent and NHS West and North London ICB; Brighton and Hove and NHS Surrey and Sussex ICB; Bristol and NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire ICB; Bromley and NHS South East London ICB; Buckinghamshire and NHS Thames Valley ICB; Bury and NHS Greater Manchester ICB.

Calderdale and NHS West Yorkshire ICB; Camden and NHS West and North London ICB; Central Bedfordshire and NHS Central East ICB; Cheshire East and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB; Cheshire West and Chester and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB; Cornwall and NHS Cornwall and The Isles of Scilly ICB; County Durham and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Coventry and NHS Coventry and Warwickshire ICB; Croydon and NHS South West London ICB.

Darlington and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Derby and NHS Derby and Derbyshire ICB; Derbyshire and NHS Derby and Derbyshire ICB; Devon and NHS Devon ICB; Doncaster and NHS South Yorkshire ICB; Dorset and NHS Dorset ICB; Dudley and NHS Black Country ICB.

Ealing and NHS West and North London ICB; East Riding of Yorkshire and NHS Humber and North Yorkshire ICB; East Sussex and NHS Surrey and Sussex ICB; Enfield and NHS West and North London ICB; Essex and NHS Essex ICB.

Gateshead and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Gloucestershire and NHS Gloucestershire ICB; Greenwich and NHS South East London ICB.

Hackney and NHS North East London ICB; Halton and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB; Hammersmith and Fulham and NHS West and North London ICB; Hampshire and NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB; Haringey and NHS West and North London ICB; Harrow and NHS West and North London ICB; Hartlepool and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Havering and NHS North East London ICB; Herefordshire, County of and NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire ICB; Hertfordshire and NHS Central East ICB; Hillingdon and NHS West and North London ICB; Hounslow and NHS West and North London ICB.

Isle of Wight and NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB; Islington and NHS West and North London ICB.

Kensington and Chelsea and NHS West and North London ICB; Kent and NHS Kent and Medway ICB; Kingston upon Hull, City of and NHS Humber and North Yorkshire ICB; Kingston upon Thames and NHS South West London ICB; Kirklees and NHS West Yorkshire ICB; Knowsley and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB.

Lambeth and NHS South East London ICB; Lancashire and NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB; Leeds and NHS West Yorkshire ICB; Leicester and NHS Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland ICB; Leicestershire and NHS Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland ICB; Lincolnshire and NHS Lincolnshire ICB; Luton and NHS Central East ICB.

Manchester and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Medway and NHS Kent and Medway ICB; Merton and NHS South West London ICB; Middlesbrough and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB.

Newcastle upon Tyne and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Norfolk and NHS Norfolk and Suffolk ICB; North East Lincolnshire and NHS Humber and North Yorkshire ICB; North Lincolnshire and NHS Humber and North Yorkshire ICB; North Northamptonshire and NHS Northamptonshire ICB; North Somerset and NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire ICB; North Tyneside and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; North Yorkshire and NHS Humber and North Yorkshire ICB; Northumberland and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Nottingham and NHS Nottingham and Nottinghamshire ICB; Nottinghamshire and NHS Nottingham and Nottinghamshire ICB.

Oldham and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Oxfordshire and NHS Thames Valley ICB.

Peterborough and NHS Central East ICB; Plymouth and NHS Devon ICB; Portsmouth and NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB.

Reading and NHS Thames Valley ICB; Redcar and Cleveland and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Richmond upon Thames and NHS South West London ICB; Rochdale and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Rotherham and NHS South Yorkshire ICB; Rutland and NHS Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland ICB.

