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HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT

PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES

(HANSARD)

Monday 4 March 2024

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Two o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

NEW MEMBER

The following Member took and subscribed the Oath required by law:

George Galloway, for Rochdale.

Oral Answers to Questions

LEVELLING UP, HOUSING AND COMMUNITIES

The Secretary of State was asked—

Rough Sleeping and Homelessness

1. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps he is taking to support rough sleepers and homeless people to move into accommodation. [901760]

17. **Lilian Greenwood** (Nottingham South) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help reduce the number of families in temporary accommodation. [901777]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): We are investing almost £2.4 billion over three years to tackle homelessness and rough sleeping, which is an unprecedented amount. That includes over £1.2 billion through the homelessness prevention grant, which councils can use flexibly to prevent homelessness and help families to move out of temporary accommodation. Last week, an additional £107 million was allocated to councils through the single homelessness accommodation programme, providing 808 homes for people sleeping rough.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that answer, but the number of people in temporary accommodation has risen by 10% over the past year, and the number of rough sleepers has risen by 27% across the country. Clearly, the money is very much needed—all London councils report that they are spending more than the temporary accommodation money that has been allocated. Equally, the pilots for Housing First have been outstandingly successful, so can we ensure that Housing First is introduced across the country and more investment is made, in order to take people off the streets and provide them with a permanent home, as they deserve?

Felicity Buchan: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for everything he has done in the homelessness space. The other day, I was looking at the figures from the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017—we have supported 708,000 families courtesy of that Act, in order to prevent homelessness. My hon. Friend is absolutely right that we have seen an uptick in rough sleeping and homelessness,

which is disappointing. However, with rough sleeping we are still 9% below pre-pandemic levels, and 18% below the highs in 2017. I agree with him about the success of Housing First. We have invested £42 million in those pilots, and we are investing a further £30 million through the rough sleeping initiative.

Lilian Greenwood: There are 142,000 children living in temporary accommodation—a record high that is costly to taxpayers, but devastating to the lives of children and families—and the Government's own data shows that they have utterly failed on their 2019 manifesto commitment to end rough sleeping by 2024. As the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) has just said, rough sleeping has risen by 27% in the past year, and I remind the Minister that it is 120% higher than in 2010. Is she happy for children and families to be paying the price for 14 years of Tory failure on housing?

Felicity Buchan: This Government have made a concerted effort to tackle homelessness and eliminate rough sleeping. I am not happy with the numbers in temporary accommodation, which is why the last autumn statement contained a series of measures to address the issue, including an additional £450 million for the local authority housing fund—taking that to £1.2 billion—in order to improve the quality of temporary accommodation. We have also uprated the local housing allowance to the 30th percentile, which is worth £800 per family.

Anna Firth (Southend West) (Con): Southend has an abundance of accommodation that is deemed inexpensive by local authorities, and our city is picking up the tab for social care, education and long-term housing when other local authorities are not informing our city council that they are placing people in the city. Under section 208 of the Housing Act 1996, all local authorities should give prior notice when placing people for homelessness within 14 days. Will my hon. Friend assist me and Southend-on-Sea City Council in dealing with this issue?

Felicity Buchan: My hon. Friend is absolutely correct: if a local authority places people into temporary accommodation outside the borough, it should notify the relevant local authority. I am very happy to assist in getting that message across.

Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD): Analysis by London Councils shows that, on average, the equivalent of one child in every classroom is homeless and that London local authorities are now spending a staggering £90 million a month on temporary accommodation for those who are homeless. What conversations has the Minister had with colleagues in the Department for Work and Pensions and the Treasury about raising the cap on the housing benefit subsidy for temporary accommodation and also supporting local authorities to buy up property, as Richmond Borough Council is doing, so they can rehouse people locally in decent accommodation?

Felicity Buchan: As the hon. Lady will understand, I cannot talk about any discussions that we may have had with the Treasury, but clearly the Budget is on Wednesday. However, I would point to the increase in the local housing allowance rate, which will take effect in April, and the local authority housing fund is intended specifically to help local authorities to buy properties for temporary accommodation.

Mr Speaker: I call shadow Secretary of State.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): I hear what the Minister says about the housing fund for temporary accommodation, but what we need to be doing is reducing the number of families in temporary accommodation. Four years have passed since the Government first promised to end section 21 evictions, and now 70,000 children are coming home from school each night to sleep in temporary accommodation. For a child being brought up in a hotel room, doing their homework on the bathroom floor and eating their dinner perched on the bed, the opportunity to make the most of their life is out of their control. So I ask the Minister how many more children must face eviction before she meets the promise?

Felicity Buchan: We are absolutely committed to repealing section 21—there is no question about that. As I have said, the numbers for those in temporary accommodation are disappointing but we do have a very holistic approach: building more housing, building more affordable homes, and enabling local authorities to go out and build and purchase temporary accommodation.

Levelling-up Fund

3. **Giles Watling** (Clacton) (Con): What assessment he has made of the impact of the levelling-up fund on local communities. [901762]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): We are transforming communities the length and breadth of our United Kingdom through our £4.8 billion levelling-up fund, improving transport, regenerating high streets and rebuilding pride in place.

Giles Watling: I thank my hon. Friend for his answer, and I am delighted that we have recently been able to bring £78 million of investment to Clacton. Freeports will be a major contributor towards levelling up, and in my view levelling up also means better transport infrastructure, but not enough is getting through to bus services in my patch. Will he support my campaign outlining that Freeport East in Essex needs to show its social value in Clacton by helping to improve connectivity for everyone across the Tendring district, including for buses?

Jacob Young: I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss his campaign. Buses are the most popular form of public transport in our country. They are an essential element of our national transport system, playing a vital part in levelling up. I am grateful to my hon. Friend for acknowledging the huge amount of levelling-up funding going into Clacton and am keen to work with him to see how we can help people in Jaywick as well.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My borough, Hackney, was successful in its bid for levelling-up funding, but there was a delay to the bid being put in, because the Government changed the timetable, and a delay to the final decision, again because the Government delayed the timetable, which has contributed—it is not the only factor—to a nine-month

delay in the programme and getting the funding. Will the Minister look at that? Given that it is a Government flagship programme, is he not a bit disappointed that the timescale problems are down to his own Department?

Jacob Young: I absolutely commit to looking at that. We have introduced the project adjustment request process, and I am more than happy to talk to the hon. Lady and her local authority about how they can utilise that to meet the changes that she outlines.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the great strength of levelling-up funding is that it supports projects that are generated by local communities, rather than by officialdom? When the Borders levelling-up partnership is considering projects, the projects in my constituency at the Crook Inn at Tweedsmuir and the George Hotel in Walkerburn are ideal for such funding opportunities.

Jacob Young: I was grateful to meet my right hon. Friend recently to discuss those exact priorities. We are hoping to invest £20 million into the levelling-up partnership he mentions. I am sure that those priorities will be part of our considerations as we design the partnership.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Communities in Northern Ireland experienced no benefit from the last round of levelling-up funding, because of the Government's flimsy excuse that the Assembly was not sitting. Now that the Assembly is sitting, can the Minister tell us what discussions he has had with the communities Minister to ensure that the millions of pounds that he said was set aside will be available for projects in Northern Ireland?

Jacob Young: I can absolutely commit to having those discussions, and I offer to meet the right hon. Gentleman following Question Time.

Dame Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): I am proud that Morley has received £24 million in funding from the Conservative Government. I am sure that my hon. Friend agrees that transparency and care with taxpayers' money is vital. Will he look into the concerns that a number of constituents have raised about Morley Town Council, including the controversial plan to install £80,000-worth of TV screens in a conservation area, whether it followed the correct tendering process and whether any vested interests among those involved were fully declared?

Jacob Young: I will absolutely look into those concerns and ensure that my officials can meet my hon. Friend to discuss them further.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): The success or otherwise of levelling up will be tested by whether people in communities feel better off and whether inequalities in those communities are removed. What assessment has the Minister made of an area such as Tameside, which has had three successful levelling-up bids, but feels poorer because its council is £200 million worse off?

Jacob Young: Across the north-west, we are investing £2.2 billion through our different levelling-up fund streams. We are working closely with the Mayor of Greater Manchester, giving him more powers and more funding to help deal with the exact issues the hon. Gentleman mentions.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): The Government talk about levelling up, but local councils and communities are on the brink due to policies made in Downing Street that affect every single local authority in the country. Funding has been slashed, the fair funding review delayed, and the business rate reset postponed, while reserves are depleted, community assets have been sold, accounts go unsubmitted, and more and more councils are lining up for emergency support. Is it not time to end the sticking-plaster politics and have a long-term plan for all our communities' sake, or are the Government doing what the country is doing: waiting for a Labour Government?

Jacob Young: I am sorry that the hon. Gentleman failed to mention the long-term plan for Oldham, which is in his constituency and where we are investing £20 million over the next 10 years. Since 2019, we have invested £15 billion of levelling-up funding across the country. We are committed to levelling up right across the country.

Local Government Finance: Potholes

5. **Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): If he will make a comparative assessment of trends in (a) the level of local government financial settlements and (b) the number of cars damaged as a result of potholes in the last 10 years. [901764]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): We have made available up to £64.7 billion for local authorities through the 2024-25 local government finance settlement. Local authorities can decide how to spend the majority of that funding. The Government are also investing more than £5 billion into local highways maintenance in this Parliament. In October, we announced a further £8 billion to fix our roads.

Mr Perkins: GoCompare's recent pothole report described the potholes in Tory-run Derbyshire as the very worst in England. The Conservative council leader was clear in his view that it is funding decisions from central Government that have forced the county to adopt what he called the totally ineffective "sticking plaster and patching approach". He said that the funding from the Government

"doesn't touch the sides of the issue for counties"

across the country. Why should Derbyshire motorists pay a Tory pothole tax, with tyres, springs and suspensions all constantly needing repairing as a result of the state of our roads?

Simon Hoare: For the hon. Gentleman's benefit, let me repeat those figures of £5 billion for local highways maintenance and the additional £8 billion announced in October. That will fill holes, including in Derbyshire and his constituency, to support motorists, the economy and people going about their business.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): It is normal in these circumstances to invite a Minister to visit a constituency. The Minister is welcome to visit my constituency, The Wrekin in Shropshire, and the Telford and Wrekin borough, but if he visits the Telford and Wrekin borough bit, could he bring a spare tyre? The potholes there are enormous. I thank him for allowing £32 million to be released over the next 11 years to ensure that those potholes are filled. Rather than a pothole tax, may I thank him for the pothole fund? Finally—[*Interruption.*] I will not give a "finally", but he is very welcome to visit. Bring a spare tyre!

Simon Hoare: As I struggle with my Lenten observations, I need no lessons about spare tyres—it is all about trying to get rid of spare tyres, as far as I am concerned. I am grateful for my right hon. Friend's comments. The Wrekin is a part of Shropshire that I know well. Those sums can and should be used by upper-tier authorities, which are the highways authority, to ensure that their networks are working well, smoothly and safely. That benefits all, and the Government are putting up the money to allow them to do that.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Angela Rayner (Ashton-under-Lyne) (Lab): Public service workers and local leaders across the country are working incredibly hard to improve their local areas and provide vital services, so rather than the begging bowl culture that makes them bid for money, will the Minister take forward Labour's commitment for a long-term, more secure funding settlement to allow them to plan for the future?

Simon Hoare: I am intrigued by what the right hon. Lady proffers to the House. Only a few weeks ago, in the debate on the local government finance settlement—none of her colleagues apart from the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), the hon. Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), who chairs the Levelling Up, Housing and Communities Committee, and those on the Front Bench could be bothered to turn up and speak on it—the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), who is sitting next to her on the Front Bench, said:

"As I will come on to say shortly, we will have a review to look at the long-term plans. We understand the problems that local government is facing."—[*Official Report*, 7 February 2024; Vol. 745, c. 326.]

May I say to the right hon. Lady that part of the job of being in Opposition is to work out the policies that she may want to deliver in government?

Islamophobia

6. **Peter Grant** (Glenrothes) (SNP): What steps he is taking to tackle Islamophobia. [901765]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Felicity Buchan): We have been clear that anti-Muslim hatred has absolutely no place in our communities. I feel that strongly, as I represent one of the most diverse constituencies in the country. We have provided over £6 million to the anti-Muslim hatred monitoring and support service Tell MAMA, and just shy of £13 million to schemes protecting

mosques and faith schools. Funding for both measures had been uplifted in response to increased reporting since October.

Peter Grant: An extreme right-wing Conservative MP was allowed to go on an extreme right-wing Conservative-funding TV station and make a series of vile Islamophobic remarks. The MP was not suspended for Islamophobia; he was suspended for refusing to obey an order from his party leader. Does the Minister understand why it is that, not only among Muslim communities but across a much wider range of believers and non-believers, people are becoming increasingly concerned that, in the eyes of this Government, Islamophobia is seen as somehow less abhorrent than other forms of racism?

Felicity Buchan: The Government were absolutely clear that those were not appropriate comments. That is completely clear. Any form of religious hatred is not acceptable in our society.

Theresa Villiers (Chipping Barnet) (Con): The recent rise in anti-Muslim hate incidents and crimes is really worrying. Will the Government do everything they can to improve education so as to improve multi-faith understanding and tackle this scourge?

Felicity Buchan: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. Education is critical, and we need to bring our communities together. Last weekend, I was delighted to attend an inter-faith event in my constituency that included Holland Park synagogue, where it was hosted, and al-Manaar mosque. That inter-faith work and communities working together is critical.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): For almost two years this Tory Government have failed to appoint an independent adviser on Islamophobia. The former adviser has criticised the Government for their failure to engage, and revealed that he could not even get them to provide terms of reference for his role. Does the Minister agree that this Government lack the political will to tackle this pernicious hatred, or even to call it out?

Felicity Buchan: I strongly disagree. We plan to appoint a new independent adviser on anti-Muslim hatred, and we will update the House shortly.

Mr Speaker: I call the Scottish National party spokesperson.

Ms Anum Qaisar (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): Like so many, I am fearful of the inability to call out Islamophobia becoming a scaremongering tactic to stoke fear and division and garner support for the extreme far right. It makes life difficult or even dangerous for Muslims. Across all four nations, more can and should be done on a cross-party basis to tackle that hatred. That starts with being able to call out Islamophobia when it occurs. Could the Minister clarify the line between being wrong and being Islamophobic?

Felicity Buchan: There is no question but that those comments were wrong. I face the Mayor of London in opposition all the time, and I could criticise him for many things—housing, policing, fire or transport—but I would never accuse him of being in any way under the influence of Islamists.

Ms Qaisar: That response will give people little comfort. Let me paint a picture for the Minister of what life is like for many Muslims growing up and living across these four nations. A month after the 9/11 attacks in 2001, my local mosque in Carfin was petrol bombed. The two men were sentenced to one year and nine months respectively. If asked, most Muslims will have their own stories. Muslims are not asking for special treatment. They work, pay taxes, send their kids to the same schools and support the same football teams. The Government have had ample opportunity over the past few weeks to commit to tackling this stain on society, but there has been no substantial change in policy. Next Friday 15 March marks the UN's International Day to Combat Islamophobia. Will the Government use that opportunity to commit to adopting the definition of the all-party parliamentary group?

Felicity Buchan: I want to make it clear that this Government will not tolerate religious hatred towards Muslims or any other faith group. That is a red line. This Government are aware, very sadly, of incidents of anti-Muslim hatred, which is why we put in place an extra £4.9 million of protective security funding for Muslim mosques, faith schools and communities. We are 100% behind our Muslim communities.

7. **Dame Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of section 21 evictions on levels of homelessness. [901766]

9. **Feryal Clark (Enfield North) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of section 21 evictions on levels of homelessness. [901768]

14. **Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of section 21 evictions on levels of homelessness. [901773]

23. **Rebecca Long Bailey (Salford and Eccles) (Lab):** What assessment he has made of the potential impact of section 21 evictions on levels of homelessness. [901783]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): The Department publishes official statistics on homelessness duties owed, including the number of households threatened with homelessness following service of a valid section 21 notice. We are committed to the abolition of section 21 through our landmark Renters (Reform) Bill, which will deliver a fairer private rented sector for both tenants and landlords.

Dame Angela Eagle: In 2019 the Government promised to abolish section 21 no-fault evictions, but the Bill that they finally published five years later, which the Minister mentioned, does not actually abolish section 21 no-fault evictions. Meanwhile, 140,000 children are living in costly temporary accommodation. In my constituency we get one or two cases every week. The problems are piling up. When will this Government do what they promised—stop delaying, stop dithering, and abolish no-fault evictions?

Jacob Young: As I have already said, we are absolutely committed to abolishing section 21. The Renters (Reform) Bill is going through Parliament and I look forward to debating it with the hon. Lady when it returns to this House.

Feryal Clark: My borough of Enfield topped London's league for section 21 evictions last year, setting a grim record and resulting in a dramatic rise in homeless families approaching the council for help. At its peak, the borough had 400 families approach the council for help in one month, yet Ministers are unwilling to stand up to their own Back Benchers. The Minister says the Government are committed to abolishing section 21 evictions. Can I please ask him when? When will he bring the Bill back, so we can bring an end to no-fault evictions?

Jacob Young: I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who I have heard campaigning on this issue a number of times. I am well aware of her concerns for her constituents. As I said, we are absolutely committed to abolishing section 21. We will bring forward the Bill as soon as we are able to do so. I would also say to her that the Mayor of London is not building enough homes. He is not building enough homes to meet the Government-assessed need for London. He is not even building homes to his own targets, so I encourage her to have a conversation with him as well.

Rebecca Long Bailey: In Salford, from April to November last year, approximately 466 individuals presented to Salford City Council in crisis because of section 21 notices. Salford's social housing waiting list is currently in the thousands. Private market rents are outstripping incomes and local housing allowance rates at a frighteningly exponential rate. There are no affordable homes to go to once someone is evicted from a property, so homelessness is now at acute levels in Salford. This is not just a housing crisis; this is a homelessness crisis in Salford. When are the Government going to bring back the Renters (Reform) Bill, with robust amendments finally banning section 21 evictions? What action will the Minister take to ensure that my constituents urgently have long-term secure tenancies?

Jacob Young: Again, I have heard the hon. Lady talk about this issue a number of times. We are absolutely committed to the abolition of section 21. I am personally committed to that. We will bring back the Bill as soon as we are able to do so.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Matthew Pennycook (Greenwich and Woolwich) (Lab): In resisting Labour's efforts to strengthen the Renters (Reform) Bill, Ministers have repeatedly argued that the legislation as drafted strikes precisely the right balance between the interests of tenants and those of landlords, yet by watering down protections for renters and further delaying the long-overdue abolition of section 21 evictions, the package of draft Government amendments to the Bill that we saw last week will tilt the playing field decisively back towards the landlord interest. Are we to believe that the Government have honestly decided, at the 11th hour, that it is landlords who need more rights and powers, or is this not simply a crude attempt to manage an increasingly fractious Tory party at a shameful cost to hard-pressed private tenants?

Jacob Young: The hon. Gentleman, like various Members who have spoken, is a committed campaigner on this issue. I enjoyed our time together in the Public Bill

Committee. We need to strike the balance he has just spoken about. That is why we are discussing the Bill with both landlord groups and tenant groups. We are meeting colleagues on the Government Benches and the Labour Benches, and those in the smaller parties, too. We are ensuring that when we bring the Bill back it is in the best possible shape so that it affords protections and security for tenants, but protections, in fairness, for landlords too.

Flood Recovery Framework

8. **Mohammad Yasin** (Bedford) (Lab): What his planned timescale is for reviewing the flood recovery framework.

[901767]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his question. I am pleased to report that the review of the flood recovery framework has already begun and I expect the work to be completed by autumn this year. We will, of course, update Parliament in the usual way when that review is completed.

Mohammad Yasin: My constituent Lucy owns Ride Leisure Events on Wyboston Lakes, which flooded again during Storm Henk. She cannot get insurance and her business is not entitled to compensation under the flood recovery framework because of the Government's arbitrary decision to expect cash-strapped councils to cover the cost if fewer than 50 properties are impacted. It is very unfair that my constituent has fallen through the safety net. She will not be the only one, with property in Kempston regularly affected by flooding. Will the Minister crack that anomaly in the framework and help my constituent save her business?

Simon Hoare: I am sorry to hear about that case, and if the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to me giving details of the business, I will of course look into it. As for Storm Henk, 2,241 properties have been identified as eligible for grant support. That covers 16 upper-tier local authorities, and to date payments of £788,743 have been reported by authorities to impacted householders and businesses. There always has to be a rubric in these cases, and this issue will be considered during the flood recovery framework review, on which, as I have said, we will report back to the House. However, the offer is there: if the hon. Gentleman wishes to write to me, I will happily look at what he has to say.

Alexander Stafford (Rother Valley) (Con): Whiston has been flooded repeatedly over the past decade, and there is a huge ongoing issue, but Rotherham council recently approved the building of 450 new homes there. Whiston Parish Council, which is independently aligned and thus not party political, called a special public meeting about the plans, which show water running uphill—which I believe it does not do—and floodwater draining into a non-existent stream. This surely demonstrates that Rotherham Council does not understand the issue of flooding. Does my right hon. Friend agree that all councils, including Rotherham, have a responsibility not to build on floodplains?

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend has raised an important issue. Between them, the local planning authority and the Environment Agency should always find the most appropriate sites for development and take hydrology and water management into consideration. The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety, my hon. Friend the Member for North East Derbyshire (Lee Rowley), will have heard what my hon. Friend has said, and may contact him in due course.

Private Roads

10. **Alistair Strathern** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): Whether he has had recent discussions with local authorities on adopting private roads on new estates. [901769]

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (Lee Rowley): The adoption of roads is largely an issue for my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Transport, who leads on that policy, but I know—because we have spoken about this in the Committee considering the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill—that the hon. Gentleman has a significant interest in this matter. We understand the strength of feeling about it, and we are considering it further.

Alistair Strathern: Across the country, homeowners in a state of adoption limbo are being left exposed to exploitative and often unaccountable management companies. Despite their warm words, sadly the Government did not take any of the actions that the Competition and Markets Authority urged them to take in order to end the issue of fleecing once and for all. Given that the Secretary of State is rumoured to be on the lookout for legacy accomplishments, will the Minister urge his colleagues to finally act on this issue during the current Parliament, or will fleecing be yet another issue left for the next Government to tackle?

Lee Rowley: With the best will in the world, the CMA report was published a few days ago, and the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill had been progressing through the House for a number of months before that. As for the hon. Gentleman's specific point, I hope he will accept, as other Members, including his colleagues, have done, that the Bill is a significant improvement for estate management, providing the right of redress to a tribunal, further information and the right to absolute clarity on service charges. All those changes have been rightly demanded by residents, and we are considering carefully whether there is anything further than we can do.

Town Deals

11. **Tom Hunt** (Ipswich) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support the delivery of town deals. [901770]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): My Department is engaging with all town deal recipients to support delivery through our performance monitoring process, and we have a particular interest in progress in Ipswich following the allocation of £25 million, secured by the hon. Gentleman, for 10 projects there.

Tom Hunt: I am very grateful for that investment. As the Secretary of State will know, my hon. Friend the Member for Bishop Auckland (Dehenna Davison) had to intervene because of the slow production of the business cases. We got over that hurdle, but sadly, years later, we are still desperately waiting for delivery on the ground. When bodies other than the Labour-led council are responsible for projects, they are delivered—no problem—but when the council is in the driving seat, what we see is no delivery. Whether it is cock-up or conspiracy, it is not good enough. Will the Secretary of State please intervene to let the council know that it is not right to put politics before the delivery that the people of Ipswich so desperately need?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is a bonnie fechter for Ipswich, and he is absolutely right about, for instance, the local shopping parades project and the former R&W Paul Silo building. I am afraid that we have not seen the progress that we would expect. It is indeed the case that the Labour Council in Ipswich is not delivering for the people of Ipswich in the way that my hon. Friend so brilliantly does.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): I thought that the Secretary of State's Government were introducing all these deals in order to help the parts of the country that were struggling and where more people on low earnings lived. Like him, I have been looking carefully at who is getting the money. Why does so much of it go to Tory marginal seats? Is that fair?