Salford and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Sandwell and NHS Black Country ICB; Sefton and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB; Sheffield and NHS South Yorkshire ICB; Shropshire and NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin ICB; Solihull and NHS Birmingham and Solihull ICB; Somerset and NHS Somerset ICB; South Gloucestershire and NHS Bristol, North Somerset and South Gloucestershire ICB; South Tyneside and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Southampton and NHS Hampshire and Isle of Wight ICB; Southwark and NHS South East London ICB; St Helens and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB; Staffordshire and NHS Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB; Stockport and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Stockton- on-Tees and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Stoke-on-Trent and NHS Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent ICB; Suffolk and NHS Norfolk and Suffolk ICB; Sunderland and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB; Surrey and NHS Surrey and Sussex ICB; Sutton and NHS South West London ICB; Swindon and NHS Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire ICB.

Tameside and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Telford and Wrekin and NHS Shropshire, Telford and Wrekin ICB; Torbay and NHS Devon ICB; Tower Hamlets and NHS North East London ICB; Trafford and NHS Greater Manchester ICB.

Wakefield and NHS West Yorkshire ICB; Walsall and NHS Black Country ICB; Waltham Forest and NHS North East London ICB; Wandsworth and NHS South West London ICB; Warrington and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB; Warwickshire and NHS Coventry and Warwickshire ICB; West Northamptonshire and NHS Northamptonshire ICB; West Sussex and NHS Surrey

and Sussex ICB; Westminster and NHS West and North London ICB; Westmorland and Furness and NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB; Wigan and NHS Greater Manchester ICB; Wiltshire and NHS Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire ICB; Windsor and Maidenhead and NHS Thames Valley ICB; Wirral and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB; Wokingham and NHS Thames Valley ICB; Wolverhampton and NHS Black Country ICB; Worcestershire and NHS Herefordshire and Worcestershire ICB.

York and NHS Humber and North Yorkshire ICB.

Areas with approved local SEND reform plan following revision and resubmission

Cumberland and NHS North East and North Cumbria ICB and NHS Lancashire and South Cumbria ICB; Liverpool and NHS Cheshire and Merseyside ICB.

Areas with deferred local SEND reform plans pending revision and resubmission

Bradford and NHS West Yorkshire ICB; Cambridgeshire and NHS Central East ICB; Lewisham and NHSE South East London ICB; Milton Keynes and NHS Central East ICB; Newham and North East London ICB; Redbridge and NHS North East London ICB; Slough and NHS Thames Valley ICB; Southend-on-Sea and NHS Essex ICB; Thurrock and NHS Essex ICB; West Berkshire and NHS Thames Valley ICB.

[HCWS431]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Water Company Performance Publication

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): Today, for the first time, the Environment Agency, Ofwat, Natural Resources Wales and the Drinking Water Inspectorate are publishing a joint water company performance insights report. This reflects the Government's drive for more integrated regulation of the sector, leaving companies with nowhere to hide poor performance. Alongside the environmental performance assessment for 2025 and operational performance report for 2025-26, it gives the public an overarching picture of how their water companies are performing and makes clear where companies are failing to deliver for the environment. Joined up scrutiny means companies can no longer point to progress in one area to distract from failures in another.

The findings show why change cannot wait. Poor performance is unacceptable. Pollution remains far too high, with too many serious pollution incidents. Only one company achieved the top four-star environmental rating, and four received the lowest one-star rating—the chief executive officers for these companies will not be eligible for bonuses under the new rules we have introduced. Too many customers still face avoidable service failures. Improvements in some areas do not excuse persistent failings elsewhere. While drinking water quality remains high, and though there has been progress on some customer and environmental measures, performance in other areas continues to fall short.

I am demanding answers from underperforming companies. Ministers will visit companies with the most serious pollutions to see what actions they are taking to prevent them happening again. We will call in chief executives to challenge failures and scrutinise delivery of vital infrastructure improvements. My message to the sector is clear: cut pollution, tackle leaks, improve customer service and deliver the infrastructure needed to secure future water supplies. The record investment approved for 2025 to '30 must translate into visible improvements for customers, communities and the environment—not more excuses.