Michael Gove: First, Ipswich is an area that deserves investment—an area that has been overlooked and undervalued under Labour Governments. Secondly, on Friday I was proud to be able to announce additional investment in a mass transit system, which will enable the hon. Gentleman's constituents in Huddersfield to travel more quickly across West Yorkshire to Leeds and Bradford. Sadly, it is the case at the moment that we do not have Conservative MPs in Leeds or Bradford, but we know that the Labour marginal seats in Leeds and Bradford, and of course the marginal seat of Huddersfield, will very soon have Conservative representation.

Community Ownership Fund

12. **Miriam Cates** (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (Con): What the eligibility criteria for the community ownership fund are. [901771]

22. **James Daly** (Bury North) (Con): What the eligibility criteria for the community ownership fund are. [901782]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): The £150 million community ownership fund is open to voluntary and community organisations or parish, town and community councils from all parts of the United Kingdom that have a viable plan for taking ownership of a community asset at risk and running it sustainably for community benefit. So far, we have awarded £71 million to 257 community projects, including £1 million to Gigg Lane, the home of Bury FC. Detailed guidance on the criteria is available in the prospectus on gov.uk.

Miriam Cates: Silsden Methodist church in my constituency has not been used for worship for some time, but it is a really important community space, where a wide range of community groups meet regularly. Sadly, I understand that the Methodist Church may now sell the building, threatening the future of these groups, but Silsden Parish Council has managed to have the building listed as an asset of community value. Could my hon. Friend tell me whether the community ownership fund might be a suitable source of funding to secure the future of the building, or which other funds the parish council should be looking at?

Jacob Young: It sounds as though the church is eligible, but I am happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss eligibility further. Applicants can bid for up to £2 million in capital funding from the community ownership fund, with additional revenue funding available, but in the first instance I would recommend that interested applicants read the prospectus on gov.uk, as this will cover all they need to know regarding eligibility requirements, funding available and the application process.

James Daly: Would my hon. Friend consider amending the criteria for community ownership fund applications to include the potential community purchase of redundant council assets? It would bring back to life many publicly owned buildings and spaces that are currently serving no purpose or are underused.

Jacob Young: I thank my hon. Friend for his advocacy for the fund and for his constituents in Bury. The community ownership fund works alongside existing community asset transfers and supports them by funding the costs of renovation and refurbishment. We cannot fund the cost of purchasing publicly owned assets where the public authority would credit a capital receipt, except in the case of parish, town and community councils, but I am happy to meet him to discuss this issue further.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): In many communities in Westmorland, the pub is the centre of the community and is often under threat. In some cases, the local pub—such as The Ship Inn in Sandside—has closed down altogether. The community ownership fund is clearly a very good way of allowing the community to bring such businesses back into public use, but does the fund allow communities to go through the process of compulsory purchase, so that a building can be taken from an owner who is unwilling to sell and made useful again for the local community?

Jacob Young: I think the CPO process is probably a bit too lengthy for the fund itself, but I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to discuss the project directly. We are very happy to help fund community pubs through the community ownership fund.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The Citizens theatre in Glasgow is a much-beloved institution and has been undergoing refurbishment for several years. It has had a range of funding from Glasgow City Council, the Scottish Government and Historic Environment Scotland, but, due to inflation and various measures, it still requires additional funding to make up the balance

and complete its really significant refurbishment programme. Is the community ownership fund something that the Citizens theatre might be able to avail itself of?

Jacob Young: Once again, it sounds as though the theatre may be eligible. I cannot comment on its eligibility today, but I am happy to meet the hon. Lady to discuss whether the fund is appropriate for the Citizens theatre.

Local Authority Finance

13. **Nigel Mills** (Amber Valley) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to help ensure the financial sustainability of local authorities. [901772]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): We have made available up to £64.7 billion for local authorities through the local government finance settlement for 2024-25—an above-inflation increase of up to £4.5 billion, or 7.5% in cash terms, on 2023-24. Of course, that includes an additional £600 million of funding, which was announced by my hon. Friend the Minister for Local Government on 24 January.

Nigel Mills: Aside from potholes, the issue that has caused the most angst for Derbyshire County Council is the significant rise in the cost of residential placements for looked-after children. The council believes that the market for this is now completely out of control and that prices are excessive. Is there more that the Government can do to help councils financially to pay these bills or to find a better way to structure that market so that the bills are not so high?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are spending £500 million additionally on adult and children's social care, but he is right to say that the cost of residential homes for looked-after children is excessive, and a number of private equity firms are operating like bandits in this area. I have talked to the Minister responsible, the Under-Secretary of State for Education, my hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (David Johnston), and action will be forthcoming.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Select Committee, Clive Betts.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Select Committee recently produced a report on local government finance in which we said that the Government must act now if local authorities are to survive this severe crisis. What has the Secretary of State done? He has asked every local authority to produce a productivity plan. That sounds a bit like advising councils how to spend better the money they have not got. He has asked local authorities to identify

“ways to reduce wasteful spend”.

What does he think they have been doing for the last 13 years? In particular, he has asked them to identify waste on

“discredited staff equality, diversity and inclusion programmes”.

How much does he think that will save when it comes to avoiding section 114 notices?

Michael Gove: The Chairman of the Select Committee is right to say that local government is facing challenges, but there are outstanding councils—North Lincolnshire and South Norfolk, for example—that are continuing to ensure that they can build up surpluses and deliver effective services. That is because they put productivity first. There are some local authorities, lamentably, that are not putting productivity first. They include South Cambridgeshire, with its plans for a four-day week, and St Albans, which is still spending money on discredited forms of training that only increase division rather than bringing communities together. It is no coincidence that both those local authorities are Liberal Democrat.

Property Repairs: Recourse for Renters

16. **Steve Tuckwell** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Con): Whether his Department is taking steps to ensure that there is appropriate recourse for renters if property repairs and safety concerns are not adequately dealt with by landlords. [901776]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): Where landlords fail to keep their properties in an acceptable condition, local authorities can issue improvement notices and impose penalties for non-compliance. Social tenants can already access the housing ombudsman service, and the Renters (Reform) Bill will establish a new landlord ombudsman service so that private tenants can also seek free redress.

Steve Tuckwell: While these changes in legislation are welcome, it is clear that more must be done. Too many rental and leasehold residents in my constituency face ongoing issues in ensuring that landlords and freeholders face up to their responsibilities. Will the Minister work with me to ensure that my residents in precarious situations with unresponsive landlords or leaseholders are able to access the correct course of remedial action in a timely and effective manner?

Jacob Young: I will indeed work with my hon. Friend to ensure that his residents, who he is such a brilliant champion for, can access redress. We are committed to protecting tenants from the minority of landlords and agents who provide a poor service. Where a property is managed by an agent, residents can seek redress through the property ombudsman or the property redress scheme, as well as the housing ombudsman for social tenants and the new ombudsman for private tenants. The Leasehold and Freehold Reform Bill will require freeholders who manage their property to join a redress scheme, too.

Fleur Anderson (Putney) (Lab): Too many children across the country are still being hospitalised because there is mould in their private rented homes. Repairs and concerns especially about mould are the subject of Awaab's law, which is being brought in, but private landlords are being let off the hook. Will the Minister consider supporting my private Member's Bill to extend Awaab's law and ensure that private landlords fulfil their responsibilities to fix mould?

Jacob Young: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for the time we have spent together discussing her private Member's Bill. Through the Renters (Reform) Bill we are introducing

a new decent homes standard for the private rented sector, which I believe covers the majority of her Bill, but I would be happy to continue those discussions with her further.

Norfolk Devolution Deal

18. **Duncan Baker** (North Norfolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to implement the Norfolk devolution deal. [901778]

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): My Department is supporting the implementation of the Norfolk devolution deal, which is progressing well. Norfolk County Council, under its brilliant leader, intends to vote to change its governance in July, leading to the election of a directly elected leader in May 2025.

Duncan Baker: The Budget, in a couple of days' time, could do two things for Norfolk. First, it could announce the county deal to give Norfolk control of its future. Even more importantly, it could provide the vehicle for my Sheringham roundabout, which the Secretary of State knows all about. The roundabout will be wonderful for my North Norfolk constituency, so has he convinced the Chancellor to announce it yet?

Michael Gove: I cannot reveal the nature of any discussions I have had with the Chancellor, but Sheringham roundabout is one of the single most important infrastructure investments in Norfolk. My hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Duncan Baker) has convincingly made the case to me, and I hope we will be able to get motoring on it before too long.

Social Rented Housing

19. **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South East) (Lab): What steps he is taking to increase the provision of social rented housing. [901779]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): Our £11.5 billion affordable housing programme will deliver thousands of affordable homes for both rent and purchase right across the country. The levelling-up White Paper committed to increasing the supply of social rented homes, and a large number of the new homes delivered through our affordable homes programme will be for social rent.

Yasmin Qureshi: In Bolton, 20,000 people are on a housing waiting list. There is an 18-month wait for a three-bedroom house and, on average, 800 to 900 people apply for each home that comes up. Families are often referred to the private rented sector, which they are not able to afford—we know that rents are sky high. After 14 years of this Tory Government failing to build affordable homes, will the Minister now apologise to my constituents who are stuck in temporary accommodation?

Jacob Young: The hon. Lady mentions the last 14 years. Well, since 2010, we have delivered over 696,000 new affordable homes, including over 482,000 affordable homes for rent, of which 172,000 are for social rent. We are committed to building more homes for people like her constituents.

Topical Questions

T1. [901785] **Debbie Abrahams** (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Michael Gove): On Friday, at the convention of the north, I was delighted to confirm enhanced devolution deals for the Liverpool city region, West Yorkshire and South Yorkshire and additional investment in Blackpool, Sheffield and Blackburn. That includes £1.5 million for Tony's Empress Ballroom, which—as you know, Mr Speaker—is an iconic northern soul dance hall. I look forward to visiting it with you and the shadow Secretary of State soon.

Mr Speaker: On the dancefloor tonight!

Debbie Abrahams: A constituent recently came to my surgery with her seven-year-old son to show some appalling photographs of the private rented accommodation in which they live. The little boy asked me whether he is going to die because of the thick mould in his bedroom. Given the housing ombudsman's recent remarks, particularly emphasising the link between housing conditions and health, what urgent action will the Secretary of State take to address the appalling situation in the private rented sector?

Michael Gove: We will shortly say more about the decent homes standard and the extension of the ombudsman's powers to deal with precisely the sort of situation that the hon. Lady raises.

T2. [901786] **Dr Thérèse Coffey** (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): My local housing association, Flagship Newtide, has sold off three more homes in Aldeburgh at auction since the last Levelling Up, Housing and Communities questions. However, it is failing to take action on the antisocial behaviour that is affecting several of my constituents in Saxmundham. What powers can we apply to make sure that people who do the right thing and want to live peacefully in their home are not surrounded by people who deal drugs, breed illegal pets and make other people's lives a misery?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Jacob Young): Tackling antisocial behaviour is a priority for this Government, which is why we have published our antisocial behaviour action plan, backed with £160 million of new funding. We have committed to a "three strikes and you're out" ASB policy, and landlords will be expected to evict tenants whose behaviour is disruptive to neighbours. My right hon. Friend will be pleased to know that, from 1 April, the social housing regulator will require registered providers of social housing to work with the appropriate local authority, the Department, the police and other relevant organisations to tackle antisocial behaviour.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall) (Lab/Co-op): This week's Budget will be a big one for young people—16 and 17-year-olds—who are starting work or making important education choices, yet they currently have no say on

who will be the next Government. We on the Opposition Benches believe in our young people. Will the Government act now to give 16 and 17-year-olds a say in the next general election?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (Simon Hoare): The hon. Lady makes a case for lowering the voting age—one that I do not support and the Government do not support. The age of 18 is seen as the age of maturity in this country and many others across the world. It seems to have served us pretty well up to now and I see no particular reason to change it.

T3. [901787] **Marco Longhi** (Dudley North) (Con): Will the Minister join me in congratulating South Staffordshire Council on serving an enforcement notice to rebuild the Crooked House pub? Will he also look favourably at measures I will be bringing forward to ensure that heritage pubs are better protected, because, as he will know, the Crooked House and many others have had no protections at all?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important argument, and the case of the Crooked House reinforces what he has long campaigned for: better protection for heritage pubs. I look forward to working with him and Lord Mendoza to achieve just that.

T4. [901788] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): The Secretary of State is a strong supporter of green urban spaces, so will he urgently meet me to discuss the ancient Haven Green, which is currently under threat and on which he is due to make a decision soon?

Michael Gove: Obviously, I cannot speak to the hon. Lady about specific planning applications. I do cherish urban green spaces, but I also cherish more homes being built in London. It would be regrettable if she were to be a blocker, not a builder.

Jane Stevenson (Wolverhampton North East) (Con): Since my election, I have urged Wolverhampton City Council to focus on city centre living, to bring footfall back to our city centre. What more can the Government do on that? I am delighted that the council is now changing its plans, but how can we get upper storeys converted as well, to really bring that footfall back?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend is a brilliant champion for Wolverhampton and for Wulfrunians everywhere. In particular, she has been the single most effective voice in attracting investment to the heart of Wolverhampton. She is right to say that, as well as commercial investment, we need new residential opportunities, and our extension of permitted development rights should provide just that.

T5. [901789] **Chris Stephens** (Glasgow South West) (SNP): Will the Minister for the Union tell me what discussions he has had with devolved Administrations, and with the Chancellor, on the very important matter of infected blood compensation? Does he recognise the frustration and dismay from many campaigners at the delays? They have waited almost a year since Sir Brian Langstaff reported on his compensation framework.

Michael Gove: The hon. Gentleman raises a very important point. Those who have suffered as a result of the infected blood scandal are, of course, in the forefront of our minds. This is directly a Cabinet Office responsibility, but I know from my time there how seriously the Ministers charged with that responsibility take it. I will talk to them and update the devolved Administrations on progress towards appropriate compensation.

Neil O'Brien (Harborough) (Con): The Government are to be commended for taking through the first leasehold reforms for 20 years, but as the Bill now goes to the Lords, will Ministers go further and agree: first, to empower the 3 million to 4 million people trapped on leasehold estates; and, secondly, to fundamentally end this scammy, dodgy, corrupt model once and for all?

The Minister for Housing, Planning and Building Safety (**Lee Rowley**): My hon. Friend makes an important point about making sure that we strike the right balance. We have brought forward significant reforms in the Bill, but I am happy to continue to talk to him and other Members who are interested. The Government continue to look at what more can be done.

T7. [901791] **Paula Barker** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (Lab): Last week we saw, for a second year running, rough sleeping numbers up by more than a quarter—that is a lot of people to criminalise if the Criminal Justice Bill remains unamended. More than 100,000 households, including 140,000 children, find themselves stuck in temporary accommodation, yet the mere mention of temporary accommodation sees Ministers pivot away from the subject entirely. This should be a source of shame for this Government. So where is the national plan to end all forms of homelessness? I sincerely hope it is not in the same place as the Government's plan for ending section 21 evictions.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities (**Felicity Buchan**): This Government have a clear plan that we introduced last year: ending rough sleeping for good. We announced £2 billion behind it and the figure is now £2.4 billion. We are giving unprecedented amounts of money to this very important task.

James Morris (Halesowen and Rowley Regis) (Con): Haden Hill leisure centre in my constituency is to be part rebuilt and part refurbished by a £20 million investment from the levelling-up fund. Does the Minister agree that the Department needs to continue to be engaged with the local authority, which is appointing contractors, to make sure that this project gets delivered on time and on budget?

Jacob Young: My hon. Friend is a fantastic champion for his constituents. I am happy to meet him to discuss the delays as soon as we can. The project adjustment process is available to the council if it needs to use it.

T9. [901793] **Judith Cummins** (Bradford South) (Lab): In 2010, total wealth per head in the north of England was 16% lower than in the rest of England. Last week, the Institute for Public Policy Research released a report that estimated that by 2030, this gap will have grown to 21%. Can the Secretary of State confirm that this Government's policies have achieved levelling up?

Michael Gove: I was delighted to be in West Yorkshire on Friday outlining the additional investment that we are making in that region. The agreement that we have reached with the Mayor of West Yorkshire, Tracy Brabin, will see significant additional funds going in to help with housing, adult skills and transport, all of which will contribute to a revolution in devolution that has occurred under this Conservative Government.

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Rural areas are particularly vulnerable to the high energy costs we have seen in the last two years. They are 150% more vulnerable to fuel poverty. Does my right hon. Friend agree that councils on the frontline of high rural costs are seeing a spate of homelessness? Great councils, such as Breckland Council in my patch, are now spending 50% of their net budget on relief. Would he support me in urging the Chancellor to increase that relief in the Budget on Wednesday?

Michael Gove: My hon. Friend makes an important point. We are concentrating on ensuring we can level up the north and the midlands, but we also need to recognise that levelling up encompasses making sure that those in rural areas, who contribute so much to the life of our nation, are supported through the challenges that the cost of living crisis has generated.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister advise me how many people took up the offer of the former help to buy ISA scheme? Has another such scheme been considered to allow young people to get on the seemingly impossible first rung of the property ladder?

Lee Rowley: As a Government, we continue to bring forward as many interventions as we can to support young people to get on the housing ladder. Some 800,000 first-time buyers have managed to do that since 2010. I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman to talk more about the points he has made.

Sir Michael Ellis (Northampton North) (Con): Today, the Charity Commission issued new guidance for charities that refuse to accept donations. That comes after the Royal National Lifeboat Institution turned down a donation from Dungarvan Foxhounds Supporters Club in the Republic of Ireland. Declining a donation from a lawful source may not be consistent with the legal duty of trustees to “further their charity's purpose”. Will my right hon. Friend support the right of communities throughout the British Isles to donate to charities of their choice?

Michael Gove: My right hon. and learned Friend, the former Attorney General, raises a very important point. We want to do everything we can to encourage charitable giving. I will look closely at the case he mentions, and raise it with the Cabinet Office and Orlando Fraser KC, the distinguished chair of the Charity Commission, who is doing such a good job.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): There are businesses in York that have not been able to trade for over four months because of flooding. The flood recovery framework precludes them from getting funds, whereas those in the Tory shires are able to access funds. Will the Minister meet me to discuss the fact that businesses in my constituency cannot get funding? Let us find a way forward so that they do not miss out.

Simon Hoare: Yes.

Luke Hall (Thornbury and Yate) (Con): Councillors will not be covered by the newly passed Neonatal Care (Leave and Pay) Act 2023 and are at risk of losing extra responsibility allowances if they have a child who spends time in neonatal care. Will the local government Minister issue guidance to councils, asking them to ensure that all parents are protected if their councillors find themselves in those most difficult of circumstances?

Simon Hoare: My hon. Friend has worked on this campaign. We spoke about it last week and I understand entirely the merits of the argument he makes. So powerful is he as an advocate that I have already put work in hand to deliver what he is talking about.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): On the community ownership fund, it is welcome that the match funding requirements for local organisations have been reduced to 20%. In future rounds, could the criterion around match funding take account of prior investment

by the community, such as the very many small donations that people in the Axe valley area gave to build Seaton community hospital?

Michael Gove: That is an interesting idea. I am very fond of the Axe valley, so I will look at it.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): 1244 was the date of the first market charter awarded to Wellington in Shropshire, in my constituency. In the last three years, £3 million from the towns fund, £10 million from the levelling-up fund and £800,000 from a fund I cannot remember have provided record investment from this Government into the 800-year-old market town of Wellington. The Labour council has just taken over the market, so will the Secretary of State please ensure that the council do not mess it up?

Michael Gove: We will do everything we can. Wellington is very lucky to have such a brilliant advocate. I hope my right hon. Friend sits on the green Benches for many years to come, but when he is transferred to another place, he deserves to be the next Duke of Wellington.

Independent Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration

3.35 pm

Dame Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for the Home Office if he will make a statement on the publication of 13 reports by the former independent chief inspector of borders and immigration on 29 February and how the inspectorate will now operate in the absence of a chief inspector or deputy?

The Minister for Legal Migration and the Border (Tom Pursglove): We recognise that independent scrutiny, such as that provided by the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, plays an important role in ensuring that we have an effective immigration system. In January, the Home Secretary made a promise to the former chief inspector to publish all overdue reports as soon as possible, which I repeated in the House last month in response to an earlier urgent question. Last Thursday, we delivered on that promise by publishing all 13 reports that were outside the eight-week commitment to review and respond. We take ICIBI reports seriously and we do not wait until publication to act on its findings. Indeed, some of the reports' recommendations have now been implemented and work is ongoing across the Department to implement others. That includes action to strengthen border security and improve the system for processing asylum claims.

The final two reports from the former chief inspector will be published in the established eight-week period. There is no requirement for a chief inspector to be in place for that to happen, but the process of appointing his replacement is under way, with the advert going live the day after the former chief inspector had his appointment terminated. An appointment will be made following robust competition, in accordance with the governance code on public appointments. In addition, we are looking at options to appoint an interim chief inspector. We will, of course, update the House on the outcome of the appointment processes. We will also continue working with the right hon. Lady's Home Affairs Committee in relation to these matters.

The security and effectiveness of the UK border is of paramount importance. The Government recognise that, which is why we have taken wide-ranging action to tackle illegal migration and reform our asylum system. Our efforts are paying off, but there is more to do. We will never compromise on this. We will always put the safety and interests of the British people first.

Dame Diana Johnson: I agree with the Minister that the role of the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration provides indispensable scrutiny of vital Home Office functions. On Tuesday 20 February, the Home Secretary sacked David Neal. Eight days later, the Home Office published 13 of the 15 reports that the chief inspector had submitted during his tenure, none of which had been published within the agreed eight-week deadline following receipt.

The reports raise multiple serious concerns about the Home Office's handling of border security and immigration operations. Will the Minister confirm what action is being taken to address the report findings that the protection

of borders at airports is "neither effective nor efficient", with border posts being left unstaffed? What steps will the Minister take to remedy the serious failures identified in attempts to discover illegal goods at airports? Does the Minister accept the conclusion that attempting to clear the legacy backlog at all costs

"has led to perverse outcomes for claimants and staff",

with quality assurance "sacrificed for increased productivity"? With the new chief inspector not expected to be in post for six to nine months, and with no deputy to step up and exercise statutory responsibilities, will the Minister explain exactly how the inspectorate will operate during that period? Is all inspection work now on hold, and what happens to the inspectorate's 30-plus members of staff?

Last week, David Neal told the Select Committee of his concerns regarding Wethersfield asylum accommodation centre relating to suicide, violence and the lack of expertise to manage the situation. Will the Minister now agree to the Committee's request to visit Wethersfield?

The Committee last week published the 10 changes that David Neal thinks need to be made to improve the effectiveness of the inspectorate, including the power to publish its own reports, creating a deputy position, and providing access to commercial contracts entered into by the Home Office. Does the Minister have any plans to implement any of those recommendations? Finally, will he comment on the joint letter sent by seven national home affairs editors complaining about the decision to publish a slew of Home Office reports on the same day as the Sarah Everard report?

Tom Pursglove: I am grateful to the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee not only for asking those various questions but for the opportunity to respond to today's urgent question.

It is rather surprising that Ministers are being criticised for doing precisely what they said they would do. I was pressed a couple of times on when the reports would be published. I said that it would happen soon. I subsequently said that it would happen very soon, and that commitment was fulfilled. I give the right hon. Lady this undertaking, because this issue is important and I care about it, as I know she does: the two outstanding reports will be responded to in full and in the proper way within the eight-week window. I refer back to the commitment that my late friend James Brokenshire made to the House. She will appreciate that I came back to the Department in December. I would argue that we have made progress in publishing the reports. I assure the House that the existing reports that have not yet been responded to will be dealt with within the eight-week window. We will return to that approach in dealing with these matters, which is the right thing to do.

On the recommendations in the various reports, we have obviously responded to those reports. A number of recommendations have been accepted, a number have been progressed, and a number have been completed. The reports speak for themselves, and give an indication of the direction of travel that we intend to take. We also want to engage with the next inspector regarding that performance, to ensure that they have an important role in overseeing the delivery of the commitments that we have made in response to the issues that were understandably raised in the reports.

General aviation falls within the reports that are still to be responded to. As I say, that will happen within the eight-week window. I undertake to fulfil that commitment. On the asylum backlog, it is fair to say that there has been pressure from this House to get on and process asylum claims. I would argue that the teams have done remarkable work in delivering on the commitment to get on and process the legacy backlog. There has been much learning along the way, which we will take forward into future processing. There will be increased sampling in the way that the inspector recommended, as well as improvements to IT.

Arrangements for the ICIBI functions in this period are under consideration. The Minister for Countering Illegal Migration is the lead on that aspect of the Department's work. I know that Ministers will update the House accordingly. I am happy to consider the request from the Home Affairs Committee to visit Wethersfield.

One of the most frustrating things about all of this is that if Mr Neal had not gone to the media in the way that he did and put that information into the public domain in a way that was in breach of the terms of the agreement that he had with the Department to take on this capacity, he would still be in post and would be able to engage in the dialogue this week.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): To follow up on some specific questions from the Chair of the Home Affairs Committee that the Minister did not pick up on, is it not the case that David Neal was dismissed by Teams call by a civil servant? Why was he not afforded the courtesy of seeing a Minister? Is it not also the case that, despite the recruitment process having started last November, no suitable candidates came forward and the post had to be readvertised at a higher salary?

Thirdly, the Minister has not mentioned anything about how the inspectorate actually operates. Is it not the case that the 30 civil servants are unable to carry on their work on the reports they are currently working on, unable to carry out any inspections, unable to pick up the schedule of reports that has been programmed, and unable to comment on any responses to the reports?

Finally, can the Minister assure me that there were no redactions and nothing was removed from the 13 reports published en masse last week, because there is no inspector or deputy inspector to challenge the contents of the reports that have been put into the public domain?

Tom Pursglove: On my hon. Friend's final point, I will go away and check, and I will write to him. This is clearly an important function. The recruitment process was restarted the day after Mr Neal left the role. We are keen to make progress in appointing a new independent chief inspector of borders and immigration, and I encourage people to put themselves forward. It is an important role, and the Government value it. The relationship with the ICIBI will be in the terms that I set out: it will get on and publish reports within the eight-week framework for the existing workload. We will continue to work constructively with it when Mr Neal's successor is appointed. The second permanent secretary is engaging with the administrative team at the ICIBI, and we are looking at what can be done in the interim to bridge the gap between Mr Neal leaving and the new inspector taking post.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Home Secretary.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): We think of the family and friends of the seven-year-old who lost her life in the channel this weekend. It matters more than ever that we stop the criminal gangs and dangerous crossings that are undermining border security and putting so many lives at risk.

The Tory Home Secretary has shamefully tried to bury or hide 13 inspectorate reports and one National Audit Office report with damning revelations about Britain's borders, and now he has gone into hiding himself. He should be doing a statement on those reports, which show shocking border security failures, including border and customs posts not staffed. In one airport, the inspectorate was told,

"customs is shut down for the summer".

It found that equipment was

"either broken, not available, or untrusted",

and that there was

"a lack of anti-smuggling capability".

Mr Neal said that

"protection of the border is neither effective nor efficient".

Will the Minister tell us how many times customs and border posts have gone unstaffed this year? Does he even know? How many high-risk private flights were not checked in person? How long will there be no inspector in post?

More findings: only two people have been removed under the inadmissibility process that the Government claimed would cover tens of thousands, and 147 unaccompanied children who went missing have still not been found. On Rwanda, £400 million of taxpayers' money will have been spent even if no one is sent. If 300 people go, it will be £580 million. That is over half a billion pounds on a scheme that will cover less than 1% of UK asylum arrivals—nearly £2 million per person. I say to the Minister: do not give us any garbage about the Tories having a plan. That is not a plan; it is a farce. Why do they not stop wasting that money and instead put it into rebuilding border security and stopping the criminal gangs? That is Labour's plan.

Finally, there is the revelation that the Home Office has gone a shocking £5 billion over budget this year because it failed on the backlog, on returns, on hotels and on Rwanda—14 years of Tory Government, wasting taxpayers' money, weakening Britain's security. They have bust the Home Office budget and broken Britain's borders. Instead of hiding and running away, why do they not just get out of the way and let someone else do the job properly?

Tom Pursglove: That was a contribution to the House full of soundbites, as ever, but light on policy substance. We hear time and again from the right hon. Lady and her colleagues a lot of criticism of what the Government are doing and absolutely no credible policy alternative in response. It is incredibly frustrating. It just will not do, and the British people see straight through it.

I share the right hon. Lady's sentiments about the terrible incident at the weekend when that young girl lost her life. In the last few weeks, we have yet again seen lives lost in the channel, and that is a source of regret for all of us. That is why the Government are absolutely

[Tom Pursglove]

determined to put an end to these channel crossings. We are making progress—that is why the number of crossings last year was down by over a third compared with the year before, and Albanian arrivals are down by over 90%—but there is more work to do, and we will continue to see through the plan that is delivering those results.

The right hon. Lady mentions Rwanda. We have a fundamental point of difference in that the Government believe that the Rwanda policy is an important part of the answer in putting those evil criminal gangs out of business. It is not acceptable to spend £8 million a day in the asylum system. However, it does not take many spends of £8 million a day to get to the figures that have been provided to the NAO in a transparent manner. We will continue to publish those through the annual report and accounts. We think that advancing that policy and putting those criminal gangs out of action is the right thing to do, recognising that the policy is novel and has been challenging. She will, of course, have the opportunity to vote for the Rwanda legislation when it comes back from the other place, and I certainly encourage her and her colleagues to be in the Lobby with us, because it just will not do to have no credible plan.

The right hon. Lady refers to one of the comments made in the report. We do not accept it. The inspection covered only a small part of our border operations at a specific location and over a limited time period—it is a snapshot—and it is inappropriate to draw unsubstantiated wider conclusions through sweeping statements based on a three-day inspection. Ultimately, Border Force facilitates 132 million passenger arrivals last year, processing over 96% of passengers within service standards. Significant progress has been made since the report was commissioned to increase the number of officers trained in vulnerability and behavioural detection, and that is set to continue. We treat the inspector's recommendations with the utmost seriousness; we get on and deliver on those recommendations and, as I have consistently set out to the House, we now have a commitment to respond to those reports within eight weeks.

James Daly (Bury North) (Con): Following on from that point, there is clearly an issue with publication within eight weeks. Bearing in mind that the public purse is funding 30 civil servants and a chief inspector of immigration, has my hon. Friend considered a statutory basis for the eight-week requirement—or whatever requirement is necessary or proportionate—for the publication of such reports, to ensure efficiency in the system?

Tom Pursglove: In his usual way, my hon. Friend comes to the House with constructive suggestions for how the Government can go about their work. I am happy to put that suggestion to the Minister who leads on these matters in the Department. I can absolutely assure my hon. Friend that there is a commitment to engage with the reports within that eight-week window, which I would argue is within both the letter and the spirit of what the late great James Brokenshire said a few years ago.

Mr Speaker: I call the SNP spokesperson.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I thank David Neal for his work. Nobody can doubt that he was an independent chief inspector of borders and immigration,

and his reports bear testament to that work. He called out the Home Office for being particularly poor at communication, and for its data being “inexcusably awful.” In relation to Border Force, he highlighted “basic stuff not being done”.

He shone a bright light on the shoddy treatment of unaccompanied children in hotels, some of whom are still missing to this day and have not been found by the Home Office. He highlighted the

“lack of grip and poor leadership”

that resulted in those children becoming lost. He also highlighted the chaos and the secret policies being operated as part of the Afghan citizens resettlement scheme—utterly unacceptable.

What happens now to the planned inspections that are stuck in limbo? Those inspections include adults at risk, which is crucial as people have committed suicide in asylum accommodation. Small boats are all the more critical given the tragic loss of a seven-year-old wee girl just this week. On high-performance visas, on Rwanda, on Georgia and on age assessment, what will happen to the work plan that the chief inspector set out, and to the staff—expert inspectors—who are in place to deliver it? Will David Neal's recommendations be taken on by whoever follows him in that post? What will the Department do for future reports? Next time a report is published, will the Minister make a statement to the House, rather than being brought here by an urgent question?

Tom Pursglove: I am very grateful to the SNP spokesman for that variety of questions. I too, actually, want to place on record my thanks to Mr Neal for the work that he did—[*Interruption.*] There is chuntering from Opposition Members, but it is perfectly right and proper to thank him for his work.

There are recommendations that the Government have accepted and are taking forward. We treat the outcomes of those reports with the seriousness that they warrant. We will continue to work through those recommendations; even in the absence of an ICIBI, we will continue to make progress against our commitments. Obviously, we want to get on and appoint a replacement for Mr Neal, and that process is under way. We want to do that as quickly as possible, while also making sure that we properly engage the Home Affairs Committee in that process, and we will do so in the way that that Committee would rightly expect.

It is welcome that we no longer have any unaccompanied asylum-seeking children hotels under the auspices of the Home Office, but the recommendations that were made within the report still stand and, again, we treat them seriously. As I said at an earlier Home Affairs Committee appearance, I treat tracing missing asylum-seeking children with the utmost seriousness, and with better relationships with the police, improved guidance and other steps, we have managed to track down more of those children since we met at the Home Affairs Committee.

We continue to see Afghans arriving under the ACRS. That is welcome, and we will continue to evolve that scheme and make improvements where we can. We have made commitments around the scheme, and it is of real importance to me: fulfilling our promises to those who worked with the British Government and to others is a responsibility that I take incredibly seriously.

I want to make sure that we go about this recruitment process in the proper way, involving the Home Affairs Committee. The second permanent secretary is leading engagement with the secretariat at the ICIBI, and we will get on and appoint a successor.

Simon Fell (Barrow and Furness) (Con): I pay tribute to David Neal. It is fair to say that when we did his pre-appointment scrutiny at the Home Affairs Committee, we had doubts, but he has proved himself to be a diligent and dogged public servant in some of the most difficult circumstances. Notwithstanding the fact that he has not been reappointed, the 13 reports that have been published raise significant issues, whether that is the border at London City airport, Afghan resettlement, or child asylum seekers. Even though those reports have only just been published, what assurances can the Minister give that work has been undertaken on them? Will he also give me his thoughts on the excellent suggestion that the post should be made independent so that the chief inspector can publish reports when they are ready, rather than dropping them into the Home Office memory hole and hoping for the best?

Tom Pursglove: My hon. Friend is a diligent member of the Home Affairs Committee. It is fair to say that where recommendations are made, we engage with them constructively, and progress will quite often be made against those recommendations even in advance of reports being published. He can absolutely have an assurance from me that we will continue to work through the commitments that we have made in responding to various recommendations in those 13 reports and, having made this promise to this House, that future reports will be published within an eight-week window.

My hon. Friend has raised a point about procedure. I am happy to take that point away and raise it with ministerial colleagues who have direct responsibility for the ICIBI relationship.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Ind): As colleagues have said, the Home Affairs Committee found Mr Neal to be a very diligent and committed public servant. Does the Minister share the chief inspector's concern about unaccompanied child migrants? He reported on them playing very unsuitable games—trying to bet which one of them would be the first to go into foster care—and on their ages being overestimated, resulting in children sharing bedrooms with much older adults. Does the Minister propose to follow up on any of the issues that the chief inspector raised?

Tom Pursglove: The right hon. Lady should know that that is an area we have been very concerned about. The issue of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children should never, ever be the subject of a game. I think all of us were horrified to hear about that incident, and following those inspection findings, the Department launched an immediate investigation into the inappropriate behaviour of the support worker, who was removed from site immediately and did not return. As I have said, all seven hotels used to accommodate unaccompanied asylum-seeking children have since closed. The Department has taken the recommendations seriously, and there is a lot of learning there for the future as we take forward our work, including our wider work with local authorities on safeguarding the most vulnerable children.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I welcome the Minister's earlier assurance about Afghans who fought with or otherwise supported our troops against the Taliban. Can he explain, for the benefit of those of us not au fait with the details of this dispute, for what reason these reports were not published earlier, and at what level the decision not to publish was taken? Had they been published sooner, would the inspector have been out of a job, and would we have been looking for a replacement?

Tom Pursglove: We have gone into the termination of the inspector's appointment before in this House: he lost the confidence of the Home Secretary, and information was shared in the media that ought not to have been shared; it was confidential, and outside the appropriate publication process. On the publication of reports, I cannot speak to earlier decisions made under previous Ministers, but I said very clearly on a number of occasions that we would get on and respond to the reports, and that is precisely what we have done. I also reassure the House today—I think this is important, and that the House is interested in this point—that we will respond to the reports within eight weeks. That arguably lives up to both the letter and spirit of the commitment that James Brokenshire made all those years ago, when he held this role.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): These reports are, cumulatively, a remarkable catalogue of past failings, but may I invite the Minister to look ahead? He has referred to the Rwanda scheme; does he agree that the incoming independent inspector must be allowed to examine the workings of that scheme, and that it should not be implemented unless and until the next inspector has given it a satisfactory bill of health?

Tom Pursglove: It will of course be for the next inspector to decide on their programme of work, but I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman on his latter point. I would argue that lives are at stake, and that every day that people lose their lives in the channel is one day too many. We are making progress on seeing through our commitment to put an end to these channel crossings, but the Rwanda policy is absolutely front and centre; it is the next piece of the jigsaw when it comes to putting these evil criminal gangs out of business, and we should not wait any longer than is absolutely necessary to get on and deliver on that work.

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): The Rwanda policy has cost over £500 million—an approximate cost of £2 million for each individual the Government are seeking to transport to Rwanda. Will the Bill ever be implemented, and is it good value for the taxpayer?

Tom Pursglove: I hear a lot of criticism there, but no constructive suggestion on what the hon. Gentleman would do in the absence of the Rwanda policy. As I have said, we engage properly and thoroughly with the National Audit Office on the figures, and we continue to be committed to providing transparency around those figures through the annual report and accounts. The Rwanda policy is an important part of our answer when it comes to putting an end to these criminal gangs and the terrible criminality that they oversee. Crucially, this is about saving lives, and we will get on and deliver the policy.

[Tom Pursglove]

He will, no doubt, have the opportunity in the next few weeks to vote for that Bill, and so help us to operationalise that policy and put those evil criminal gangs out of business.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The borders inspectorate found that staff working in a Home Office-run hotel made unaccompanied asylum-seeking children play a disgraceful game to find out which child was next to be placed in foster care, a practice certain to cause more distress to already traumatised children. The same report found that agency workers employed to look after children as young as nine had insufficient background checks and training. What has the Minister done to ensure that he understands the full extent of the risks to children in the asylum system, and what steps is he taking to end such disgraceful practices, and to guarantee that everyone working with children is properly vetted and trained?

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Lady is right to say that everybody working with children has to be properly vetted. We have taken seriously the recommendations that Mr Neal made in response to that issue. As I said to the right hon. Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott), this was a terrible situation. There was accountability in relation to the individual who thought it appropriate to play that game, which was, to any Member of this House and any right-minded person, abhorrent. The hon. Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) is right to say that we are talking about children in difficult circumstances who have been through an awful lot. All those individuals—I would use the word “professionals”—have a responsibility to care for those children, and to behave in an appropriate way befitting their role. There are no longer any unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in hotels open under the Home Office’s remit, but there is value in the recommendations, which should carry through into the work that we do with local authorities.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): The Independent Anti-Slavery Commissioner, Dame Sara Thornton, raised concerns about Government policy on trafficking and slavery. Her contract was not renewed, and that crucial post was vacant for 16 months. David Neal, as the ICIBI, raised concerns about immigration, and he was sacked. That post will be vacant for months. The Minister has said that independent scrutiny plays an important role, but does he not agree that under this Government, independent scrutiny is not only not valued, but becoming a sackable offence?

Tom Pursglove: I have been clear with the House about the basis on which Mr Neal’s contract was terminated. I do not think it was appropriate for him to share confidential information in the way he did; it was outside the process for publication. However, as I have said repeatedly, we want to get on and appoint a successor. The chief inspector of borders and immigration has an important role and remit; the House and the Government see value in it. We are looking at what can be done to bridge the gap in the absence of a full-time, permanent chief inspector. We will no doubt say more once that work has been concluded.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Africa, I met David Neal a number of times. He was incredibly impressive, robust, well-informed, all over the detail, and entirely independent. It beggars belief that the Government ignored his reports for so long—publication is essential for scrutiny—sacked him over Teams, and dumped all the reports out at once. Does the Minister believe that the Home Office is so perfect, and that everything is going so well, that it should be above scrutiny? Or is it more the case that everything is going so badly, including on Rwanda, the asylum backlog and our border security, that there is no hope of improvement until we have a change of Government?

Tom Pursglove: That is an interesting observation, but what sits behind it, I am afraid, is a lack of policy and a lack of an alternative, credible approach to borders and immigration. Mr Neal said this in response to the reports being laid before Parliament last week:

“I think it’s a real positive that these reports have been published. I think it bodes well that the home secretary has gripped his officials in getting these reports published so quickly”.

I agree with him. I promised that we would lay those reports before Parliament; we have got on and done it, and we will table the outstanding reports within the eight-week window, moving forward.

Lilian Greenwood (Nottingham South) (Lab): Last week’s figures showed 46,000 people still in asylum hotels. David Neal’s report said:

“There is no evidence of a Home Office strategy to end hotel use, as recommended by ICIBI in 2022.”

He is right, is he not?

Tom Pursglove: I am afraid that what is right is that the hon. Lady consistently votes against the strategy to end the use of hotels, as do her colleagues on the Opposition Front Bench and Back Benches. The way to address the issue of hotels is: to diversify the accommodation offer; to ensure that local authority areas engage properly with dispersed accommodation—I encourage all Members of this House to take an interest in the performance of their local authority—and to bring into being larger sites, such as those that we have brought forward. Crucially, we have to reduce the flow of people coming across the channel and arriving in our country illegally. Every time Opposition Members have the chance to do something about the flow of people arriving, which undoubtedly leads to the pressures that she touches on, they refuse to do so. That is where the scandal really lies.

Andrew Gwynne (Denton and Reddish) (Lab): Is the Government’s failure to tackle the asylum backlog, the Minister’s inability to grapple with the asylum hotel issue, or the staggering cost of the Rwanda deal, at £2 million per person taken out of this country, the reason why the Minister has broken the Home Office budget, and will come to Parliament cap in hand next week, asking for an extra £5.5 billion of funding for the Home Office?

Tom Pursglove: I am afraid that the hon. Member is yet another Opposition Member with no credible alternative to speak of—just lots of complaints about the work that the Government are doing. We are making progress.

As I have said, last year, the number of people who arrived via the channel was down by a third compared to the year before. The population accommodated in hotels is going down, and the number of hotels open is reducing.

Andrew Gwynne: Five billion pounds.

Tom Pursglove: The Government are making progress. We are living up to the commitments—

Andrew Gwynne: Five billion pounds.

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Member can keep parroting figures and chuntering from the Back Benches, but I would rather he came forward with a credible alternative plan. Perhaps then we could have a conversation.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): The shambles that is the ongoing mismanagement of our borders and the Government mismanagement of the huge asylum backlog, which was just referred to, is now enhanced by the additional shambles of an unnecessary interregnum. In answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), the Minister seemed to imply that independent oversight would not be necessary in the next few weeks and months while there is an interregnum over the Rwanda deal. If the Government are right—in the best-case scenario, from their perspective—1% of all asylum seekers will go to Rwanda. Apparently, that is so important that independent oversight is not necessary during this period. Will the Minister confirm that until a new inspector is formally and fully appointed and in post, there will be no further progress in deporting anybody to Rwanda?

Tom Pursglove: It is rather ironic that the hon. Gentleman argues for due process on the one hand, and says that we should dispense with it on the other. The contract of the chief inspector of borders was terminated because of respects in which his actions were not in accordance

with the agreement around the post. That was not an acceptable situation. The Home Secretary lost confidence in him, and that was why steps were taken.

I welcome oversight and accountability. There will be opportunities for scrutiny of the work on Rwanda. On the point that the hon. Gentleman sought to suggest that I had made, I was clear in saying that we should not waste any time when lives are at risk in the channel. We should not waste a moment in getting on and operationalising that Rwanda policy, but there will of course be plenty of opportunity for scrutiny of that work.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): May I put on record my thanks to the Minister for all the work that he did for one of my constituents last week, and for ensuring that one of the Ukrainian babies got back to Northern Ireland?

We should bear in mind the gap that has been left in this vital component of our immigration response. On the role of civil servants and the importance of ministerial oversight, most recently, the difficulty in Northern Ireland, where there was an absence of Ministers in situ, was that although senior civil servants could make decisions, they were loth to do so; and those who made decisions did not provide the usual accountability or explanation of decisions. How will the Minister ensure that that does not remain the case until a replacement for the independent chief inspector of borders and immigration is in place?

Tom Pursglove: The hon. Member always goes about his business in the House diligently, and he speaks with great passion about Northern Ireland; I am delighted that we now have Ministers back in government there. I look forward to engaging with counterparts in Northern Ireland on these issues. I reassure him that that engagement will be the cornerstone of the work that we do. There is a commitment to engage thoroughly and extensively. As I said, we want to get on and appoint a replacement inspector; it is an important role for everybody in the United Kingdom. The functions that the inspector oversees matter to everybody the length and breadth of this country, and we will make that appointment as soon as we can.

Point of Order

4.15 pm

Neale Hanvey (Kirkcaldy and Cowdenbeath) (Alba): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I extend my thanks to your office and to the Clerks for preparing for this point of order.

On Friday 1 March, during the debate on the Conversion Practices (Prohibition) Bill, the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) spoke of the need for LGBT Members and staff to feel safe coming to work in this place. In response, I asked her:

“In fact, people in the LGB community are often referred to as “bigots”, “transphobes” and other slurs just because we have concerns about legislation such as this and want to make sure that young LGB people are protected—and trans people. Does the hon. Lady agree that that rule must apply to all sides of any debate, not just to the side that she favours?” The hon. Member responded:

“The hon. Gentleman is entirely right, but there was one letter missing in his LGB: the letter T. We do not divide the LGBT community in this place. Members can say that they have concerns about what we are doing, but by removing the T, the hon. Gentleman is suggesting that transgender people do not exist. He is suggesting that they are less than other LGB people, and I will not stand for that, because it was trans people who stood with gay people at Stonewall; it was trans people who fought alongside them for LGB rights. I will happily discuss the intricacies of legislation with the hon. Gentleman, but when he chooses to eradicate, that is wrong.”

Later in the debate she made the following comment about the UK’s only gay rights charity:

“that includes the LGB Alliance, who have also removed the T”. —[*Official Report*, 1 March 2024; Vol. 746, c. 556.]