We have strengthened regulators' enforcement powers through the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. Companies that fail must face consequences, including fines and prosecutions where performance falls short. But accountability today must go hand in hand with lasting reform. Our forthcoming 10-year plan for Britain will set out stronger public control over water, underpinned by a strengthened Water Bill. The Secretary of State has already set out her expectations for the next price review to deliver better value for money for struggling households. More joined-up regulation now is part of building a water system that protects the environment, secures supplies and earns back the trust of the people who pay for it.

[HCWS433]

HOME DEPARTMENT

New Safe and Legal Sponsorship Routes for Refugees

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Anna Turley): In November 2025, the Government published the restoring order and control statement, which committed to tackle the vile smuggling gangs who seek to exploit our borders with no regard for human life and to reform the asylum and immigration system. Alongside bringing order and control to the immigration system, we must do this fairly by providing sanctuary to those in genuine need and reducing the pull factors for illegal and dangerous journeys.

The UK has a long-standing history of providing sanctuary to those fleeing war and persecution from around the world. The UK is a compassionate country, that lives up to its international obligations and saves the lives of those fleeing war and persecution.

The Government are continuing this tradition by creating new safe and legal sponsorship routes. New named community sponsorship, refugee work and refugee study routes will create safe and legal pathways for refugees to come to the UK, enabling communities, universities and employers to identify refugees they wish to sponsor. By connecting refugees with communities, universities and employers that are ready to support them, the routes are being designed to promote successful integration from arrival.

These routes will be capped and controlled, with the number of arrivals based on community capacity to sponsor refugees. The Government expect arrivals of UNHCR-approved refugees across the new routes and the existing UK resettlement scheme to number in the hundreds at first, but this will grow into the low thousands as levels of illegal migration fall.

Applications will open today for organisations to be accredited as lead sponsors for the named community sponsorship and refugee study routes. Applications for the refugee work route will open in spring 2027. Lead

sponsors will play a key role in the new routes, acting as intermediaries between the Home Office and sponsor groups and providing assurance that sponsor groups are delivering positive outcomes for refugees, communities and our country. Lead sponsors will be responsible for engaging and onboarding sponsors, assessing the suitability of proposed sponsorship arrangements, submitting applications to the Home Office and providing ongoing support to sponsor groups. The Home Office will continue to conduct appropriate security checks on individual refugees and make all immigration decisions.

To be accredited as a lead sponsor, organisations will be required to demonstrate that they are a registered UK charity or community interest company based and operating in the UK and have appropriate policies and procedures in place to undertake the lead sponsor role. They will also be required to demonstrate they have the capability, resources and networks to deliver the lead sponsor role.

The routes will initially operate from Bangladesh, Egypt, India, Kenya, Malaysia, Pakistan and Uganda. To be eligible, refugees will need to be outside their country of nationality, and to have been present and registered with relevant authorities or UNHCR in one of these seven countries before 1 October 2026. The Government are introducing the new routes in phases, starting in a limited number of countries to establish effective delivery arrangements.

The first arrivals through these routes are expected in autumn 2027. The new routes will enable refugees to come to the UK and provide them with an opportunity for a better life. However, it is imperative that these routes are only used to support refugees with a genuine need for protection to resettle in the UK. This is why we will work in partnership with the UNHCR who will assess refugees through established processes. All refugees who are identified will be required to meet identity, security and eligibility requirements and have suitable sponsorship arrangements in place to be granted status.

Further details of the new routes, including refugee and sponsor eligibility requirements, will be published on gov.uk.

[HCWS434]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Government Reorganisation

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Jim McMahon): This Government are committed to a fundamental rewiring of a system that for too long has seen power held in Westminster and Whitehall, rather than with people and the places where they live, work and invest. Strong and sustainable local government is the foundation of our rewiring the state agenda.

Reorganising 21 two-tier areas across England will impact nearly a third of the population of England and last for generations to come, so it is important that we consider our approach and decisions fully, and plan for the long term. On 7 September, the Secretary of State therefore announced that we were undertaking a review of the local government reorganisation programme to make sure that the process was robust, and that it meets the priorities of a new Administration and the new Prime Minister.

Since we made that announcement, I have listened closely to a wide range of voices from the local government sector and those that care about it—from local leaders and sector partners, to mayors and Members of Parliament. I recognise the strength of feeling about the decisions announced so far, both from those who raised concerns about them and from those who support them. While there remain different views about the right outcome for each area, I am grateful for the constructive way in which places have continued to engage with me and my officials.

I know the announcement has had a significant impact on local councils, councillors and staff across the country, and I am grateful for the patience they have shown throughout this process. I recognise that the review period has not been easy, and I do not take for granted their continued commitment to the long-term work needed to fix the foundations and put local government in the best possible position.

Above all, I have heard a clear message from colleagues: you want clarity about what happens next and what it means for your area. Today, I want to provide that clarity and set out the way forward for each area.

Review: phase 1

I am pleased to report that the first phase of the review is now complete.

Working with the Secretary of State and officials, I have interrogated the key pillars and framework underpinning the local government reorganisation programme, including whether the existing unweighted criteria set in February 2025 and its objectives continue to support the policy priorities of the new Government.

I have concluded that the basis of the programme is robust and that the existing criteria against which proposals have been submitted were both correct on their own terms and continue to support the Government's policy agenda.

Single-tier local councils are a key enabler of the rewiring the state agenda. Stronger, more sustainable unitary councils will support more effective partnership working between local, regional and central Government and better outcomes for economic growth, building the houses local people need, helping reform public services, and empowering local communities. They will be strengthened further by new measures brought forward in the English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026, for instance on neighbourhood governance and community ownership.

Following this initial phase of the review, I can therefore confirm that the Government remain committed to delivering local government reorganisation and that we will continue to move forward with the programme based on the existing criteria, which I hope gives confidence as we move ahead.

Throughout this phase of the review, Ministers and officials have heard from leaders and officers from all corners of the local government reorganisation programme, as well as key local government stakeholders. I know that consensus on the outcome in every area is not possible, but I have heard that more can, and must, be done to recognise the demands being placed on council

leaders and senior leadership teams; to make sure councils feel supported to deliver such important changes including in relation to disaggregation; and to build consensus on how we deliver this programme and the timetable in each area.

I am clear that central and local government work best when we work in partnership and I am committed to doing all I can to ensure that this Government are an active partner that local government feels able to rely on.

Review: "minded to" decisions

I am now able to set out a timeline for concluding the final phase of the review across the 20 areas in the review other than Surrey and confirming the outcome for each.

I hope this will give local councils the certainty they need to plan ahead, while giving us the time necessary to complete our consideration of each individual area.

I have considered carefully whether outcomes should be announced together or as decisions are reached. I have concluded that councils should not be asked to wait unnecessarily once the consideration of their area is complete. We will therefore inform councils at the earliest practical opportunity, meaning that some areas will receive an outcome before others.

First, I am now able to give further clarity in respect of five of the 14 areas with decisions taken in July. In these areas, the proposals received, their merits, and all relevant evidence and views have been carefully considered against the existing criteria.

Following this consideration, we are minded to implement, subject to a representations process and parliamentary approval, the following proposals:

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—with 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.

Oxfordshire: Three unitary proposal submitted by Oxford city council, including the adjoining area of West Berkshire council—with the boundary change Oxford city council requested alongside the proposal.

Warwickshire: Two unitary proposal submitted by North Warwickshire borough council, Nuneaton and 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.

It should be noted that the Secretary of State has recused herself from local government reorganisation decisions in the East Sussex and Brighton and Hove invitation area, so I will take decisions there.

These five areas are receiving letters setting out the rationale for why we are minded to proceed with these proposals. Before we take our final decision, there will be a minimum period of three weeks, during which those interested may make further representations to me. I will shortly confirm the start and end date for this representations period and I will also set out how councils and interested parties can make representations. Any final implementation decision would also be subject to parliamentary approval. To be clear, the previous decisions in these five areas made in July 2026 are today withdrawn.