That raises the following serious concerns. Despite specifically mentioning the safety of trans people immediately prior to asking my question, the Member launched into what felt like a targeted attack on my character. Furthermore, it felt like that was aggravated by my protected characteristics of same-sex attraction and gender critical beliefs. In addition, the Member, a heterosexual woman, felt it appropriate to lecture me, a homosexual male, on the boundaries under which she believes I should be permitted to exercise my rights and protections. Specifically, she demanded that this should centre the needs of the completely separate protected characteristic of gender reassignment—commonly known as force-teaming. The Member then gave an inaccurate account of the Stonewall riots, which has been corrected repeatedly by eyewitness testimony.

As a direct consequence, various news outlets have wrongly accused me of “dropping the T” and have ignored the context of a straight woman lecturing a gay man about what rights he is permitted to use. Given the sensitivity of these matters, that is deeply concerning. I have had five years of abuse, including murderous threats, mainly from heterosexuals who claim to be allies—but they are allies of queer theory, not lesbians, gay men, bisexuals or transsexual people. That outburst felt deliberate and targeted. I consider these behaviours emblematic of the modern-day homophobia that has

been insinuated into our culture by organisations such as Stonewall and Mermaids. In response to the clip on social media—

Mr Speaker: Order. I hope the Member will be coming to an end very quickly.

Neale Hanvey: Mr Speaker, this is the text that was agreed with the Clerks.

In response to the video clip on social media, prominent transexual campaigner Dr Debbie Hayton said:

“We trans people value the right to organise separately from the LGB as trans people. My LGB friends need and deserve the same right to organise separately from us. We can still organise together when it serves both groups. Nobody is ‘lesser’”.

A statement issued by the Gay Men’s Network noted that the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton’s comments were

“not characteristic of an otherwise civilised debate. We urge her to reflect on these comments and consider apologising.”

I agree. At the very least the Member should apologise—not just to me but to others who may feel threatened by her remarks. Any further consideration will be contingent on that.

After the debate, two Members—the Members for Jarrow (Kate Osborne) and for Nottingham East (Nadia Whittome)—both gave inaccurate accounts of the outcome of the day’s debate, laying blame for its failure at the doors of opponents. The truth is that the Bill failed to garner sufficient support in the closure motion proposed by the hon. Member for Brighton, Kemptown (Lloyd Russell-Moyle). Again, in this sensitive policy area, that shows a lack of concern for the safety of all Members, and risks whipping up targeted harassment. These posts should be removed and the Members should apologise. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: I am very disappointed that the Clerks agreed to such a long text. This is an important issue and the hon. Member is quite right to raise his concern, but I am concerned about the length of time it has taken. I therefore hope that I will be speaking with the Clerks.

I am grateful to the hon. Member for his point of order and for giving notice of it. I hope he notified hon. Members that he intended to refer to them in the Chamber. Hon. Members are responsible for the content of their own speeches, provided that they remain within the House’s rules of order. I understand the strength of the hon. Member’s feelings, but the Chair heard nothing disorderly in the remarks made by the hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Alicia Kearns) on Friday. He is correct in his observation that the Conversion Practices (Prohibition) Bill did not make further progress because fewer than 100 Members voted for closure. It is also true that the House continued to debate the Bill until the moment of interruption, which is unusual, although Members are entirely within their rights to do so. I thank the hon. Member again for giving me notice.

Farming

4.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Wales (Fay Jones): I beg to move,

That this House has considered farming.

I am delighted to open the debate on behalf of the Government, but I am also incredibly proud to speak on behalf of the many thousands of farmers I represent. Hon. and right hon. Members may be confused as to why I am opening the debate, but it is precisely because the Government believe in the importance of our Union and the industries that sustain it that I am here this afternoon. The Government understand that farming drives rural Britain. It generates jobs and growth in rural areas. My constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire is home to proud beef, sheep and poultry farmers—365 days a year, they produce world-class food that is good for our health, good for our economy and good for our environment.

That brings me to the key reason I am here today. A fortnight ago, the Prime Minister told the National Farmers Union conference that we, the Conservative party, will always have their back. To farmers across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland, I give that commitment again.

Farming has unique potential to address the world's biggest challenges: feeding a growing world, reducing emissions and restoring nature. Those huge tasks have been complicated by the recent reality of volatile global prices, as well as by changes in weather patterns and climate, but to address the long term, it is the immediate challenges that need to be dealt with. The Government have been working to tackle one of the biggest drains on farm incomes. Inflation is down from 11% last year to 4% now. Beyond those immediate challenges, we have a plan for supporting British farming, bolstered by the Prime Minister's announcements a fortnight ago. The plan to back our farmers has three elements.

First, we are investing in farmers. Our commitment to farming is absolutely solid and every penny of England's £2.4 billion annual farming budget will be spent on farmers across this Parliament. In England, we are stepping away from the bureaucratic and dysfunctional common agricultural policy. Instead, our new system focuses on long-term food security by supporting and investing in the essential foundations, from healthy soils to clean water. Our plan is starting to pay off, as nearly half of all farmers are now in one of our schemes in England. January 2024 brought about the biggest upgrade to farming schemes since Brexit gave us the opportunity to design our own agricultural support. A fortnight ago, the Prime Minister went further still to support farmers. He announced our biggest ever package of grants, expected to total £427 million in 2024.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): I recently visited Andrew Gilman at Statfold Farm. He has a biomass boiler, he has solar panels on the roofs and he even has a wind turbine, but what he wants from the Government is help with mechanising the milking process—he wants some robots. Is that the type of thing the Government would support?

Fay Jones: I congratulate my hon. Friend on raising that point, and I congratulate Andrew on his innovation. That is exactly the type of thing that the Government want to support, which is why we have announced the biggest ever package of funding—as I have said, about £427 million.

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (Ind): I look forward to debating this subject with the Minister in Westminster Hall tomorrow. I think that the Government have left themselves open to the accusation that they have neglected farmers' interests in the post-Brexit trade deals that they have signed. What assurances can she give the House that in future trade deals the interests of farmers will be at the top of the pile?

Fay Jones: I would not want to give away all my best lines before tomorrow's debate in Westminster Hall, and I look forward to seeing the hon. Gentleman there. I will say, however, that I do not agree with his assessment of the trade deals that the Government have been able to strike outside the European Union. They represent real opportunities for farmers across England and Wales, and he would do well to support them.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her commitment to farming as a whole across the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. That is important to us in Northern Ireland, including my constituents. Will the Minister commit herself to working with the regional Administrations—and the Northern Ireland Assembly is now up and running, with a new Minister—to ensure that we can work together within this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland? Together, we can do great things.

Fay Jones: The hon. Gentleman is entirely right. I am certainly committed to working with Ministers in all the devolved Administrations of the United Kingdom in my role in the Wales Office, and I know that DEFRA Ministers are as well.

On innovation, we have a grant package upgrade that will make a concrete difference to British farms, for example by bolstering the improving farming productivity fund, which will allow farmers such as Andrew—mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Walsall North (Eddie Hughes)—to invest in robotic equipment and barn-top solar.

Secondly, we are changing our approach, and building a culture that is based on trust. Farmers have asked for a fairer and more supportive regulatory system, so in England we have reformed our approach and have already cut penalties for minor issues by 40%. We have ended the harsh EU cross-compliance system, instead choosing a fairer and more preventative approach to regulation. No one cares more about the land, or the ability to pass on a healthy farm to future generations, than farmers themselves.

Ben Everitt (Milton Keynes North) (Con): This is about more than just passing on a farm; it is about producing food for the nation, and we are proud that our farmers do that. Can my hon. Friend confirm that this Government will always back farmers as food producers rather than wildflower growers?

Fay Jones: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. What we are seeking to deliver is a combination of the two, certainly in England.

Farmers deserve that trust, and we have announced that we will deliver on our promise to cut the planning red tape that is preventing them from diversifying. In April we will introduce legislation enabling them to create bigger farm shops, commercial space and outdoor sports venues. Farmers have raised the issue of the often unfair pricing that they receive for their products, so a fortnight ago we introduced new regulations for the dairy sector, and we are also launching a review of the poultry sector. We will introduce similar regulations for the pig sector later in the year, with regulations for the egg sector to follow.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): I hear what the Minister is saying, and she is making a powerful point, but in Exmoor we have a national park that stopped everything happening. We need to get the national parks under control. They will not allow farm shops, and they will not allow development. Sheep farmers on Exmoor have enough trouble as it is without being told that they cannot let holiday cottages, set up farm shops or apply for planning permission. Could we please make an exception for the national parks so that they can join the real world?

Fay Jones: I live in a national park as well, in mid-Wales, so I entirely understand my hon. Friend's frustrations. The matter that he has raised will, of course, be one for Ministers in DEFRA and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, but I know that the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), has heard his point.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): I am a strong supporter of the recent initiatives of the Secretary of State and the Prime Minister to make food growing far more important. What are the targets for getting much more self-sufficient in food, and will it not need further reorientation of the money away from the environmental land management scheme and wilding, and towards proper food promotion schemes?

Fay Jones: My right hon. Friend pre-empts me. I will certainly come to talk about that point in just a few moments, but let me first talk about further reforms that the Government are introducing, particularly in the field of farming mental health.

We will make up to £500,000 available to charities to deliver projects that support mental health in the farming sector, building on the support already on offer through our farming resilience fund, which has benefited more than 19,000 farmers to date. Mental health in agriculture is a key concern for the Department, so much so that my right hon. Friend the Farming Minister regrets that he is unable to be with us at present, as he is hosting a roundtable on mental health in agriculture. I know that shadow Ministers will agree that that is a commendable thing to be doing. Altogether, the work to change our approach will build a better and more supportive system around farmers, so that they can get on and do what only they do best.

Before I talk about our final strand of work, I want to congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (Dr Evans). Today his campaign for online retailers to carry a specific "buy British" button has achieved another success, as Ocado has become the latest retailer to adopt the tool, joining Morrisons, Aldi and Sainsbury's. I congratulate him on his campaign.

Food security is a vital part of our national security. The primary role of farmers is to produce the nation's food, and they deserve our gratitude for that—a point echoed to me on many occasions by the Chair of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee, my right hon. Friend the Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Sir Robert Goodwill), who is away on a Select Committee visit and unable to join today's debate. Recent years have brought home the truth of that, particularly in an age of climate change, instability and increasingly volatile global food production.

Uncertain times require us to double down on the certainty of our food system. In the Government's food strategy, we set a clear commitment to maintaining domestic food production at the current level at least, which is around 60% of what we consume. The importance of food security is why we brought in the three-times-a-year food security report through the Agriculture Act 2020. Going further, the Prime Minister announced a fortnight ago that, given the context of the last three years, we will significantly strengthen this work through a new annual food security index. Climate change is increasingly likely to impact on the sector, with more extreme weather events, so it is only right that we step up our monitoring of food security to ensure that we can act swiftly and decisively against any in-year shocks. We expect the work to be UK-wide and will work to achieve that, strengthening accountability across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland.

Sir Geoffrey Cox (Torrige and West Devon) (Con): How does the emphasis about which the Minister is talking square with the sustainable farming incentive activities? They arouse considerable concern in the farming community that it would almost be a better and more paying proposition for them to give up farming altogether under the SFI scheme. Is my hon. Friend the Member for Bridgwater and West Somerset (Mr Liddell-Grainger), who intervened on the Minister a while ago, not right to say that what we have to do through the SFI is start to consider how we encourage people to produce food and not encourage people not to produce it?

Fay Jones: My right hon. and learned Friend is absolutely right to emphasise and underline the importance of food production. DEFRA is actively monitoring the take-up of SFI schemes with food production in mind, so he raises a key concern that I believe the Department is already addressing.

Going further, last year the Prime Minister hosted the UK's first farm-to-fork summit at Downing Street, putting industry leaders at the sharp end of policymaking for the first time. We will make this an annual occasion, and this year's summit will consider the publication of the first food security index.

Finally, millions of tonnes of perfectly good farm food is wasted each year—thrown away simply because of shape or size. It is unfortunate that that is still the case, even in 2024, so we have announced that we are

bringing in a £15 million fund to redirect the huge amount of surplus food to those in need. That £15 million will be available directly to farmers or the redistribution sector, working with farmers.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Ind): Will the Minister give way?

Fay Jones: I will make some progress, if I may.

Boosting and strengthening our food security is paramount, and our actions stand in stark contrast to those of the Labour party. Farmers in Wales have become used to an uneasy relationship with Welsh Labour over the last 25 years, but as Members may have seen, frustration is turning to anger following the publication of the Welsh Government's sustainable farming scheme, which is nothing short of unworkable. Instead of farmers being freed from the burden of red tape, they will be forced into an atrocious set of data-gathering and reporting on a yearly basis. They will be forced to submit data on the amount of medicines they give their animals and the rates of lamb loss in their flock. They will have to submit soil samples and even data on worm numbers and seed receipts. The scheme will require every farmer to do six online training courses each and every year, and most controversially of all, it will force farmers to take 10% of their land out of production to plant trees, harming our ability to feed ourselves. Last week a number of farmers travelled to Cardiff Bay to protest against these changes. These protesters were not extremists or conspiracy theorists, as Labour MPs labelled them last week. They were raising legitimate grievances about the viability of their businesses under the Welsh Government's plans.

Colleagues in England will know that this Government have taken decisive action to tackle bovine TB. In 2013, under the coalition Government, a badger cull was introduced in England to tackle the appalling rates of bovine TB in cattle. Those of us who represent beef or dairy farmers know the pain of bovine TB. It is one of the most difficult and intractable animal health challenges the livestock sector faces today. Tens of thousands of cattle are culled each year after testing positive for the disease. This has a devastating personal impact on livestock owners and their families.

Here I must declare an interest. In 2013, when working for the National Farmers Union, I volunteered to work on the pilot badger cull in Somerset. We worked 12-hour shifts in a portacabin at a secret location, as anti-cull saboteurs would follow us home at night. That pilot resulted in a 37% reduction in bovine TB breakdowns, and across the way in Gloucestershire we delivered a 66% reduction. That shows that culling works.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Farmers in my constituency in Gloucestershire have been involved in the cull probably longer than anyone else, except perhaps those on the Somerset levels. Could my hon. Friend give them an assurance today that we will not introduce measures that restrict culls and their after-effects until we have a realistic vaccine programme in place that is actually seen to work?

Fay Jones: My hon. Friend is right. This is part of a three-pronged approach that Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs is planning to take and we will continue to be led by the science. No country in the

world has ever been able to grip the scourge of bovine TB without tackling the disease in wildlife. The science is clear: the tide is turning on bovine TB in England and a major element of this success has been the industry-led cull of badgers in affected areas.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) was right to say that Somerset started the culls, and the intimidation I and others received at the time was appalling, but we weathered it. I say to the Minister and Members across the House that the cull worked because farmers led it. Farmers were absolutely determined to do it, having survived foot and mouth at the time I became an MP, and then having gone into TB. Farmers are responsible; they understand the countryside and understand what they are doing. Where TB and other things are concerned, I urge the House to give the farmers the benefit of the doubt. They look after the land and they manage it well.

Fay Jones: I could not have put it better myself. Culling is part of a three-pronged approach that DEFRA has taken to tackling bovine TB. Field trials for a new cattle vaccine and companion skin tests for bovine TB started in 2021 and remain ongoing.

If the Welsh Government had any ambition for farming in Wales, they would have the backbone of this Government and introduce a cull in Wales, but their weakness in the face of this issue is causing alarm and panic in the Welsh livestock sector. Instead of a cull, they have a First Minister who told them it was their fault. Labour's Mark Drakeford told the Senedd that the disease spreads when farmers import infected cattle. This is despite farmers working desperately hard to maintain good biosecurity measures. This is a First Minister who also thinks that farmers are entirely responsible for poor water quality. The all-Wales nitrate vulnerable zone, introduced in 2021, is an unworkable piece of legislation that has done nothing to improve our rivers. Instead, it forces farmers to farm to a calendar, spreading muck only on certain dates—never mind the weather.

NVZs, bovine TB and the sustainable farming scheme are all examples of an ill-thought-out policy from a Government determined to set their face against farming in Wales. In contrast, the record of the UK Conservative Government is clear. Our plan is to invest in farmers, to change our approach and to protect food security. Meeting farmers face to face in north Wales a fortnight ago, the Prime Minister again made it clear that we have their back. This Government will always support and be proud of British farming.

I commend this debate to the House.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition spokesperson.

4.40 pm

Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): I start by congratulating Tom Bradshaw on his election as president of the National Farmers Union. I am sure he will do a fantastic job, and I wish him all the best as he starts his new role standing up for our British farmers. He has big wellington boots to fill, of course, after the outstanding job done by Minette Batters over the past decade—I am sure the whole House wishes her the very best in her future endeavours.

[*Steve Reed*]

Recent years have been very challenging for farmers: the covid pandemic; the Government's botched EU withdrawal deal; Putin's brutal invasion of Ukraine; and now war in the middle east. Each of these shocks has underscored how vulnerable our food supply chain really is, and how dependent we are on our great British farmers. Food security is national security. In recent years, British consumers have seen empty shelves in local supermarkets, while food prices rocketed by 19% at their peak last year. We need to get resilience back into the system, and at the heart of that must be a commitment to back our British farmers.

I had the pleasure of attending the NFU conference in Birmingham last month and the Oxford farming conference in January. Speaker after speaker made it clear that British farming is in crisis, and that farmers feel abandoned by this Government. Over 6,000 British producers have gone bust since 2017, and the agricultural workforce became a third smaller over the same period. Labour shortages mean that valuable crops have been left in the ground to rot.

The Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution, the farming mental health charity, alarmingly reports that suicide rates among farmers are the highest of any sector in the UK economy, thanks to the huge pressures that farmers are now under. This is heartbreaking, and it should concern every one of us. The Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, the right hon. Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), is unable to be here today, but I am glad that he is focusing on working with stakeholders on an issue of such importance and magnitude.

Flooding was among the top issues raised at the NFU conference. Farmers have faced one of the wettest six-month periods on record, with many winter crops still not planted and others washed away or under water. Farmers need better flood defences. It is astonishing that so much of the allocated funding has not been spent over the past two years. I visited Retford in Nottinghamshire and was astonished to learn that, of the £11.7 million allocated for flood defences over the past two years, less than 0.5% of it has been spent.

There is a severe failure of co-ordination between central Government and the agencies responsible for getting spades in the ground to dig out the drainage systems, to build the flood barriers and to plant trees upstream to help the land hold more water.

Mr Liddell-Grainger: The shadow Minister is making some interesting points. I have probably had more flooding on the levels than anyone in this House. One of the biggest challenges we face is the intransigence of the Environment Agency and Natural England, which are quite impossible. The hon. Gentleman makes a powerful point, but one of the reasons we are finding it difficult to build up the defences, to clear out the rhynes and ditches, and to maintain the clyses and dams is that the Environment Agency and Natural England will not give way on making every single thing impossible.

I have been waiting for a barrage in Bridgwater since 2014. We really must break this logjam. I gently say to the shadow Minister that we are all on his side if he can help to do it.

Steve Reed: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for his intervention; he makes an important point about the experience of flooding in his part of the country, which, sadly, is reflected in others as well. The Government, whoever might be leading them, need to get a grip of these agencies and work more closely with them. That is why Labour has proposed that if we are elected, we will introduce a flood resilience taskforce to bring together national and local government, and the frontline agencies that he referred to, to make sure that once funding is allocated it is actually spent to protect our farmland and rural communities from the devastating impact of flooding.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): Would it not be a better idea to scrap these agencies all together and hand responsibility back to Ministers, where it originally was, because the agencies that are now employed to do this are often doing things completely against Government policy and, in particular, against farmers?

Steve Reed: The answer, which is quicker than playing around with the architecture of agencies and national Government, is for the Government to get a grip. These agencies are responsible to national Government and I would like to see much stronger command from national Government to make sure that they do what they were set up and funded to do. They are clearly not doing it to anything like the extent or with the quality that Members from all parts of this House expect of them.

A second point I wish to raise is that Vladimir Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine has sent energy prices rocketing. That exposed the Government's failure to transition to cheaper, home-grown energy. As a result, soaring energy bills have clobbered British farmers and producers. Labour's approach would be very different. We will switch on GB Energy to cut bills for farmers, households and businesses. That publicly owned company will direct public and private investment to harness the power of wind, wave, solar and nuclear energy, to cut bills, create jobs and secure energy supply chains inside our own country, freeing us from dependence on foreign dictators like Putin. We can also help farmers who want to generate clean energy on their own land. Under this Government, it can take up to 10 years to get planning permission to connect this desperately needed energy into the national grid. Labour will reform our planning laws and cut that wait from years to just months.

The Government's bungled transition from European Union farming payments has been another source of financial misery for farmers. Far too many have seen incomes plummet as the basic payment scheme is phased out. Tenant farmers, in particular, feel that the new scheme does not work for them. The principles behind environmental land management schemes make sense, but the implementation has been chaotic and bureaucratic. Instead of tackling the weaknesses in ELMS, the Government have instead shuffled their feet and tried to claim the credit for reallocating a £220 million underspend. That money should have been given to farmers in the first place and not returned to the Treasury, but at the core the Government's failure is to have never developed a clear strategy for land use, including food production.

Our land management scheme should support moves towards regenerative farming and nature recovery, alongside food production. Instead of doing that, the Conservatives

are increasingly positioning themselves against nature. Their attempt to trash environmental standards to legalise the further pollution of already polluted rivers and waterways was shocking. We have a limited amount of land for the size of our population in this country. We need a land use framework to make sure that the many competing demands on our land can work in balance. This Government have failed to produce one. In government, Labour will introduce one.

The Conservative Government stubbornly refuse to publish interim data showing what impact ELMS are having. *The Guardian* has used a freedom of information request to expose how the Government buried an analysis of the dire financial prospects for upland farmers after they realised it was almost entirely bad news. We need to know what is going wrong with ELMS so that we can make them work more effectively. If this Government will not publish that information, an incoming Labour Government will, if we win the next general election. We have to make sure that policy works for food production, as hon. Members have already said, as well as for nature, which means being open and transparent about what is really going on.

Farmers are furious about the Conservative Government's post-Brexit trade deals. *[Interruption.]* I see the Minister is shaking her head. The outgoing president of the National Farmers Union—not a Member or supporter of the Labour party—called the Government's approach “morally bankrupt”. The right hon. Member for North East Somerset (Sir Jacob Rees-Mogg), until recently a senior member of the Cabinet, has called for the import of hormone-injected beef and chlorine-washed chicken. That is not just alarming for British consumers; it would be catastrophic for British farmers. We cannot demand high welfare and environmental standards from our British producers if the Government then undercut them with lower quality imports, yet that is the approach this Conservative Government have taken.

The Government's own assessments say the Australia and New Zealand trade deal will result in the loss of £48 million from British agriculture and fisheries, so no wonder the former Environment Secretary, the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), attacked the deal as

“not actually a very good deal for the UK”,
because, as he rightly said, it

“gave away far too much for far too little in return”—*[Official Report, 14 November 2022; Vol. 722, c. 424.]*

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I am indeed very critical of what was done with the Australia trade deal, but since he is raising this issue, will he at least give credit to the current Government and Prime Minister for the steadfast approach they have taken on deals with Canada and the comprehensive and progressive agreement for trans-Pacific partnership? *[Interruption.]*

Steve Reed: It does seem a bit late, doesn't it—the Government having done a deal of the nature the right hon. Gentleman attacks? It seems to depend which of the five families happens to be in charge of the Conservative party at any one time as to what they are going to do on agricultural, trade or any other policy. They are a rudderless Government, but it always seems to be British farmers and producers on the losing end of whatever deals they come up with.

The Government's broken promises on trade go back much further than the deal the right hon. Gentleman criticised. The Government promised farmers they would keep full access to the European markets for their high-quality British produce after Brexit, but then they threw up trade barriers that blocked them from exporting. Labour's way forward is to seek a renegotiated veterinary agreement with the EU. We must cut through Tory red tape at our borders to get British food exports moving again.

Our country spends over £1 billion a year buying food for hospitals and prisons. Labour will make sure that at least half of that food is locally produced or certified to higher environmental standards, putting money straight into the pockets of British farmers and producers at a time when so many are struggling just to stay in business. We will devolve more decision making to the nations and regions of the United Kingdom. That will give them more control over skills and training to increase and upskill the farming workforce, and more control over infrastructure investment so that we can extend broadband in rural areas and the use of new technology in farming to boost productivity.

Labour is offering a new deal for farmers: lower bills from harnessing the power of clean energy, generated in our own country; more money in farmers' pockets through the prioritisation of locally grown and sustainable food for public procurement, and ensuring ELMS work effectively; seeking a veterinary agreement with the EU to tear down the Tory barriers to trade; a flood resilience taskforce to protect farmland from devastating floods; and planning reform to help farmers diversify and plug their clean energy into the national grid.

Farmers do an extraordinary job as producers of our food and stewards of our land, yet they have been betrayed by this Conservative Government. British farmers deserve better. They deserve our thanks, respect and support. We are proud of our farmers—proud of the work they do to feed our nation and steward our beautiful countryside—but they need a Government who are on their side to help them in that vital work. After 14 years of Conservative failure, only Labour can give farmers their future back.

4.54 pm

Sir Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed), although I suspect that he has more customers or consumers in his constituency than farmers. In North Herefordshire, we have 1,715 of probably the best farmers in the world. *[Interruption.]* Oh, no, there's no doubt about that. The joy of Herefordshire is that we grow every crop that the UK produces; whether it is raspberries, which come from Scotland usually, or hops from Kent—we do it all. No other county can make that claim. As a result, I have had to spend an awful lot of time with a variety of highly expert and very skilful farmers as they explained their particular element of the industry.

I agree with all Members who have said how important farmers are, but their troubles do not seem to be seen as such. The worst case, of course, is bovine tuberculosis. It has been 10 years since the badger cull began to tackle the transmission of TB—and it has been an enormous success. TB plagued the agricultural sector

[*Sir Bill Wiggin*]

and, by 2020, as many as 30,000 cattle were dying each year from this terrible disease. I lost my bull to it, so I know how devastating it can be for farmers across the country.

Thanks to the culling of sick badgers, which carry the disease to cattle, 24% fewer cattle were killed in 2022-23 relative to the preceding year. In fact, the number of deaths was the lowest it has been since 2008. The beneficiary is not just the farmers and their cows, but a healthy badger population that is therefore less likely to be exposed to this fatal disease. With that rate of success, I fear the Government's move away from culling to a badger vaccination programme is premature and potentially disastrous. A reactive cull just will not work, because once DEFRA has decided that there is TB in the badger population, all the cows are dead; it does not work, it is not good enough and it will not cut the mustard. The Department needs to rethink very carefully what will happen. We have seen a 54% reduction in this disease, and we have learned from covid that we should not take away the precautions that are working before we are ready to bring in the new DIVA test—the differentiating infected from vaccinated animals test. That test allows the BCG vaccine to be applied to cattle, and for the cattle that are vaccinated to be separated from the cattle that are infected.

Until that test is ready—a written answer indicated that that might be in 2027—we cannot take our foot off the culling programme or allow our defences to drop. We cannot risk a 54% increase in TB, which is what will happen if we continue to do the wrong thing, as I think the Government are doing. We need to protect the healthy badger population and the healthy cattle population. Most of all, though, this is a disease that reaches human beings too; and because of antimicrobial resistance, there are not that many drugs that tackle tuberculosis. If we allow this disease back, there would be a serious risk to human health, particularly as there is now an increasing desire to buy green top milk, which is unpasteurised. Considering that TB is a serious disease—consumption, as it used to be called—that would be extremely dangerous.

It costs a farm about £14,000 when a bovine TB breakdown takes place. It could also cost the taxpayer up to £1 billion over the next 10 years—and I have already mentioned the risk to human health. I urge the Government to think again about their reticence to allow the cull to continue, until the DIVA test is proven, active, working and successful, which I am sure it will be. That point was stressed when the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries, my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer), visited my constituency. It breaks people's hearts when their cows are taken away, and it is wrong that their health is threatened too; worst of all, the healthy badger population will be diminished as the disease spreads.

The rural economy is brimming with £43 billion-worth of economic potential. We need to cut back on the regulations and procedures that burden the sector. Farmers can spend over 15 hours a week on administrative work. A recent survey found that 86% of respondents believed that levels of farming administration have increased, and I agree. I filled out my SFI form and countryside stewardship forms, and they are extremely complicated.

Worse, they cannot be changed very often. An individual can submit a form only once a year. That is fine if they are not going to change anything, but this is a dynamic industry. As a result, we need much more flexibility. A DEFRA tracker found that, when taking account of regulatory and payment changes, over 50% of farmers have a negative view of their farming future.

The transition from the basic payment scheme to the sustainable farming incentive is riddled with problems. Even though the new scheme is supposed to add flexibility to the system, farmers need to wait a year to amend their applications. Fundamentally, the problem is that we have moved from a scheme under which people were given money for the land that they owned, which they considered their income, to one where they have to fill out the SFI form and agree to do things that are not in their interest. Every single rule has a disadvantage to it, which is why we have to pay farmers to follow them. The problem is that when they compare their income as it was under the basic payment scheme with their income as it will be under the SFI, they find that it will be lower. As a result, farmers feel extremely unhappy and put upon.

That is one reason why the underspend by DEFRA is more complicated than the hon. Member for Croydon North suggested. He was right to touch on it, but it is much worse than that, because £200 million every year not reaching the people we are subsidising to provide us with food security is a proper problem for our country. This money is not there to ensure that we do not compete with the French; it is meant to ensure that we can. We really need to ensure that we are not providing public money for public goods alone, but are ensuring that the incomes of the people doing the work are maintained. It is about not just the good of the industry and of nature, but ensuring that the people doing the work get paid for it. That is going seriously wrong. I get a text message from the Animal and Plant Health Agency telling me about bluetongue—that seems to be going on all the time—but I am not getting messages saying when the vaccine for it will appear.

We need to be much more supportive of our farmers in every sector they deal with, because they confront so many issues, not least the consumer market. A recent report found that the retail share that farmers receive is down to 0.03%. Some farmers have decided not to grow carrots anymore because the margins are so small. According to research by the University of London, the University of Portsmouth and Sustain, a kilo of carrots priced at 45p costs growers 14p to grow, yet they make only a negligible profit. Beef farmers make a profit of only 0.03% on a £3.50 pack of beefburgers, even though each pack costs them 90p to make. Dairy farmers will make only a 0.02% profit for each £2.50 pack of mild cheddar, despite it costing £1.48 to make.

Those margins are far too small, and competing with foreign counterparts is a secondary challenge, particularly for poultry farmers, who have to compete with imported chicken. Some chickens may be treated with antibiotics, but the real problem for poultry farmers is the square footage that they are limited to producing on. The one thing that most people do not know about chickens is how long they live for. A chicken will probably be 31 to 36 days old when it goes to be processed, so the square footage that it lives in is fairly dynamic. It changes as the chicken gets bigger, which it does extremely quickly. Because the Americans allow the use of chlorine washing,

American chickens can be squished into a smaller square footage than British ones. That is not much good for the chicken, it is much better for the farmer, and the chlorine washing hides the risk to the consumer of salmonella, E. coli and various other chicken-transmitted diseases. It results in lower animal welfare and is bad for farmers in the UK. We have not squared the circle. I am sorry if I have not explained it well enough, but a poultry lesson is always available for anybody who wants one. At the end of the day, we insist on much higher animal welfare standards, and as a result our farmers are suffering and are being outcompeted by those in less scrupulous countries.

Therefore, the most important thing the Government can do is to ensure honesty in food labelling so that customers, whether they live in Croydon or Leominster, can buy chicken that has been properly brought up, properly looked after and kept clean. I say to the Government: please, please—food labelling is really important. “Pasture fed” should mean that the animal has been fed pasture for its entire life, not for the last six months. The benefit is that when the customer eats it, they will have a far better ratio of omega 3 fatty acids to omega 6 fatty acids. Omega 3 fatty acids are what the body uses to make cancer-fighting gamma linolenic acid, so customers need to know what they are buying because it can be good for their health.

We all talk about a food strategy for the UK, but we should really be talking about a health strategy. We should feed our people not just the best food in the world, produced to the highest standards, but the best food for them. In that way, we would not have an obesity problem, we would not spend so much on our health service, and we would give our people what they really want: a happy, healthy and long life. That is my most powerful plea.

But things are not so bad. French farmers’ dissatisfaction with the increasing amount of red tape and greater competition from imports led them to descend on Paris to disrupt a food distribution hub that feeds 12 million people. Belgian farmers blockaded the EU building in Brussels in February, and water cannon were used. In 2022, a Dutch farmer was shot at during the protests in Holland. Fortunately, the bullet just missed him.

The French Government’s response to those protests was to lower environmental regulations. That is wrong in every direction: the farmers should not be rioting, and the Government should not be lowering environmental standards. We have not done that in this country and we do not have revolting farmers—in fact, mine are anything but—so we should look at our withdrawal from the common agricultural policy as one of the great successes of Brexit. The Government must do more to help farmers producing local produce, such as by promoting the “Buy British” button from the campaign that encourages supermarkets to sell British products.

The one tragedy of public procurement is that our armed forces do not get enough British beef and lamb. Of course, supporting British food in schools and hospitals would boost local farmers, but it is very difficult to still get local food from a local abattoir because, thanks to the veterinary regulations, there are not very many local abattoirs. There are some very big ones in Wales, but there are essentially only three major companies slaughtering at any sort of scale. We should therefore look at the regulations that hold local abattoirs back. Most of them

are to do with veterinary inspection. The problem with veterinary inspections is that the vets need to be there when the animal is opened up, because it smells different if it is not right inside. The idea of having video vets watching what is going on does not work as well as I wish it did, so we need to go back a step to make local abattoirs competitive.

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Hugh Phillips Gower Butcher in my constituency has just closed its abattoir, which is a disaster because Gower salt marsh lamb was slaughtered there. There is a lack of support for abattoirs, and it is hugely costly for butchers to train their staff—it is a very skilled job—and keep their licences, even if they have to close for short periods, so more and more abattoirs will close. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that that is a disaster?

Sir Bill Wiggin: I definitely agree that it is a disaster, and it is the cost per animal killed that would have put the abattoir owner out of business. That happened in my constituency as well. One of the biggest problems is that the burden is too high. Of course, for Gower lamb, Hereford beef or any of the wonderful things that are killed and processed locally, without the abattoir those animals have to travel considerably further, so there is an animal welfare problem, and there is a human health risk to not having proper inspections.

However, the qualifications required in the UK are of a much higher level. Very often, when one visits an abattoir, one will see that the veterinary inspectors are from Spain. That is because the qualifications are different and they are paid less. There is no reason why we should not insist on UK food inspectors being qualified differently from the six years it takes to become a fully qualified vet, but that is what we use here, and it seems to be a cornerstone of the problem with abattoir closures—over-regulation and over-qualified meat inspectors.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: My hon. Friend is making an extremely knowledgeable speech about agriculture, as I would expect. One of my constituents was prepared to invest a considerable amount of money in portable abattoirs. As far as I know, the initiative has been stalled because of excessive regulation.

Sir Bill Wiggin: I am delighted to say not only that I am aware of the portable—or mobile—abattoir, but that a model of it appeared in my house for me to have a look at, courtesy of one of the people supporting the initiative. That is why a more sensible, practical and affordable veterinary inspection regime is what is needed. Then, we could have the mobile abattoirs back.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I gently say to my hon. Friend that it was not only the veterinary inspections; it was the planning, the hygiene, the safety—every sort of regulation under the sun has made the initiative stall so far.

Sir Bill Wiggin: Indeed, but the mobile abattoir did not require planning because it was mobile, and cleanliness and hygiene are essential for confidence in human consumption. However, there is at least some margin for improvement on the veterinary bit. When I looked into slaughtering through that particular abattoir, the cost was very high because of the veterinary inspection

[*Sir Bill Wiggin*]

rather than the other things, although those of course must be dealt with. I completely support the project that my hon. Friend refers to, and I hope to see far more little abattoirs popping up, be they mobile or fixed like the one that closed in Gower.

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD)
rose—

Sir Bill Wiggin: I would be delighted to give way to the man with the answer on abattoirs.

Mr Carmichael: If only. I should remind the House that my wife is a practising member of the Royal College of Veterinary Surgeons, and my younger son is three rent cheques away from following in her footsteps.

The hon. Gentleman makes a good and significant point about the nature of the regulation of abattoirs, but there are other forces at play here, particularly market forces. The reason we have seen the consolidation of abattoirs is that it produces a lower unit cost for throughput. That comes back to his earlier point about the demands of the supermarkets and their determination to drive down farm-gate prices. Does he agree that this is another area where the Groceries Code Adjudicator could perform a significant role if it had sufficient powers? If he is interested in that, he may wish to join me in the Adjournment debate tomorrow evening.

Sir Bill Wiggin: I can think of nothing nicer than to join the right hon. Gentleman in all sorts of debates. He was a first-class Deputy Chief Whip in the coalition Government. Of course, he absolutely right in what he says about abattoirs. I congratulate his son on being three cheques away from qualification—it is no small achievement to become a vet, so he deserves our congratulations.

One thing that the Government have done right, and about which I am really delighted, is to establish the statutory food security index and make it an annual event. Whether Members agree that we should have a health index or a food security index, all of that will come together, and we will see that our 60% figure is too low. Sixty per cent of the food that we eat is produced here—that is 60% of the food that we could produce, so there is potential for farmers to fill that 40% void. If we look at the world price of wheat, they are not going to be doing it at this rate. It is very, very difficult for some of our farmers to make any money. In 2022, the value of imports of feed, food and drink was £58.1 billion, over double the value of exports of feed, food and drink for the same year. That is an enormous sum, which could be directed towards British farmers if we supported them to feed our country.

The other thing I would like to see is tax breaks as well as grants. Grants are very limited; tax breaks are a much more efficient way of getting farmers to cut their costs and compete with farmers abroad. The Government recently announced a £427 million grant for farming, which is welcome, but it fundamentally misunderstands the sector. We like to use second-hand machinery in farming, but the grant system does not permit that. A better solution would be to offer tax breaks to farmers, allowing them to keep their hard-earned capital

to invest as they wish. That capital would also go towards new technologies to generate efficiencies, increase yields, and combat the negative impacts of extreme weather. One of my constituents wanted to buy a hop-drying machine from Germany, so she applied for a grant. It was such an expensive machine—more than half a million pounds—that it blew through the system. There was no way that that grant could be approved, so in the end, she bought it herself.

The hop sector is tiny, but that is why these grants cannot just tick the boxes; they have to be much more comprehensive. When we talk about farming in this place, we talk about it generally, but each sector is completely different on the ground. A hop-drying machine is completely different from a blackcurrant-picking machine. That is all very well, but a cattle crush nowadays is very different from the one that I could afford to buy, and much more impressive. There is a desire to bring in robot fruit-pickers, and that would be great. We already have robot milkers, but the robot milkers we need are the ones that work on a rotary parlour instead of individually. Give us the tax breaks, and we will do the work. Do not tell us how to spend our money, because the grant system is not efficient.

Some 70% of land in England is managed by growers and farmers, and the work that we could do and do to combat flooding is often overlooked. One of the lowest pieces of low-hanging fruit is to allow local authorities to let their farmers clear flood blockages. Most farmers have a digger, and most farmers have a bulldozer of some sort. They have the kit, and that is where the flooding is, but they are not allowed to do anything because they are not insured. That is just mad. Let us make sure that local authorities can authorise a farmer to get in his tractor, put the snowplough on and clear the road. It is not that hard, but it does seem to be for my local authority—mind you, to be fair, almost everything is very hard for Herefordshire Council.

The Environment Agency could also do a great deal more. One little thing that would really help is that the River Wye has phosphates in it from chicken muck, and there is a man in my constituency who has spent a lot of money on building a phosphate-stripping plant. The chicken muck comes in, it goes through the anaerobic digester, the digestate is stripped of its phosphate, and then the muck can go back on the fields. At £300 a tonne, nitrogen fertiliser is very expensive; at £18 a tonne delivered to your farm, chicken muck is a much better alternative. If we want to stop the pollution, we need the Environment Agency to permit activities such as phosphate stripping, so that people can get on with putting on proper fertiliser—muck—instead of buying in fossil fuel-based fertiliser from countries such as Russia. There are all sorts of little things that the Environment Agency could do instead of putting my constituents in prison.

Diversification would benefit from a less rigid planning system, which of course the Government are thinking about at the moment. That rigidity is counterintuitive when a development would be helpful, so I welcome the Prime Minister's recent comments about allowing greater diversification in farming. I look forward to seeing that legislation in April.

One or two Members have already talked about the need for connectivity. Some 46% of rural deprived areas are notspots for 5G, including most of my constituency.

The NFU found that 79% of respondents did not have a reliable mobile signal on their farms. How can we possibly fill in our forms and drive our tractors using GPS when we cannot get a mobile phone signal?

We also need better digital mapping. At the moment the maps the Rural Payments Agency is using are not accurate for hedgerows, and the work needed for hedgerows is even harder because by the time we have filled out our digital map and put in our sustainable farming incentive forms, then, oh dear, we are not allowed to do anything for our hedges because of the wild birds. Then we have to wait, and then the patch comes up again when we can do stuff to our hedges, but we cannot do the same thing for hedge laying as we can for hedge cutting, so it is hard and complicated. Then some bright spark thought we would plant trees in the hedges, and that is absolutely fine until someone crashes into one and then we have a fatality. Hedges are very helpful for many reasons, but not many of them are quite right in the SFI at the moment.

Lastly, there are the issues of transport infrastructure for rural communities and livestock worrying. There has been a 63% decrease in the percentage of under-25s managing farms. That has to change; we are all getting older and that knowledge is needed. We saw it on “Clarkson’s Farm” when Kaleb calved a cow. It is not easy; if you do not know what you are doing, you cannot do it, and you will then have to call a vet and that will spoil all your economics. We have seen it again and again on television; people need to know what they are doing with agriculture. It is exceptionally dangerous. If you get your fingers in the power take-off, you will lose your whole arm. If you try and do things that do not work and turn your tractor over, you will die. And even if you do all right, if you are on your own for weeks on end with very little contact, you may well choose to take your life. I have lost six farmers in my constituency in the past 12 months. Things are not all right and there is no room for complacency, but some of the good things the Government are doing are so welcome.

While I am on a cheerful note, my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) has the Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill coming through. We really need it; there is nothing more miserable than lambing a Schmallenberg lamb and then coming back and seeing the remains of your flock torn to bits by one of these pit bulls. It is absolutely appalling, and that is why I support that private Member’s Bill. The damage done to livestock in the midlands alone was £313,000 so this is a really serious problem, and I am delighted my right hon. Friend is doing that.

I am delighted the Government are maintaining their £2.4 billion annual budget, but they should be increasing it. That is the money that keeps us standing still; it is not going to be sufficient to compete with our European competitors or other countries. We need more money, we need it delivered through tax breaks, and we need to make sure that British farmers are supported at every level by honesty in food labelling.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. A significant number of Members wish to participate, so I gently suggest that if every Member speaks for half an hour, not everybody will get in.

5.23 pm

Steven Bonnar (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (SNP): Today’s debate had to be rescheduled, but we welcome what is still a timely debate on farming. The Scottish National party will always welcome any opportunity to speak on this issue and especially to give Scottish farmers a voice in this place.

I will talk today about the vital role farmers and farming play in the rich fabric of Scottish tradition and outline the impact of Scottish farmers on our nation’s economy, the health of our people, and the protection and management of our environment. I will also detail just some of the mounting pressures they face largely due to this Conservative Government’s long-held obsession with Brexit.

This debate is timely for several reasons. The first is that the Prime Minister spoke at the NFU annual conference a fortnight ago. “Brave” is a word that absolutely nobody would attribute to the current Prime Minister, but he is the first Tory Prime Minister to address the conference since 1992 and the first UK Prime Minister to do so since 2008. If anyone in this Chamber, or indeed any of our constituents, were looking for a telling insight into Westminster’s attitude to farming and agriculture, they need look no further than that.

I cannot help but wonder what it was that kept the Tory leadership away from such a meeting for so long. Why, despite having four Prime Ministers in that time, was the current Prime Minister the first in 28 years to make such a commitment—although in the interests of fairness it is only right that we acknowledge that the Prime Minister’s immediate predecessor was not in office long enough to have received an invitation? What might have been the cause of that historic hiatus? Perhaps it was a long-held tradition of successive Tory Governments taking the rural vote and communities for granted. Perhaps it was a fear of scrutiny from the sector itself, or perhaps it was the crippling knowledge that the Tory obsession with Brexit is playing the defining role in the decline of our once great agricultural industries. It was probably a combination of all three.

We on the SNP Benches believe that the Prime Minister’s address to the NFU should have begun with an outright apology. The Westminster Government have hammered farmers with their Brexit obsession, leaving them to fend for themselves in facing the devastating impact of higher costs, mountains of red tape, labour shortages and eye-watering delays over border controls.

Wendy Chamberlain (North East Fife) (LD): Alongside my right hon. Friend the Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), I am grateful to be here as a Scottish MP who can also give a voice to Scottish farmers. The hon. Gentleman is making good points on Brexit, and I agree with him, but does he agree with me on the importance of skills for farming and having training where the communities are? Scotland’s Rural College received a Queen’s anniversary award for innovation a couple of weeks ago, and I was in London to see that, but the SRUC Elmwood campus in Cupar is facing devastating cuts, largely as a result of the Scottish Government’s cuts to higher and further education. Its golf course will be sold off, and there are doubts over the future of its animal care unit. Does he agree that the SRUC is an integral part of Cupar and that the Scottish Government should be helping the SRUC with funding to keep it there as a going concern?

Steven Bonnar: I agree with the hon. Member, and I will make representations as such. I look forward to all contributions in the Chamber from all Members across Scotland today.

The debate is timely, as we finally saw the UK Government responding to decade-long calls for fairer contracts for dairy farmers. Since as long ago as 2011, NFU Scotland has been desperately pushing on behalf of its members for reform in that area, so we welcome legislation to regulate dairy contracts, but we join NFU Scotland and other unions in highlighting the devastating delay shown by the Westminster Government in listening to our dairy farmers and that sector.

Farming is vital to the Scottish economy. The sector in Scotland delivers an annual production output of £3.3 billion, employing 67,000 workers directly on farm and supporting a further 300,000 jobs within agricultural activities. It has long been the backbone of rural communities in Scotland and our surrounding landscapes. We are a nation with a proud agricultural history of crofters, growers and farmers shaping global methods of food production that are still practised today. Scottish salmon, Aberdeen Angus, oat-based products and Scotch whisky all represent modern success stories for our resilient food and drink sector. Exports of those Scottish products and others reached a total export value of £8 billion in 2022.

While those products have success in common, they are also united by a far darker shared trait: their new-found precarious position as a result of Brexit red tape, staffing shortages, and a poorly negotiated trade deal that has left them vulnerable to cheap imports. Our farmers, growers and crofters are resilient and have been for centuries. They have had to be—forging a livelihood in often remote and weather-beaten locations, feeding the people of Scotland and those far beyond our shores—but they are struggling. Scottish farmers deserve far better than the blatant disregard and damage they continue to receive from Westminster.