For the remaining nine areas where decisions were also announced in July 2026, we will consider these areas further in the next phase of the review, with more detail set out below. To give councils clarity on the status of the existing decisions while we do that, the Secretary of State and I today are also withdrawing the decisions announced in July 2026 for the following areas:

Derbyshire and Derby

Devon, Plymouth and Torbay

Hertfordshire

Kent and Medway

Lancashire, Blackburn with Darwen, and Blackpool

Leicestershire, Leicester and Rutland

Lincolnshire, North Lincolnshire and North East Lincolnshire

Nottinghamshire and Nottingham

Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent

For the avoidance of doubt, all options and proposals in these areas will remain under consideration as part of the review.

Review: next phases

I now turn to the next phases of the review and those 15 remaining areas due to have a "minded to" decision:

The nine areas listed above where decisions have now been withdrawn;

The four areas—Essex, Southend-on-Sea and Thurrock; Hampshire, Isle of Wight, Portsmouth and Southampton; Norfolk; and Suffolk—where decisions were withdrawn in September; and

The two areas—West Sussex and Cambridgeshire and Peterborough—where decisions have not yet been taken.

I believe it is right to take a structured approach to the review and give each area the serious and deep consideration it deserves given the significance of these decisions.

As I have set out above, we will seek to inform councils at the earliest practical opportunity, meaning that some of these 15 remaining areas will receive an outcome before others.

We commit to coming back to this House with updates on outcomes in another set of areas by Christmas—and I commit that we will work to ensure that every area will have an outcome by early next year.

Elections

In September, we set out that the review meant that elections scheduled to take place in May 2027 would go ahead to existing councils. This remains the position for all 20 areas covered above. In those areas, the timetable is for elections to new councils to happen in May 2028 followed by vesting day on 1 April 2029.

Capacity and transition funding

I recognise the impact and costs of ongoing uncertainty and delay, which I have also considered in the initial phase of the review.

I understand that areas will have incurred costs associated with local government reorganisation in good faith.

For areas where new unitaries were previously announced, we will pay 50% of the £900,000 of transition support per new unitary, based on the number of new unitaries in the initial announcement. This funding is

guaranteed and will be paid in the coming weeks. It is not contingent on the outcome of the review. For Cambridgeshire and Peterborough and West Sussex, where no decisions have been previously announced, we will instead pay £500,000 to each area.

When final decisions are made, we will pay the balance of the £900,000 of transition support per each new unitary, taking account of funding already paid to its area, as well as £150,000 of supplementary funding per new unitary for leadership capacity and continuity in children's services, adult social care and public health.

Committee system

The English Devolution and Community Empowerment Act 2026 sets out that all councils operating the committee system must transition to a leader and cabinet executive by 29 June 2027, except where they are "protected" or secondary legislation has been made under which they would be dissolved.

The Secretary of State has discretion to extend the deadline for transition by up to one year. She may do this if she considers it likely that secondary legislation to deliver local government reorganisation will be made in relation to a council during the one-year period between 29 June 2027 and 29 June 2028.

This would include where a "minded to" decision on local government reorganisation is made envisaging legislation to implement local government reorganisation in an area within the extension period.

The purpose of allowing extensions in legislation is to ensure that councils undergoing local government reorganisation would not have to move from the committee system to a leader and cabinet executive shortly before being dissolved. This remains the Government position.

City status and ceremonial matters

We recognise the pride, history and identity that sits behind our cities and counties which is why we will work with areas to make sure city status and any ceremonial rights are preserved following reorganisation. City status and ceremonial matters play a valuable role for pride of place in our local communities. These issues have been raised by local areas and Members of Parliament for some time, and we recognise that this is an important programme of work. Subject to any final decisions taken on reorganisation, we will work with places to protect their city status, by reviewing all available options and relevant precedents, including bringing new legislation to this House where it is necessary to do so, and likewise, for any ceremonial matters currently held by councils that would be abolished.