While Labour in Wales and the Tories here in England fail to deliver for farmers, with EU replacement support schemes falling far short of what was promised, the SNP Scottish Government have provided the most generous package of support for farmers and crofters across the UK. We are lucky that farming is a devolved matter, so we can make these interventions back in Scotland. We can try our best to support this vital part of our economy, our history and our culture. With both the main parties here in Westminster in lockstep in their support of Brexit and the damage it is doing, Scottish Government support for farmers in Scotland can only do so much and only stretch so far. We aspire to much more than mitigating the worst of this place.

The general nature of the debate makes it hard for us to shortlist all the damage that this place is doing to farming communities; many aspects of farming deserve to be debated on the Floor of the House. I will touch on some of them, and hon. Members may detect an underlying theme that connects them. I will start with animal welfare, which has been mentioned. Members on all Benches will know that it is of huge importance to me and the SNP. This Tory Government like to talk about standards and the world-leading role that they see us playing on the global stage. It is true that Scottish farmers have some of the highest animal welfare standards

in the world, thanks largely to the Welfare of Farmed Animals (Scotland) Regulations 2010 introduced by the Scottish Government.

The actions of the Conservative Government here in Westminster since Brexit have made an absolute mockery of their claims to be concerned about animal welfare. For example, the free trade agreement struck with Australia in 2021 does not honour the Westminster Government's supposed commitment not to undercut our farmers through unfair competition. We were sold that deal on the laughable pitch that it would save consumers up to £34 million a year—a measly 52p per person. At what cost? At a cost to our farmers. Their high animal welfare standards go unrewarded, and they are penalised by being undercut by imports of a far lower standard. Of course, it is also at a cost to the planet, as we fly goods across the world rather than support local food economies.

Surely the time has come for the UK Government to listen to calls from farmers across Scotland, as well as organisations such as the Landworkers' Alliance. Through a recent consultation, its Scottish policy team, led by Dr Tara White, has provided invaluable insights into the Scottish Government as they shape our enforced post-Brexit agricultural direction. Organisations such as Compassion in World Farming call for a smarter, more ethical approach to rewarding farmers—through making core minimum animal welfare standards a condition of any tariff or quota-free trade deal; through efficient labelling, so that consumers are better informed about the origin and welfare standards of the product that they are going to consume; and through a localised approach to supply that bolsters local food economies.

Nobody needs reminding of the impacts of the pandemic in revealing weaknesses in our over-reliance on long supply chains and those that rely on the international trade, or of the importance of local food supply systems and meeting our domestic needs. The need for shorter supply chains is only compounded by the climate crisis, and importing food from other countries—especially those as far away as Australia—will serve only to increase greenhouse gas emissions. That contradicts any UK Government claim that they are tackling the climate challenge head on.

Another issue of concern to all of us in the SNP is the cost of our food and the unavoidable reality that while costs for consumers rise, the share of that cost that finds its way to our farmers remains completely stagnant. The Centre for Economic Performance has stated that leaving the European Union added an average of £210 per household to food bills over the two years to the end of 2021. That is the legacy of this place—and that was before the Tory party elected its previous leader, whose reckless relationship with economic reality heaped further costs on each and every one of our constituents.

For any Members who need to be reminded of the impact of the Tory-engineered crisis, data from the Office for National Statistics shows that the overall price of food rose by about 25% between January 2022 and January 2024. In the 10 years prior to that, food prices rose by only 9% in total. We know that farmers have not benefited from those price increases; in fact, the opposite is true. Farmers are paying higher costs for essentials such as feed and fertiliser.

Research for Sustain by Professor Lisa Jack found that of the entire price we might pay for one grocery item, about 98% or 99% of that goes to production and

overheads for intermediary companies such as processors and distributors, and then the retailers. That means our farmers, our crofters and our growers are left with crumbs: sometimes as little as 1p of profit for each item they produce.

Let me take this opportunity to ask the Minister, once again, to consider price caps to stop the supermarkets profiteering and to help ensure that basic essentials are not beyond the reach of many people. Better still, the UK Government could answer calls from organisations such as Sustain and force supermarkets to publish more information about their own supply chains. We in the SNP are clear that farmers must be paid what they are owed, because they provide a secure, fair and sustainable future for family farms across all these nations. We need urgently to review existing frameworks that are supposed to enshrine that fairness but are not acting as well as they should, including looking at the efficacy of the grocery supply code of practice.

Another issue raised by the SNP in this place consistently is the crippling effect of Brexit on the ability of our farmers to staff their farms. Currently, the UK relies on some 58,000 seasonal workers to harvest the crops grown by our domestic system, not counting those working in the wider food production and farming system. Despite constant warnings from farmers and unions in Scotland during the referendum and after, Brexit has had a devastating impact on the ability of farmers to find staff at peak times of the harvest cycle. Despite the introduction of short-term visas for overseas workers to fill those roles, significant immigration issues remain, especially for seasonal workers, those forced to work in food manufacturing and, as we have heard, those working in abattoirs. The introduction of short-term visas not only failed to address worker shortages in agricultural and food production in Scotland but posed another serious challenge. The complexities of the system and associated costs of the move to the UK mean that many workers are often at the sharp end of exploitation—a great deal of which occurs in the application process itself, where third parties take advantage of applicants struggling to navigate the UK system.

What have we been left with? We have an immigration system that allows exploitation at its outset and has not effectively filled the vacancies, and a hostile environment created by the attitude of this Tory Government, which deters workers with the appropriate skillset from even considering coming to the UK to carry out that work. I said earlier that consistent themes emanate from Westminster, the painful reality of which have become all too familiar to the people of Scotland: Tory chaos, Tory mismanagement and the enduring damage of Brexit, which threatens to decimate our hard-working and admirably resilient farmers in Scotland.

In stark contrast, we in the SNP stand up for Scottish farmers wherever we can on matters that are fully devolved. We have given clarity and assurances that we will support our farming industry. We have introduced the Agriculture and Rural Communities (Scotland) Bill, which is a milestone in our work to transform how we support farming and food production in Scotland, to become a global leader in sustainable and regenerative agriculture. A final example of the differences between the clear leadership shown in Scotland and the approach favoured down here is that, in his address to the National Farmers Union Scottish conference, the First Minister

announced that the Scottish Government have now committed up to 70% of the budget made available through tiers 1 and 2 of the frameworks.

Today's debate is welcome and incredibly important. Farmers in Scotland are close to breaking point. Despite the constant commitment of support from the Scottish Government, there is only so much we can do to clean up the mess that has been left by the Tory Government. This Government continue to bury their heads in the sand, but we in the SNP will continue to work hard to secure the fair and sustainable future that Scottish family farms deserve. There is only one way to properly address the challenges that farmers face and support and protect Scotland's agricultural history: an independent Scotland taking its place within the European Union. Only one party is making the case for that: the SNP.

5.39 pm

George Eustice (Camborne and Redruth) (Con): I draw the attention of the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I am a trustee of a family trust that owns shares in Trevaskis farm—our family farming business—and I am a director of Penbroath, a consultancy in the sector.

I want to start by addressing the current year, because the current year is always at the top of farmers' minds. As the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) pointed out, it has undoubtedly been a very difficult year for farmers, principally due to the weather. This has been one of the wettest winters on record. It affects different parts of the country, but it has been more widespread than the bad flooding in 2020 or the more localised but much more severe flooding in 2014. A lot of winter arable crops have struggled to establish. In areas such as my constituency, which is home to most of the UK's cauliflower production, the producers of cauliflowers in Cornwall have had the most difficult year in living memory. So, it has been a difficult time over the past 12 months, particularly this winter.

It is also true that in recent years a number of global events have led to volatility. In common with many other business sectors, farmers have sometimes found it difficult to plan and budget properly because of volatility in their input costs, although over the past 12 months some sectors have seen commodity prices ease back from the very high levels recorded in recent years. That is particularly pronounced in some areas of cereal production, such as winter wheat.

While acknowledging that it has been a difficult year for farmers and that that is at the top of their minds, it is important to take a step back and look at the wider context and a longer timeframe. DEFRA constantly monitors farm business incomes. Every year, it publishes the "Farm Business Survey". As the Minister will know, a whole statistics department in DEFRA spends its time understanding global agricultural commodity markets—what is driving prices up or down—and their impact on UK farm enterprises. In recent years, we have to acknowledge that farm incomes have actually risen sharply overall since 2016.

Throughout history, farmgate prices have always been heavily influenced by exchange rates. The sharp devaluation of sterling against the euro after the 2016 referendum result—literally within seconds of it becoming apparent

[George Eustice]

what was likely to happen that evening—meant that anybody who was in a productive sector, whether primary industry or manufacturing, benefited from a slightly softer exchange rate. People who make and produce things tend to do better when there is a weaker exchange rate against the euro and the dollar, and people who import things, or who are in the financial services sector, tend to prefer a stronger exchange rate. Because of that exchange rate change, between 2016 and 2022 profits on the average dairy farm more than doubled to over £200,000 last year. That is more than four times higher than the average dairy farm was getting in 2015 when dairy prices really were on the floor and struggling. It is also true that turbulence following the terrible invasion of Ukraine has led to sharp increases in global cereal prices. For the average cereal farm, gross profit margins per hectare actually trebled in the few years after 2022, although, as I have already acknowledged and for any angry cereal farmers listening, cereal prices have fallen sharply in the current year.

I recognise that it has not been a universally positive picture. Overall, farm incomes were healthy from 2016 to 2022, but the pig sector in particular suffered difficulties in 2021, caused by oversupply in the EU market and problems in the Chinese export market. Our apple industry suffers a long-standing problem of a seeming inability to break through in export markets, leaving an industry which requires investment over many years, if not decades, at the mercy of all-too-powerful retail customers. The potato industry has suffered several years in the doldrums, partly owing to changing consumer tastes and a reduction in demand for potatoes. In the grazing livestock sectors—not just in the more vulnerable upland landscapes, but in lowland areas, too—profits have typically moved sideways; they are not really increasing, and in some years are dipping slightly.

The overall picture for agriculture since 2016 is positive, and it is important to recognise that. Farmers will not always volunteer the fact that they have had a good year, but it is important for those of us in the House who are interested in coherent policymaking at least to understand the data and the statistics, which is why I was so pleased when the Minister for Food, Farming and Fisheries published the data and the trends late last year.

I want to say a little about the agricultural policy that the Government are pursuing. Most of its key tenets were developed between 2017 and 2019, when I was the Minister of State responsible for agriculture, and implemented between 2020 and 2023, when I was the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs. We applied a number of principles to that policy, as we had a once-in-a-generation opportunity to rethink farming policy from first principles. The first principle was that there was no long-term place for land subsidies.

The single farm payment, area payments, direct payments—whatever we wish to call them—were essentially a subsidy paid to people for owning land. There was no coherence in such a policy, simply because there had never been any shortage of people in this country wanting to buy land, so it made no sense to add a subsidy to it. There is also a great deal of evidence that when that subsidy payment was introduced in 2005, about 50% of it went in inflated rents, so all that happened was that the ultimate owners of the land benefited most. That is

why we ended up with the problem that 50% of the entire agriculture budget went to 10% of the wealthiest landowners in the country, while 44,000 farmers—more than half the cohort claiming direct payments—had just 10% of the total between them.

That made no sense, so we introduced a second principle. We decided that as well as paying farmers for what they did, rather than just paying them for happening to own land, we should allow them a profit margin from what we ask them to do. We made a deliberate decision to depart from the backward “income forgone” methodology that was pursued by the European Union and is sometimes advocated by the World Trade Organisation. As we try to modernise farm policy, we must reject some of the anachronistic approaches supported by the WTO, because they have no place in modern policy. If we are going to ask farmers to give up a land subsidy in exchange for being paid for what they do, we should not begrudge them a margin for what they do. There has to be a profit margin; that is the *quid pro quo* for the removal of anachronistic land subsidies.

We recognised that there was poor profitability in some farming sectors, and that in some areas there was a dependence on the subsidies received, but the third principle that we brought to the design of the policy was that we should try to address the cause of that poor profitability, rather than simply treating the symptoms. That is why, in the Agriculture Act 2020, we legislated for new powers to introduce fairness in the supply chain, and it is why in the years since then there has been a significant expansion in grants to help farmers invest in their businesses, reduce costs and improve their profitability. It is also why we ensured that the schemes we designed, such as the sustainable farming incentive, not only helped the environment, but increased and improved farms’ financial resilience. There is considerable evidence that in some landscapes, a more extensive approach, in which farming has fewer inputs but a higher profit margin, can lead to overall improvement in the profitability and long-term financial resilience of enterprises.

The fourth principle, which I was very keen to bring to the policy, was that there should be simplicity in the new schemes. Others have commented that we did not take that far enough, and I am open to representations on that, but achieving that is not easy, because the environment is complex. Whenever we try to design a scheme that delivers for the environment, it will always be limited by the extent of human understanding, and the ability to make payments that we can track; we have to be able to validate the fact that they have been delivered. That is not straightforward, as I discovered when I got into this issue.

I campaigned to leave the European Union. I was very hostile to the cross-compliance regime and the way that the EU approached these matters, and I was very keen to ensure simplicity. My message to officials is that when we design policy, if we encounter a dilemma or a difficulty, we should always tack towards simplicity, and accept that although the policy might not be perfect, we need something that works. To be fair to officials, they have generally done that; and to be fair to Ministers, they have maintained that basic principle.

The final principle was that there should be evolution, not revolution. That is why, way back in 2018, when I first tried to take an Agriculture Bill through Parliament—

it did not complete its passage, and we had to have a second attempt in the Parliament that followed the 2019 general election—we made it explicit, right from the beginning, that there would be a seven-year transition between 2021 and 2028, and that we would gradually reduce the legacy basic payment scheme land subsidies and expand the roll-out of the new policies. It is sometimes said that there has not been a plan, or that things have not happened as fast as they should have, but all such representations are complete and utter nonsense. We published a document in 2019 that set out the seven-year transition plan, and I pay tribute to all my successors, because every single one of them has continued to roll out the policy programme exactly as we set out in 2019. Indeed, late last year, the Government confirmed that this year, they would de-link the remaining legacy payments from the need to have tenure over land, which is exactly what we planned as long ago as 2019. Every component of the new agriculture policy, from the sustainable farming incentive to the landscape recovery project, has been rolled out exactly as we intended.

I pay tribute to the many officials in the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs who have maintained the trajectory that we outlined in 2019, particularly Janet Hughes, who has led the team in question for a number of years. Having that continuity on the policy programme has been helpful. I also pay tribute to Tim Mordan, a long-standing official in DEFRA who has helped Ministers from different parties over many years, and who I understand will soon be retiring from the Department.

I want to say a little about the challenges that remain; I will wind up soon. When it comes to agriculture, I am afraid to say that most of the challenges that DEFRA faces are from other Government Departments. The first of those is the Home Office. When I was Secretary of State, we put in place the Shropshire review, which concluded that we needed not only a multi-annual visa scheme for seasonal workers in the agriculture sector, but a more progressive approach to having a visa scheme for sectors such as food manufacturing. I regret to say that there has not yet been a response to the Shropshire review. I place no blame at the feet of DEFRA Ministers, because I was a Minister in DEFRA and I know how these things work. Ministers will not be able to say so, but it is pretty obvious that, as usual, the Home Office is the intransigent blockage in this problem. We really need a machinery-of-government change in which the Home Office is stripped of its powers relating to visa policy for seasonal agricultural workers. The policy in its entirety should simply be moved to DEFRA, so that DEFRA Ministers no longer have to waste their time trying to explain things to Home Office Ministers; that is often where the problem lies.

A number of hon. Members have mentioned trade. I would simply say to Ministers that DEFRA understands trade and some of the technical issues around it far better than officials in the Department for Business and Trade. DEFRA Ministers are armed with real intellectual power, and real experience of dealing with trade negotiations. I hope that current and aspiring Ministers in this place will always draw on the power in DEFRA to face down some of the more naive approaches that we have seen in the past from the Department for Business and Trade.

We must also keep payment rates under review. I increased the payment rates for the sustainable farming incentive and countryside stewardship scheme by about 30% in my final year in the role. Ministers recently increased the rates by a further 10%, and it may be that we need to consider going further as we depart from the anachronistic “income forgone” methodology.

A number of hon. Members mentioned land use, and the shadow Secretary of State, the hon. Member for Croydon North, mentioned the land use framework. I am more optimistic about our ability to both increase agricultural output and make space in our farmed landscape for nature, because we have done the research and we know that there is no direct correlation between food production and the land area used. Some 35% of our agricultural output comes from just 4% of the land, because sectors such as pigs, poultry and horticulture have high-value outputs but do not use a huge amount of land. At the other end of the scale, around 20% of farm land in England produces just 3% or 4% of our total output. It is pretty obvious that we can make space for nature, do some tree planting and restore vulnerable habitats such as peatland, but also invest in new horticulture, glasshouses and crops to expand our domestic food production and enhance our food security.

I regret that the Government decided last year to drop the horticulture strategy. They have reinstated elements of it, which is to be welcomed, but the reason why we committed to a new focus on horticulture—in particular, a new generation of glasshouses for our food production—was this. In my nine years in DEFRA, I spent a lot of time in Cobra meetings dealing with the latest crisis, whether it was a ferry strike in France, covid or preparing for a no-deal Brexit. The issue always came down to how we would get lettuces and tomatoes from Spain into this country through the short straits. If we really want to enhance our food security, we should have a renewed focus on horticulture and try to re-shore some of the glasshouse production that was wrongly exported to the Netherlands when we joined the European Union all those decades ago.

Finally, I would like more done to support new entrants and tenant farmers. The Rock review was an excellent piece of work with many different recommendations, but if there is one recommendation that I hope the Government will consider taking forward, it is the idea of an assignable agreement on countryside stewardship, so that if somebody enters land tenure for two or three years, they can assign their agreement to an incoming tenant, or indeed the landowner. That is the only solution I can see to that problem.

5.57 pm

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): It is a pleasure to participate in this important and timely debate, and a particular pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who made a very considered speech, as ever. He is very learned in this policy field, and I would like to elaborate on his point about food security, and especially the emphasis on horticulture and re-shoring some production in the UK. Food security does not always get the attention it demands in this place—or, indeed, in wider political debate. It is a matter of life and death, and it warrants more parliamentary scrutiny and debate in future.

[Ben Lake]

I begin by considering the current state of affairs. In that regard, the UK Government's food security report is incredibly useful. It sets out the situation regarding food production and consumption, as well as exports and imports, and I was taken aback by some of its findings. For example, the UK's production-to-supply ratio in 2020 was 60% for all food, and 76% for indigenous-type food. Perhaps more relevant and more widely understood is the figure for consumption of UK-produced food, which stands closer to 54%, as some food products are exported.

The point is that statistics are hard to interpret and can sometimes tell a whole array of different stories. One thing I would say about the 54% of UK-produced food being consumed here is that that compares with a 1984 figure of 78%. Changing dietary preferences, a changing climate and different consumer habits have a heavy bearing on this story, but the trend is quite important. From a peak in the mid-1980s, the production to supply ratio declined into the early 2000s and has remained quite stable ever since.

Food security is not a simple matter; it is multifaceted and has various contingent factors. The Government's "United Kingdom Food Security Report 2021" includes a useful definition, which I think conveys the complexity. It notes that food security

"encompasses the state of global agriculture and markets on which the UK is reliant; the sources of raw materials and foodstuffs in the UK and abroad; the manufacturing, wholesale, and retail industries that ultimately bring food to shelves and plates, and their complex supply chains of inputs and logistics; and the systems of inspection that allow consumers to be confident their food is safe, authentic, and of a high standard."

If we consider that definition for a moment, as detailed as it is, a few risks to food security immediately spring to mind. We have already heard some of them in this debate, including that the surge in input prices and the cost of commodities has had a big influence on the viability of farm businesses. We have also heard about the changing climate in the UK and the way in which flooding has had a significant impact on agricultural production here.

It is also important to bear in mind that a changing climate will also have an impact on those markets abroad from which the UK imports so much of its food. Especially relevant here is the fact that, as the right hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth outlined, different sectors will be more exposed to those foreign import markets than others. Let us take the fruit and vegetable sector as a case in point, as we depend quite a bit on foreign markets for our fruit and veg. The UK produces over 50% of the vegetables consumed domestically but only 16% of our fruit, and 93% of domestic consumption of fresh vegetables is fulfilled by domestic and European production, while fruit supply is more widely spread across the EU, Africa, the Americas and the UK. Some of those foreign markets are in areas of the world that we know will suffer from climate change, and their ability to produce much of the food that we import will be impacted by that.

We must also consider the unknown impacts that geopolitical instability will have on some supply chains. The war in Ukraine has already been mentioned, but we need also to remember that some of these shocks are

unexpected and cannot be anticipated, such as the recent disruption of the Red sea trade routes. For that reason, I very much welcome the Government's commitment to monitoring food security through the new statutory index. I believe that this would warrant an annual debate to coincide with updates of the index so that we could properly scrutinise this important matter. If we consider all these facts and potential threats and risks, it leads us to the conclusion that we need not only to maintain domestic food production but to increase it so that we can gain greater self-sufficiency in many of the food products that UK consumers eat.

Our focus so far has been on some of the external factors, but we need to bear in mind that many domestic factors have an impact on domestic food capacity. I am afraid to say that a combination of factors is conspiring to force many farmers in Wales out of the industry. Domestic agricultural support policy, for example, has a big part to play, in addition to the public procurement of food contracts, which has already been mentioned. The financial position of Welsh farms underlines the vulnerability of the sector in Wales and the importance of direct Government support payments.

The Institute of Biological, Environmental and Rural Sciences at Aberystwyth University in my constituency produces an annual farm business survey of farm incomes. The most recent survey, detailing the 2022-23 out-turns, paints a worrying picture of the state of many farms and farm models in Wales. It notes how hill cattle and sheep farms made a profit of some £24,000 after rent and finance, but excluding the cost of unpaid labour, in that financial year. That compares with the average basic payment scheme payment for those farms of £26,000. Hill sheep farms have a similar story. They made a profit after rent and finance of some £24,000, versus a direct support payment of £31,577. The point I am trying to make is that direct support from the Government—through the basic payment scheme in this instance—has served an incredibly important role in keeping many of those farms afloat. My concern is that if there is any reduction to that profit, many will find themselves unviable.

Robin Millar (Aberconwy) (Con): The hon. Gentleman will know well that the Labour Government in Wales are currently planning a subsidy scheme—a sustainable farming scheme—that by their own independently commissioned estimates will lead to roughly a 10% drop in livestock and a £122 million drop in revenue. Farmers in Aberconwy tell me that that income is simply the difference between them having a future and not, so what message does he have for his Plaid Cymru colleagues in the Senedd who are propping up the Welsh Labour Government through a co-operation agreement? Does he agree that tomorrow afternoon's budget vote might be a good opportunity for them to reconsider that co-operation?

Ben Lake: The hon. Gentleman is right to state the fears of his farmers, which are very much aligned with those expressed to me by farmers in Ceredigion, that the potential change in this policy is, frankly, a matter of life and death for their businesses. He tempts me to comment on the plans of my colleagues in the Senedd. I will resist that temptation, but I will say that it is important, given the gravity of the situation facing the Welsh agricultural industry, that the sustainable farming

scheme should be changed. I would suggest that it should be paused to begin with, so that we have time to devise a proper policy that is fit for the 21st century. If my colleagues decide that they need to use every possible lever, I will say all power to their elbow, and if that means the demise of the co-operation agreement, I will certainly not be mourning its passing.

The point is that direct support for many of our farm businesses is crucial. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) said earlier that much of the reality of that support is to ensure that the price of food on our supermarket shelves is controlled in a manner.

Richard Foord (Tiverton and Honiton) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is talking about direct support to farmers, and on that subject I want to ask him about direct support for local planning authorities, given how vital it is that farmers get quick answers from those authorities. My experience in Mid Devon and East Devon is that they are earnest in their desire to prevent agricultural pollution from affecting our streams and rivers, but I have one farmer who has waited 20 months for a decision on a planning application in relation to the construction of a slurry store. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need the Westminster Government also to help local planning authorities so that our farmers can get rapid answers?

Ben Lake: The hon. Gentleman is quite right. That is something we face in Wales as well, where some farm improvements and developments, sometimes involving changes to comply with regulations, find obstacles and delays in planning. It is only right that planning authorities should be sufficiently resourced to ensure that none of those obstacles is put in the way of progress.

I want briefly to turn to some of the wider issues that impact on domestic production, including the weaknesses of the current grocery supply code of practice and enforcement regime, and trade policy. I do not need to remind the House about this because I can see so many learned Members here this evening, but farming is a long-term industry, and these decisions have to be made on a very long-term basis. When it comes to the way in which the grocery supply chain operates, I am afraid that many retailers have found themselves in a position where they can exert undue influence and have an impact on farmers and growers to shift short-term risk on to their shoulders—much to the detriment of the wider industry.

It was stated in last month's Westminster Hall debate that 95% of the food consumed in the UK is sold by just 12 retailers, which affords them a dominant position in the supply chain. This means that farmers and growers receive a paltry margin compared with the margins enjoyed by many retailers. Again, that point was made far more eloquently by the hon. Member for North Herefordshire. In addition to short-term inflation spikes and rising import costs, farmers are currently exposed to unfair trading practices arising from this imbalance.

Last month, many Members present debated a petition started by the Riverford farming campaign, calling on the Government: to strengthen the Groceries Code Adjudicator by empowering it to take effective and punitive action against those committing unfair trading practices; to lower the turnover threshold so that the code applies to a greater number of retailers; and to

enshrine the simple principle that retailers should give suppliers certainty that they will buy what they have agreed to buy, that they will pay what they have agreed to pay and that they will pay on time. That basic fairness would more evenly spread out across the supply chain some of the risks and profits inherent in the food supply system.

The impact of trade policy has already been mentioned, so I will not go into detail. Concerns have been raised about the impact of the Australia free trade deal on the sector in Wales and the UK. All I will add is that, in their approach to future trade policy, the UK Government should urgently establish a set of core production standards for all food consumed in the UK to ensure that our farmers and growers are not disadvantaged by any future trade agreements. These standards could safeguard high-quality, climate-friendly markets that are open to imports from countries whose standards may differ from our own.

In addition to the food security index, the Government could look to establish an annual free trade agreement assessment to quantify the cumulative impact of free trade agreements on trade balance, sourcing, standards and domestic food production. The farming unions in Wales would very much support such a measure.

Food security is a challenge with which we will soon need to grapple. By not only maintaining but increasing domestic production, so that we gain greater self-sufficiency, we will in turn gain greater resilience to climate change and to shocks in a very uncertain world.

6.12 pm

Dr Thérèse Coffey (Suffolk Coastal) (Con): It is a huge pleasure to contribute to this debate on farming. The previous speeches show the importance of farming to our national security.

The primary purpose of farming is to produce the fine food that we enjoy, and we need farmers to keep doing that. They need to have good and fair reward, and we also need their help to protect and conserve the countryside and the natural environment.

As the Member of Parliament for Suffolk Coastal, I am blessed to represent a special part of our country that is well known for its pigs, potatoes, parsnips and much more, including poultry and its splendid natural environment. I referred in my maiden speech to the importance of listening and learning from those who expertly rear and grow so much of the produce that we enjoy in this country. We want to help them get best value for their produce by making sure that the best British food is valued across the world.

One of the challenges in drafting a national policy, as so eloquently set out by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice)—moving from a blanket 85%, based on a particular characteristic, with a bit of environmental for the other 15%—is recognising the difference between the Administrations of the United Kingdom. There are some pretty dogged elements in Wales, with farmers being instructed that, to get any support at all, they have to give up quite a lot of land, rather than potentially making improvements. I am conscious that, on the frontline, the challenges vary sector by sector and county by county. That variance is often because of the soil, which can be so different even on opposite sides of the A12 in my constituency.

[*Dr Thérèse Coffey*]

We recognise that farmers face different challenges, day in and day out, to have a fruitful industry, and one challenge is water. Farmers have way too much water right now, but there are often concerns in my part of the country about drought and restrictions on abstraction. We are now seeing other challenges to do with yield.

We must continue to be agile and flexible in listening to feedback. The Rural Payments Agency has a history of saying, “Computer says no.” Instead, we should undertake analysis and carefully consider the policies that we are pursuing, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth set out, while ensuring that we stick to our target for the distribution of funding across the country. We want to make sure that 70% of agricultural land and 70% of holdings participate in the environmental land management scheme by 2028. I would be grateful for an update on that from the Minister.

Another aspect that links to food security is that some farmers are considering whether to opt out of food production entirely, which was not the intention of ELMS. We should consider restricting how much land can be taken out of production because, as my right hon. Friend said, there is an opportunity to improve the productivity of much of our farming sector to get the food security that we all believe is vital. I hope that officials are continuing, or have finished, the analysis that I commissioned, so that we not only look at national income and national averages, but look constituency by constituency, and certainly county by county, to get a sense of whether people are taking up these opportunities.

For example, about 305 farmers in Suffolk Coastal are eligible for BPS—BPS does not apply to quite a lot of farmers in my constituency, particularly pig farmers—but only 55 have so far applied for SFI in the current year, despite the scheme being opened to pig farmers. It is worth undertaking that analysis, which is why I asked the RPA to share the recipients of BPS with me. I do not want to know how much they earn, but I want to understand why people are not taking up the opportunities. We need to listen and get feedback.

We have a fine, experienced Farming Minister in my right hon. Friend the Member for Sherwood (Mark Spencer). After lawyers and trade union officials, I expect that farming is the No. 1 occupation of Members of Parliament, certainly on the Conservative Benches if not more broadly.

It is important to be alert to the issues on which, at times, only the Government can help and intervene, but we also need to understand the barriers to participation.

Biosecurity continues to be the issue that should keep most politicians awake at night. We have already heard about bovine TB, and I absolutely believe that we should continue to cull until things are more stable. Science continues to advance our understanding of how vaccines can be applied much more readily.

We have made sure to tighten up issues at the border, but I would be grateful if the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore) updated us on where we are with the important Weybridge upgrade to make sure that we can assess those issues.

On protecting the countryside, I am delighted that Labour has abandoned its right to roam. I think Labour has listened to farmers, and I hope it will listen a bit more on bovine TB and the use of chemicals and pesticides—they are not applied willy-nilly, as they cost farmers a lot of money. It is important that we continue to ensure that we deploy what nature gives us in an appropriate way, while still being understandably concerned about the impact on the natural environment. The two can go hand in hand and it is vital they do, because if the farmers and landowners do not help us in supporting the natural environment, it does not matter what scheme we have. We might have the best scheme in the world, but if it is not taken up, we will fail. Having a practical and pragmatic approach continues to be really important in that regard.

We have already heard about skills and visas. I was delighted when the Minister for Skills, Apprenticeships and Higher Education listened to the concerns raised by my local agricultural college. T-levels are replacing BTECs, but there was a gap because pig husbandry was not included in the curriculum—again, this is part of the challenge of having national approaches. The organisations were saying that there was not enough demand for that, but there was, certainly in my constituency and in other parts of the country. I am delighted that the Government listened and are making sure that that will be in the curriculum.

As for the progress we have made, it has been a journey. My right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove) wrote the blueprint, “Health and Harmony”, ably assisted by my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth. Through the creation of the Agriculture Act 2020, my right hon. Friend the Member for Surrey Heath set in place the architecture. It is also fair to say that when things are not quite working, it is okay to have a few tweaks along the way. That is not a failure in where we are; the direction of travel is still there. However, as I say, we have to have something that works.

Water is one of our bigger challenges in Suffolk. The local microclimate is pretty much like Israel’s; parts of East Anglia are exceptionally dry. The new president of the NFU, Tom Bradshaw, will know that very well from his farming in Essex. That is why I was delighted several years ago to help support the creation of the Felixstowe Hydrocycle, which is so good it was included in the “Plan for Water” four times, at my insistence. We need to bear it in mind that although plenty of farmers have too much water right now, we often do not have enough. Thinking about the risk to future production is important when the Environment Agency is trying to balance a variety of environmental regulations alongside what can be done to make sure that farmers have enough water to grow crops. I have been trying to get permitted development rights for small-scale reservoirs. I encourage the Minister to pursue that within government. Internal drainage boards are vital and sensible in trying to manage that delicate balance.

I am very conscious that we have the highest welfare standards in the world and that people have concerns that not everyone is playing by the same rules. That happened while we were in the EU and we still see those challenges in our trade agreement with the EU. It is important that we continue to market that welfare not only within this country, but elsewhere in the world.

That is why it was right to reject a lot of the calls from foreign markets about why they should come into this country, and I was pleased that the Prime Minister stood up for British farming at the time.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am sorry to interrupt my right hon. Friend, but does she agree that it is vital that when we negotiate future trade deals, we include in them the fact that Britain has some of the highest welfare standards in the world, and that we should not sacrifice those for the sake of doing a trade deal?

Dr Coffey: My hon. Friend is right to raise that point. Welfare is one of our selling points when it comes to trade deals and what we sell abroad—people recognise that brand. There are other ways in which the industry has tried to promote its elements.

There is still a lot of clamour in this country to do even more ratcheting on welfare, with the idea that somehow the rest of the world will automatically follow us. Frankly, we still have to get the European Commission to implement all the European rules. There are still derogations in existence and a lack of enforcement. I would rather we focused on people in this country who are not following the rules than on ratcheting further. However, I hear what my hon. Friends says about what happens in other parts of the world.

We need to make sure that farming is fit for the future. There are not many sectors where, across the UK, the Government give out more than £3 billion a year to support an industry. We have made the change to public money for public good, but we can go further in making sure that our funding arrangements are fair for tenant farmers and that the contracts we have are fair. I do not believe that the Government should get involved directly in setting prices. As we have seen recently with sugar beet, there are some delicacies where Ministers had to crack heads together to get a reasonable outcome.

We need to crack on with many of the other Brexit bonuses. For example, we passed the Genetic Technology (Precision Breeding) Act 2023 and we now need the Food Standards Agency to get the regulations in place so that we can take full advantage of it. We should also be getting the FSA and DEFRA to take advantage of the opportunity to deregulate. Deregulating does not mean making things worse; it is about making things more straightforward, for example in relation to small abattoirs and Trichinella testing. There has not been a case of Trichinella in at least 20 years, if not longer, and it was a European problem, not one here in the UK. I look forward to more deregulation coming along.

As for waste, there is no doubt that there are challenges with pollution coming from farming, which is why six years ago regulations were put in place to do with water. We should recognise that we have been able to increase the amount of money that has gone into things such as slurry covers and other aspects of managing that. There is plenty more we can do in that regard.

On trade, quality is undoubtedly one of our big selling points. I was pleased that we were able to double the number of agricultural attachés, and we really need to take account of that. We should be challenging the European Commission on the fact that France seems to be putting up trade barriers. People want to export our goods, yet they cannot do so because there are no

facilities in the ports across from Dover, in Calais, to allow that to happen. That is a barrier to trade that we should be challenging through the European Commission.

There are other aspects that have already been covered well today. We do need to make sure there is availability of labour and there is more we want to do on investing in the future. There are other aspects that I hope the Treasury will look into—for example, that the tax relief is passed on. Conscious of the ups and downs that can be experienced in farming, we brought in the five year averaging of tax relief. That was an important change, but there is a problem at the moment whereby as soon as people stop giving up land—the extra patches at the edge of their land—they can no longer necessarily get the tax relief that is then passed from generation to generation. By contrast, if people bring in a solar farm and sign a lease for only 20 to 25 years, they keep all of the tax benefit that they enjoy. We need to see the same for nature too.

I am conscious that many people want to speak in the debate, Madam Deputy Speaker, but let me say that I want to make sure that DEFRA is practical and pragmatic in its delivery. The RPA needs to be agile and flexible, and it needs to listen to feedback. A good example of that is one of perhaps only two times when officials and the agency flat refused to deliver ministerial instructions. There was feedback from visits to farmers around the country and from being out in the frontline about what had been happening with certain aspects of mapping. We can go further on simplifying that and we need to make sure that that absolutely happens. It is important that farmers have trust and confidence in our delivery agency, and that that agency has trust and confidence in the policy, so that when Ministers say they want to change something simple, straightforward and necessary for farmers, that will be delivered without hesitation.

I could say much more. I have been Secretary of State for DEFRA, which was a responsible, worthwhile and challenging job. We should all ensure we have farmers at the forefront of our minds when we think of the food we eat, the animals we see and the countryside we enjoy. Frankly, this country would be worse off without farmers, which is why we need to ensure they are at the forefront.

6.30 pm

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): My constituency is far more rural than its name suggests, with many farms around the towns of Otley and Yeadon and the villages of Bramhope, Pool and Arthington. I have visited many of those farms and seen a range of practices, as well as many farms in North Yorkshire, over the border, particularly after the pandemic.

Properly supporting our nation's farmers is essential to meeting our nature and climate targets. The Government must do more to support our farmers to deliver more sustainable food production and implement environmental land management strategies. DEFRA's agricultural transition plan is a step in the right direction towards a more resilient and prosperous agriculture sector that is capable of delivering sustainable food production while meeting nature and climate targets.

The offer for 2024 includes some welcome components, including an expanded set of actions, an average uplift in payments of 10%, increased payment frequency and a commitment to double the amount of agreements

[Alex Sobel]

offered for more complex and targeted environmental land management. The review and refresh of payment rates should serve to better reflect the value of the public goods provided by certain types of habitat and management actions. However, there is no publicly available data to demonstrate how these payment rates have been calculated, which is crucial in building transparency, evaluating progress and securing value for money.

DEFRA needs to publish scheme payment methodologies, as well as a clear payment strategy that forecasts expenditure on different scheme actions and the outcomes that are expected as a result. One of the main weaknesses of the farming transition to date has been DEFRA's reliance on low-ambition, free-choice actions within the broad and shallow elements of environmental land management. The design choice is intended to maintain maximum flexibility, but it risks undermining the environmental effectiveness of the scheme with evidence suggesting that previous similar approaches have not secured their intended objectives. Over time, the sustainable farming incentive needs to evolve to enable the delivery of a whole farm-approach, ensuring that a minimum level of environmental action is delivered as part of a joined-up and cohesive scheme. We need both a degree of flexibility to account for individual circumstances and to maintain a minimum level of ambitious environmental delivery.

For farmers to truly be supported to increase sustainable practices, we urgently need to address the green skills shortage for farming. Successfully integrating environmental actions into the heart of farm-based business decision making will be a new concept for many. With over 300 actions to choose from, many farmers need the right support to deliver the right actions for their farm and the environment. Access to expert, high-quality advice will be critical to delivering higher quality environmental outcomes, business benefits and farmer buy-in. Farmers need access to ecological expertise and support for farmer-to-farmer peer learning and knowledge exchange. There is simply a lack of people and skills to help land managers do the right things in the right places at a pace that meets our climate and biodiversity targets.

As the rural economy changes, there is the opportunity to develop more skills in managing natural capital, such as stone walls, hedgerows, natural flood management and habitat areas. It is a great opportunity to support the current and next generation to have the skills to manage a landscape for food, nature and climate. With the focus on managing hedgerows better for carbon capture and biodiversity, new skills will be needed in the management of bigger, bushy hedges. With increased focus on tree planting, there will be a greater need for jobs in managing woodlands and the by-products that will be produced over the next 20 to 30 years before timber is ready to be felled. We need a national nature service for young people to introduce them to these green skills and the job opportunities that follow, as well as working closely with agricultural colleges and universities so they can provide the courses and qualifications for the sustainable farming transition.

I have spoken many times about the essential role of hedgerows and coppicing to our agricultural heritage and the protection of our natural environment and

landscape. Hedgerows are essential carbon sinks to help us meet our COP and convention on biological diversity commitments. Research by CPRE, the Countryside Charity, found that expanding the hedgerow network by 40% would create more than 25,000 new jobs over the next three decades, and that for every £1 spent on hedgerows, a return of as much as £3.92 can be expected from the associated ecosystem services. I have heard from farmers that they want more hedgerows on their farms, but the lack of a skilled workforce is a barrier.

I went to see Richard Bramley's farm near Tadcaster, in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather). Richard is the chair of the National Farmers Union environment forum. He had planted hundreds of metres of hedgerows, and it was great to see the biodiversity increase, with the associated carbon benefits. He said that the lack of a skilled workforce was a barrier to getting more hedgerows. That and other areas of green skills need to be tackled if we are to see an expansion of our hedgerow network.

Richard also highlighted the need for the availability of nursery stocks. Why are there now so few local authority nurseries? In Leeds, the Arium provides plants for the whole city, as well as raising revenue for the council. DEFRA and the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities should offer seed funding for many more such nurseries. Richard also highlighted the need for continuing payments for sensitive maintenance. He rightly pointed out that a good hedge, a store for carbon and a hive of biodiversity, could last centuries. We need to invest in those skills and skills-based activities if we are to see the necessary hedgerow planting and maintenance to meet our existing targets. Hedgerows produce crops and provide food for people and animals.

When I attended the convention on biological diversity at the UN biodiversity conference at COP15, Governments agreed a new set of goals for nature over this decade. Unfortunately, the UK is one of the most severely nature-depleted countries worldwide, as we have heard successive Ministers admit. The Natural History Museum's biodiversity intactness index, probably the best indicator of global biodiversity, has revealed that the world has crashed through the safe limit for humanity for biodiversity loss, and placed the UK's 53% score in the bottom 10% of all countries, well below China and last in the G7. That is not a record of which any of us should be proud.

The Conservatives' Environment Act 2021 target on species abundance, which they were forced to concede because of Opposition amendments, promised only to "halt the decline" in species by 2030. Just halting the decline, or getting a net zero for nature, is not good enough. Our ambition is to be nature positive.

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the Government also set a target to increase species abundance in the period after 2030. It is only through close analysis of the data that we realised that was probably the best that could be achieved, even if we acted immediately.

Alex Sobel: I want to agree to disagree with the right hon. Gentleman. The fact that the baseline is so low makes it an easy target, so that shows a lack of ambition. Let us have a general election and we can test that more accurately going forward.

To finish, we need to focus on improving our rewilding, reforestation and biodiversity, and all natural landscapes should be part of that. We need to fully support our farmers to be part of this transition. We will not get there without their support, their hard work, and the land they work on.

6.37 pm

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con): Thank you for allowing me to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, in this important debate on farming, during which we have heard words of wisdom from no less than two former Secretaries of State and a number of other colleagues, so important points have already been covered. I start by declaring my interest as a lifelong farmer, so I may have a few points I can add.

We have had an uncertain few years, with covid-19 lockdowns and the war in Ukraine contributing to a fluctuating global economy and a huge spike in energy prices since 2021. That, together with the inflation we have experienced domestically, has meant unsustainable pressure on many farmers' businesses. Farm input cost inflation in 2023 stood at 42%, with wholesale energy prices 1.5 times higher compared with 2019. These disruptive events have exposed several vulnerabilities relating to the UK's food supply chain and self-sufficiency.

The UK has seen changes over the years, influenced by various factors, such as agricultural policies, technological advancements, globalisation and environmental concerns. We have become increasingly interconnected with global food markets, relying on imports for a significant proportion of our food supply. While this provides access to a wide variety of foods year-round, it also exposes the UK to supply chain vulnerabilities, as seen during the events of covid, Brexit and the war in Ukraine. In 1984, the UK's overall food sufficiency was 78%. In 2021, it was 60%. Today, the nation is only 18% self-sufficient in fruit, 55% in vegetables and 71% in potatoes. We need to produce policies that start to increase our self-sufficiency rates in those commodities.

Declining self-sufficiency coupled with supply-chain problems abroad have resulted in occasional gaps on our supermarket shelves. Due to cost of living pressures, consumers have shown signs of trading down to cheaper proteins. The trend for 2022, for example, has shown volumes of beef down 6% and lamb down 16%. In November 2022, growers' costs of production have increased by as much as 27% in the preceding 12 months. UK egg production fell to its lowest in nine years, and is down 12% in one year alone. The cost of feed for those producers has increased by 28%, and the price of a pullet by 22%.

Back in 2022, I contributed to a debate on national food strategy and food security. At that time, the House was regularly discussing issues relating to energy markets, with costs trickling down to consumers. Similar conversations were not happening on the cost of food and the impact of rising costs on people's budgets, although I did warn that rising food prices would increasingly become an important issue to the public.

Food and energy prices are highly regressive, causing those on low incomes to pay much more as a percentage of their budgets than those higher up the income scale. Recent studies have suggested that up to one in seven people in the UK had reported going hungry due

to the cost of living. Therefore, securing our domestic food supply should not only support British farmers, but help bring costs down.

Greater certainty from the food supply chain and the Government are needed. This can be encouraged through various means: long-term certainty on accessing seasonal labour—the seasonal agriculture workers scheme—which was mentioned by several Members tonight; greater productivity investment, which was mentioned by the Minister in her opening remarks; a more enabling planning policy; and measures to deliver growth and bolster food security.

Advances in agricultural technology, such as precision farming, vertical farming, hydroponics and genetic engineering offer opportunities to increase productivity and efficiency in food production. Embracing these food technologies can help boost domestic production and reduce reliance on imports. Farming is one of the sectors that best embraces new technology, and I pay tribute to it for that. Reforms that prioritise sustainable agriculture, support small-scale farmers, and provide investment in research and development can improve self-sufficiency in food production. This might include payments for sustainable farming practices, incentives for local food production, and regulations that promote food sovereignty.

At the NFU 2024 conference held on 27 February, the Prime Minister announced: a new annual UK-wide food security index to capture and present the data needed to monitor levels of food security; a Farm to Fork summit to be held annually, which began in Downing Street last year; and a £15 million fund to help tackle food waste from the farm gate. Work that I have done through my role as deputy Chair of the Public Accounts Committee has examined the environmental land management schemes in some detail. We pressed hard for an annual report to Parliament on the goal to produce the statutory food index, which will help this House to keep track of how our production to obtain self-sufficiency is going.

We must be careful about how much grade 1 and grade 2 land we take out of food production for environmental use, especially as the areas of greatest ecological worth tend not to be in those high land grades. We have thousands of acres of very high grade land being taken out in Lincolnshire for solar farms and windmills. That is surely unsustainable in the long run. As I said in a debate way back in 2020, there will come a time when we need to produce as much food in this country as we possibly can. As the temperature rises with global warming, the temperate areas of northern Europe will be able to produce more of the food that is needed in the world.

Payments to farmers, aimed at keeping food prices down, have been a cornerstone of UK agriculture since the war. In countries that are our major competitors, such as France and the US, from which I have just returned—I was on a visit with the Public Accounts Committee—some prices in supermarkets are double what they are in our supermarkets. That highlights the impact of our subsidies in keeping food affordable domestically. However, it is unsustainable to reduce payments to farmers, even for well-needed public goods, and rely solely on importing cheap food from around the world. In recent weeks, we have seen farmers protesting in Brussels and in other European capitals. Last week, that also happened in Wales. I am not surprised that

[*Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown*]

farmers in Wales are outraged at their Labour Government's emphasis on the environment over agriculture; there are plans for farmers there to commit to having trees on 10% of their land, and to using another 10% as wildlife habitat. Good as those things may be, it would be hard for a small farmer already struggling on the breadline to have 20% of their land taken out. It shows that the Welsh Government have no consideration for the loss of jobs and livelihoods that the policy will produce.