Next steps

I have committed to this being a full, considered review, and to giving colleagues in councils and local people clarity on their future as soon as possible. I recognise the tension between these two objectives but would like to reiterate my appreciation to colleagues across the House and within local government for their ongoing patience as we progress this review. I will keep the House updated on progress.

As before, this review and update does not impact Surrey, where the new West Surrey and East Surrey councils will go live in April 2027.

[HCWS432]

PRIME MINISTER

Investigatory Powers Commissioner: 2025 Annual Report

The Prime Minister (Andy Burnham): I have today laid before both Houses a copy of the annual report of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner, the right hon. the Lord Leveson of Liverpool. This report covers the activities of the Investigatory Powers Commissioner's Office and the Technology Advisory Panel for 2025.

The Investigatory Powers Commissioner provides independent oversight of the use of investigatory powers, as outlined in the Investigatory Powers Act 2016. This oversight encompasses the inspection and authorisation by judicial commissioners of the use of these powers by over 600 public authorities. This includes the intelligence and security services and law enforcement agencies.

Overall, the report provides a positive assessment of the use of investigatory powers during the reporting period, finding that they continue to be exercised in accordance with the IPA 2016 and other relevant legislation. Lord Leveson notes the strong commitment to compliance demonstrated by those authorities within his remit, and their constructive engagement with IPCO's oversight regime. While the report identifies a number of issues and areas for improvement, he is satisfied that our agencies and departments are working with IPCO to address them.

Maintaining public trust and confidence in the exercise of investigatory powers is vital for national security and public safety. This report demonstrates the high quality of oversight of our intelligence and security services and public authorities' use of the most intrusive powers. I am satisfied that our oversight arrangements are among the strongest and most effective in the world.

Alongside its core authorisation and oversight functions, IPCO took on a significant additional responsibility in 2025: leading the independent investigation into the Agent X case following the High Court's judgment. Lord Leveson and his team have delivered this important work while continuing to discharge their day-to-day responsibilities to the highest standard.

I would like to express my sincere thanks to Lord Leveson, the judicial commissioners and the IPCO team for their hard work throughout 2025. Their professionalism, dedication and unwavering commitment help to ensure that the UK remains a world leader in the oversight of investigatory powers.

In accordance with section 234(6)(b) of the IPA, I wish to notify both Houses that there is material considered too sensitive for the open report, on which I have been briefed separately. The contents of this open report are not prejudicial to national security or ongoing investigations.

I will be sending a copy of this report to Scottish Ministers, as required under section 234(8) of the IPA.

[HCWS430]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Carer's Allowance: Call for Evidence Responses

The Minister for Social Security and Disability (Sir Stephen Timms): On 7 July 2026 the Government launched a call for evidence on the modernisation of

carer's allowance. We received more than 3,805 responses, and I want to thank everyone who responded and shared their experiences.

Today we are publishing the findings of those responses which can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/carers-allowance-call-for-evidence. Alongside research into the impact of the increase in the carer's allowance earnings limit in April 2025 to match 16 hours at the national living wage which can be found here: https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/carers-allowance-increased-earnings-limit-evaluation

The findings are varied, but there is broad consensus around the need to modernise the treatment of earnings and to reduce the risk of overpayments. These findings—alongside those of the Sayce review into overpayments of carer's allowance linked to earnings—have informed the Chancellor's announcement in the Budget of work to remove the cliff-edge earnings rule in carer's allowance once the necessary infrastructure is in place. This will include changes to automate earnings data, and to provide greater predictability in how earnings are treated in the calculation of carer's allowance.

We are providing regular updates to the Work and Pensions and Public Accounts Committees on progress in implementing the Government response to the Sayce review and will keep Parliament informed of progress with these longer-term reforms to adapt carer's allowance to modern patterns of care and work.

[HCWS429]

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not later than
Thursday 5 November 2026

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