British farmers are held to incredibly high environmental, animal welfare, and food quality standards, as I indicated to my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey), but we must not allow our trade deals with other countries to result in our farmers being undercut by low-quality, cheap products. Equally, we must look to the long-term health of our nation. We need to ensure that we continue to produce food to high standards, because that benefits consumers, and we must do what we can to maintain that.

Modern agricultural practices, including intensive farming and monoculture, have raised concerns about environmental sustainability, including soil degradation, water pollution, and biodiversity loss. The pollution of our rivers in the UK is a huge challenge. There are problems resulting from agriculture, such as run-offs of nitrates and phosphates. Eventually, we must come up with a plan that allows farmers to apply these nutrients to grow their crops but does not lead to unnecessary run-off in our rivers. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Suffolk Coastal mentioned, action to help reduce pollution includes the "Plan for Water", which would provide £200 million of funding through slurry infrastructure grants.

Water companies play a crucial part in the pollution of our rivers. I am delighted that it was a Conservative Government who introduced the Environment Act 2021, which obliged water companies to install meters on all their outlets, so that we can see whether they are adhering to their environmental discharge conditions. I am particularly delighted to have obtained a grant from Thames Water for Ampney St Peter's sewage works in my constituency, which is one of the most egregious outlets of sewage; it will be worth several million pounds and has been budgeted for. I have had similar confirmation for sewage works in Moreton and Bourton.

The production of cost-effective, wholesome food is vital for every single person in this country. However, it must be grown in an environmentally sustainable way; we must take steps to ensure cleaner rivers and reduce carbon through improved methods of production. It is also incumbent on the Government to ensure that farmers, who are the ultimate guardians of the countryside, are properly rewarded for their onerous work. They are often trying to combat adverse weather conditions.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: If Madam Deputy Speaker will allow me to give way and increase my time a bit, I will happily do so.

Matt Western: Briefly, does the hon. Member agree that there are real concerns about adverse climate conditions across the sector, including from farms, and those involved

in community-supported agriculture, particularly Canalside Community Food? Heavy rain has led to really heavy soil, which is hard to plough, and that will affect the yield and timing of crops.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has only just come into the debate. We on the Public Accounts Committee given a lot of attention to the work of the Environment Agency. It could do much more not only to promote new flooding schemes, but to maintain its existing flooding schemes, which would help protect a number of farms and houses.

I strongly support the Government's policy of buying local. There are only two ways that farmers can continue in business: either they get payments for public goods and benefits, or they get a price that reflects the cost of production. It is slightly disappointing that the Government have not done more to encourage all supermarkets—there are some good ones and some bad ones, to be fair—to pay prices to the farming community that reflect the cost of production. The Government could do more through the Groceries Code Adjudicator to ensure that that is the case. DEFRA has committed to ensuring contractual fairness between supermarkets and farmers—to ensuring that supermarkets meet certain expectations, including the expectation that they will pay on time, pay what they agreed and, vitally, pay at least the cost of production. That is important if we are to ensure a healthy and sustainable food supply, and to ensure that the hard work that produces it continues in the long run.

6.50 pm

Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown). Like him, I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests; I am an owner of farmland and a partner in the firm that manages it.

Agriculture is enormously important to Scotland as a whole, but particularly to rural Scotland and island Scotland. NFU Scotland reminds us that it is a £3.3 billion industry, employing 67,000 workers in Scotland, with a further 150,000 working in agricultural activity. When we consider that the money earned and brought into the community through farming has a spin-off in ensuring that there are post offices, local shops and the critical mass of people needed for village and rural schools, we understand the importance of the sector to Scotland. I will be back in the Chamber at the close of business tomorrow night with an Adjournment debate on the Groceries Code Adjudicator. The large number of Members who have referred to it in this debate makes me hope that I will not be on my own for once in an Adjournment debate. That issue strikes at the heart of what is necessary if farming is to be sustainable and self-sustaining in the future.

Farming and crofting are critical to the economy of the northern isles. Orkney is prime suckler beef pasture. We have had beef farming at the heart of our economy for what feels like forever, while Shetland, with its more rugged landscape, is ideal for the production of sheep, especially the native breed, Shetland sheep. The old saw that the Orcadian is a farmer with a boat while the Shetlander is a fisherman with a croft remains true to this day. In recent years, prices have been decent, but every time I speak to my neighbours in Orkney, and to

farmers and crofters throughout Orkney and Shetland, it is difficult to get away from the lack of certainty that I hear about from them, especially—it pains me to say it—among younger farmers, who are asking whether the industry has a future. I believe that it does—in fact, agriculture is not a single industry but a collection of different industries—but I can see why so many of them have that concern.

I have noticed over the years, as a farmer's son and as a representative of an agricultural community, that piece by piece, and sector by sector, the importance of farming has been diminished. Once we have lost a sector, we never get it back. I look at dairy farming in my constituency. We have seen a significant reduction in the number of dairy farms in Orkney, and in Shetland we are down to just two. We talk about food security. In Shetland, in the depths of winter, we quite often go up to a week without a ferry to bring in food. The supermarket shelves are just bare, but in that time, the one part of the supermarket and country shops where people can still see something on the shelves are the fridges that contain milk, because we have a local supply. If those two dairy farmers were to decide that they could not carry on production, followed the example of their neighbours and colleagues, and left the sector, that would leave us completely at the mercy of imports for milk. We talk about public money for public good. Surely the continued production of milk in Shetland is a public good, and schemes that spend public money on supporting agriculture should be constructed in a way that allows that to continue.

The shape of future funding is critical to addressing the uncertainty that I hear spoken about by the farmers and crofters in my constituency. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Steven Bonnar) spoke about the First Minister's contribution to the recent NFU Scotland conference. His announcement about the 70% was welcome, but the hon. Member must know as well as I do that a great deal more detail is required. The lack of detail leads to continuing uncertainty. We need certainty about not just the structure of future funding but its quantum. We need a multi-annual ringfenced budget. That requires the Scottish Government and the UK Government to work together constructively, which should not be that difficult, but somehow it never seems to be quite as easy as it ought to be.

The House may be aware that Scotland's farming budget is linked to the UK's. It is pegged at about 17% of the UK's farming budget, in recognition of the different structure in Scotland and the importance of agriculture to Scotland's economy, but the policies in Scotland are increasingly divergent from those south of the border in England, and in Wales and Northern Ireland. That is essentially the point of devolution. It is sensible and necessary to have divergence in policy, but that diversity risks being undermined if there is not the resource in the budget to accommodate it. If the consequence of the changes in England is a smaller amount of public money going into farming there, that risks Scottish farming assistance being reduced and becoming inadequate for the job that it is required to do. The Treasury needs to come forward with a framework based on a multi-annual agreement, because we all know that farming is not an industry that will work on an annual budget; it needs a multi-annual settlement. We must also ensure that funding is ringfenced, so that the money cannot be taken away and put into something else if there is another winter crisis in the NHS, or whatever.

I agree with the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) about the importance of abattoirs. In many ways, the absence of smaller local abattoirs is indicative of the problems facing the agricultural sector and rural communities as a whole. We are shipping animals around the countryside by whatever means, be it by ferry from Orkney or Shetland to the mainland, or by road and motorway on the mainland. Animals are being slaughtered in greater numbers in a smaller number of locations—as a consequence, I believe, of the way in which supermarkets drive down price, and the fact that it is so much cheaper for animals to be slaughtered in that way. That definitely works to the detriment of farmers in my constituency.

I understand why there is no functioning abattoir in Orkney. I remember well the many problems of regulation, particularly in relation to the disposal of offal, that ultimately meant that abattoirs could not continue there, but at the end of the day, for a community that is proud of its animal welfare and the quality of the meat that it produces, that simply makes no sense. With a bit of native wit, flexibility and creativity, something better is surely possible.

There are so many ways in which agriculture, farming and crofting impinge on life in my community, so I could talk for a great deal longer, but I suspect that is also true of many other right hon. and hon. Members, so I will give them the chance to have their voice.

7 pm

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con): When thinking of Sedgefield, I am sure people have the perception—due, in particular, to one of my predecessors—that we are a collection of ex-mining villages and little else. Although I am constantly inspired by many within my mining villages, Sedgefield is in fact a particularly diverse constituency, covering about 250 square miles, with many farmers operating amazing businesses. I have been delighted to engage with many of them since well before the day I was elected. As my wife is the daughter of a Yorkshire farmer, I have had an insight into their world for about 40 years. I do not have the level of insight of the two former Secretaries of State who have spoken—my right hon. Friends the Members for Suffolk Coastal (Dr Coffey) and for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice)—but the world of our farmers is particularly challenging at the moment, and I would like to take some time to outline points that they have raised with me.

When I asked Mark Dent, a farmer who also runs the Darlington Farmers Auction Mart in my constituency, for a contribution for today, he said to me:

“I wouldn't know where to start, Paul”.

I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) empathises, because he has had conversations with him too. Mark Dent said:

“there are so many issues and challenges facing the industry”.

I want to get those issues in front of the Minister. Mark continued:

“These include access to European markets, cost of inputs, cost of machinery, cheaper imports, interest rates, successive years of challenging weather topped off with the loss of direct payments”—that is the way the rant went.

“With an ageing demographic in the farmer population, many are scaling back as it's no longer viable and the young can't afford to get a start with the cost of everything, land and rented land

[Paul Howell]

being the main stumbling block as that is now being driven by the new environmental schemes and the historic tax haven for millionaire businessmen who don't farm themselves.

We are sleepwalking into a food security problem.

I do applaud the government for their recent efforts, but using farming to meet their net zero targets is not the answer if they want food and at a price everyone can afford.

You can't have cheap food without...support with all the cost challenges farmers face.

Thinking throwing a bit of money at environmental schemes (which is more land coming out of food production) will be enough to subsidise necessary food production is naive. Farmers will take the easy, most cost-effective option."

The Hart family from Foxton said:

"The last thing English Farmers want is the Welsh Labour System imposed on them if we lose the election. Taking 20% of land out, 10% for the environment and 10% for trees is unrealistic.

Plus, the new rules governing holiday lets make a mockery of diversifying business. The whole point of farmers making holiday lets is to supplement income. But if the new laws governing second homes and holiday lets come into force, it could make it unrealistic to carry on.

In Wales farms cannot afford in many cases to carry on with holiday lets under the new rules imposed on them. Farmers would prefer to farm their land for their income."

They said that because farm incomes are at a historic low, there is nothing left

"by the time you have paid the bank back, your costs for producing your product and hopefully paying yourself.

This impacts the wider farming world of machinery sales and repairs. If farms cannot afford new investment and machines, we lose skilled mechanics, and companies are closing due to lack of sales"—

it goes down the supply chain. They continued:

"The knock-on effect is far larger than just what stops at the farm gate. A generation of farmers will be lost at the rate the industry is declining",

and that these days more and more farmers diversify

"to supplement the family income or are involved with developing and running holiday lets, camp sites, farm shops, teashops etc to try and break even let alone make a profit."

The Harts also said:

"There is too much red tape."

One of their big concerns is that cheap foreign imports get labelled as British because they are processed here. That has to be stopped; we need to be clear what is and is not British food. They said:

"As a nation we need to be able to feed ourselves, we need to look carefully at how we use our land, regarding building wind, and solar farms.

There are so many concerns around the resilience of our farming sector, and we need to ensure environmental power development is not on good farmland."

The Lawsons from Bishopston told me:

"There are a lot of farmers being tempted into changing productive farmland into nutrient neutrality or biodiversity net gain credits and taking bulk payments from developers. This land will then not be able to be used for growing food for either the next 80 or 30 years respectively."

Should we be worried? What is the plan for feeding our population? Farmers are doing that because they cannot make a return on the land by keeping it in agricultural use. Farmers enjoy farming, but a lot of them need to change just to survive. We should do all we can to deliver sustainable economics to our farmers.

Steven Brown from Sedgefield asked me:

"In view of the increased levy payable to the Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board, will more of the budget be allocated to advertising UK food production rather than research and development?"

He mentioned

"the need for a reduction in red tape, a reduction in duplication of farm assurance schemes and better returns for UK farmers for quality products as opposed to cheaper imports of inferior products."

Billy Maughan farms on the border between my constituency and Bishop Auckland. He has cattle, arable and free-range layers, and is the NFU council delegate. He said to me:

"There are a couple of points around Defra capacity...Firstly, it is around capacity for the Animal and Plant Health Agency to manage notifiable disease outbreaks. Avian influenza is still the single biggest risk to our business. There are cases of Bluetongue in the country that could affect our cattle, and my fellow farmers with pigs are hugely concerned about the risk of African Swine Flu getting into the country. Is there sufficient contingency planning in place to cope with a large-scale outbreak of one or more of these diseases?

Secondly, it is about the resources within Defra to roll out the new SFI standards due this summer. Will they be delayed or announced on time? Also, is there enough capacity to process the applications as the number of applications increases?"

Finally, Anna Simpson, the NFU county advisor, said we need to ensure that

"all new policies and regulations that impact agricultural and horticultural businesses undergo a food security impact assessment", and that we need

"a seamless transition to new environmental schemes that are open to all farmers and growers"

and

"public access to the countryside to be managed responsibly whilst recognising that much of it is an active working environment."

She also said that we need to

"implement the recommendations of the Rock Review into agricultural tenancies, to support the long-term resilience of a tenanted sector, delivering on food production and environmental goals"

and must have

"a consistent and coordinated response to rural crime across government and police forces."

In summary, my farming community is concerned about: the burden of red tape; what it sees as the abuse of schemes that make it look to the public like they are buying British when the product is only processed in the UK; the capacity of APHA to support the industry; and the unintended consequences of other policies on the farming community. It is particularly concerned that well-meaning environmental initiatives are impacting on the resilience of farming, and it is absolutely terrified that the Welsh model could come to England.

Food security, like many other areas of UK resilience, was brought into sharp focus by the covid pandemic and the war in Ukraine. It is critical that we do all we can to support our farmers in delivering UK resilience. There is no one more interested and engaged in the land than our farmers, and we must trust them to look after it.

7.8 pm

Keir Mather (Selby and Ainsty) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this much-needed debate on farming, especially as I am the proud representative of what I believe to be the most rural Labour constituency in the country, although my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire

(Alistair Strathern) has spent the past hour hotly disputing that claim. It is crucial that my local farming communities know that I hear their concerns and priorities, and that I am fighting for them in this House. Despite the Conservatives' claim to be the voice of rural communities, the reality is that many farmers feel short-changed by this Conservative Government and, like the rest of the country, are desperate for change.

The Prime Minister said to farmers a few weeks ago, "you don't do it for the money...you do it because you love it."

He conjured a nostalgic image of an artisanal age, rather than the reality that we should be proud of: a serious, powerful, £14 billion industry that is vital to our national health, our national security and our national heritage.

Farmers love what they do, but farms cannot run on love alone. Since 2017, more than 6,000 agricultural businesses have collapsed, paying the price for the Tory failure to provide them with the support that they deserve. A farmer in Britain today endures insufficient flooding support, uncompetitive prices, botched trade deals, and labour supply challenges. As consolation, they are left with the bitter encouragement: "Not to worry, because the Prime Minister knows you love what you do."

That is not good enough, it has never been good enough, and it is a desperate legacy of 14 years of Conservative Government. We need to turn the page in this country and provide a real offer for farming communities. In his speech two weeks ago, the Prime Minister said one thing that I thought rang true—there is a first time for everything. He said that one reason farmers do what they do is that they "feel a responsibility," but I do not think he quite realises how deeply that responsibility is felt by farmers in my constituency.

As I mentioned in a Westminster Hall debate, and will continue to mention until I am blue in the face, farmers in my constituency who live between Wistow, Cawood and Kelfield work every day to hold back hundreds of acres of floodwater on their land, year after year, to stop it reaching people's doorsteps in Selby. They are losing hundreds of thousands of pounds in doing so, their crops are being drowned on prime arable land, and they are receiving zero compensation for it. In one case, not only was a farmer holding back floodwater on hundreds of acres, but he found that the Environment Agency was pumping more water on to his fields from its floodwater infrastructure, which had reached dangerous levels of capacity. He asked me what he should do: continue to have his livelihood ruined, or let the water reach and ruin people's homes? If someone could tell me in what universe piling responsibility on to farmers whose sector is facing a mental health crisis is a logical way to carry out flood management in this country in 2024, I would be eager to hear their answer.

In such grave circumstances, farmers in my community deserve clarity. I would welcome the Minister providing an update on how discussions are progressing with the RPA on the farming recovery fund, and setting out the extent to which eligibility for the farming recovery fund will go beyond that provided in the flood recovery framework. I cannot begin to express how unacceptable it would be for Yorkshire farmers to be excluded from the help they so urgently need after enduring such a hard winter and having protected communities like Selby from flooding for so long.

That said, it remains the case that longer-term support for the farmers storing floodwater is needed—support that goes beyond what the FRF can provide and that recognises the inherent public good that farmers do in protecting homes from risk. As with so many of the crises that this Government have presided over, we are left with a similar challenge: to take immediate action to counteract the freefall that they have created while also producing the change that is so desperately needed to provide a long-term future for the farming industry.

Some of these things could be done in the near future. The Prime Minister said that he would implement an annual statutory food security index when parliamentary time allowed. I do not wish to be rude, but the Government are not presiding over an era of unflagging legislative vigour. If they care about the nation's food security, they should get on with it and legislate for it now. If they are not up for the job, we have a Labour party committed to doing right by farmers. We on the Labour Benches will happily step up and take the action that we need. A Labour Government would pursue a new veterinary agreement with the EU, back the NFU's Buy British campaign to source 50% of food in the public sector from British farmers, simplify the ELM schemes so that more farmers can enjoy economic and environmental benefits, and encourage DEFRA to meet its own departmental spending ambitions in a way that provides value for money for the taxpayer.

Most importantly for my local area, a Labour Government would be committed to creating a flood resilience taskforce to stop the buck passing between the Government, the EA, the internal drainage board and the water companies, to ensure that farmers know that when bad weather strikes, the Labour Government will stand four-square behind them with a joined-up plan to have their backs. Farmers in my constituency need to know not that they will be admired for their work by the Government, but that they will be fairly remunerated for what they do and given the support, tools and respect that they need not just to survive, but to thrive. I look forward to fighting alongside the farmers of Selby and Ainsty, every single step of the way, to achieve that.

7.14 pm

Greg Smith (Buckingham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather), although I will stay out of the minor internal argument between him and the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) about who is more rural. Although I have no technical interest to declare, I once more remind the House that members of my family are farmers, and that I have the privilege of chairing the all-party parliamentary group on farming.

Let me be clear from the outset: our farmers are the very best in the world and produce the very best food that it is possible to produce. That is important across my constituency, which enjoys an agricultural economy. To put that into sharp focus, 90% of the land in my constituency is agricultural land.

I welcomed the speech by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister at the National Farmers Union conference last month. As an aside, I welcome the new team at the NFU of Tom Bradshaw, David Exwood and Rachel Hallos, who have been mentioned. David Exwood in particular

[Greg Smith]

was so helpful and supportive as I piloted my private Member's Bill—now the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023—on preventing the theft of agricultural equipment through Parliament last year. Of course, I salute and pay tribute to Minette Batters for her many years of excellent service to the British farming community as she steps down from her role.

It is vital that we back our farmers. We must maintain food production as the primary focus. To add a little more cross-party consensus to the debate, I thought that the comments by the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael) were good. He gave the example of milk production, but the production of food and drink, full stop, is a public good, and we should see it as such. If we did not have food and drink, we all know what would happen.

The announcements on the doubling of the management payment for SFI to up to £2,000 and on its extension to new countryside stewardship mid-tier agreements were extremely welcome. Likewise, we have the biggest ever package of grants, with the £220 million productivity and innovation scheme supporting things such as robotics, and a new round of the farming equipment and technology fund. That is all good news. Indeed, I have seen the value of such funding streams in my constituency, including at the partly Government-funded 300-cow Addingrove dairy between Long Crendon and Oakley. It is the most incredible custom-build, future-proofed robotic dairy with its own pasteurisation room, as well as its own vending machine—one that does milkshakes made from delicious Buckinghamshire milk, as my children have discovered to the cost of my wallet. That dairy will ensure a bright future for farming on that land for many decades to come.

However, it is not all about robotics and grand innovation, important as those things are. We must also get the basics right. We must ensure that all farmers are able to access the support that they need to do the thing that they most want to do and that that nation needs them to do: produce food. That comes with a number of challenges, but critically, it has the public's support. Recent polling shows that 94% of people say it is important that the Government back British farming and food production, and 81% prefer British food to imported food—why that figure is not 100%, I do not know, but it is still a very high statistic.

The first step in getting the transition from CAP to SFI and ELMS right is the physical process. Too many farmers I speak to have not yet even attempted an SFI application. Some do not believe that it will be worth it, some are just waiting to see, and others just want to get on with farming, not endless paperwork. I look to my hon. Friend the Minister to update the House, when he winds up, on the overall uptake of SFI applications, and more importantly on what steps are being taken to make the process easier. As a warning, I will be sitting in on an SFI application in the coming weeks, so I can assure him that I will be ready with feedback of my own.

The second point is that we need a clear goal for what we are trying to achieve on food security domestically. The new UK-wide food security index is extremely positive, but it needs to come with a realistic target that is higher than the one we have now—something achievable to aim for that shifts the dial upwards from the current

60% figure. Only then can we have a sensible, cross-Government conversation about the value we place on food production as part of the many competing demands on land, because I guarantee that one way to achieve the opposite of increased self-sufficiency is giving over vast swathes of agricultural land to ground-mounted solar installations, battery storage and other large-scale developments. I entirely support moves to make it easier under the planning system to develop old barns or other redundant farm buildings into something more useful, or perhaps build a second farmhouse, a farm shop or a restaurant. Likewise, I support barn-top solar—on roofs, where solar should be—but the thousands of acres of farmland being actively built out for solar, or proposed for solar or battery storage, in my constituency alone is depressing and wrong.

The latest 2,100-acre abomination in the Claydons, known as Rosefield, would dwarf the geographic size of the town of Buckingham and devastate the landscape forever, and for what? Those 2,000 acres will power approximately 50,000 homes on current usage, when a small modular reactor needs just two football pitches to power a million homes. Solar is not a good use of agricultural land, and to those who try to say that protections exist for the best land, that is just not the reality I see in practice. There is land being taken for this purpose that is deemed to be 3b, even though it will often produce a 10 tonne per hectare wheat harvest. Furthermore, the system is far too often gamed by developers: they take land tests from the headland, which will obviously produce a lower grading after testing. For food security, for the beauty of our countryside and for real science, the Government need to end this ground-mounted solar nonsense for good, and do so now.

That neatly leads me on to the impact that infrastructure projects have on our farmers. My constituency suffers from the horrors of 19 miles of HS2 construction. I have spoken many times in this Chamber about that impact, but for the sake of this debate, it is vital that DEFRA steps up and plays its part in protecting farmers from that state-sponsored infrastructure project. HS2 Ltd and its contractors have no idea what they are doing when it comes to agriculture, yet their actions have a huge impact on farming, from robbing farmers of their topsoil to causing flooding to neighbouring fields in crop, cutting farms in two—making it impossible to move large equipment or animals—and failing to properly compensate for land taken or loss of profitability. For example, cattle loss has blighted numerous farms as a result of poor soil treatment and management by HS2's contractors, which are often operating right next door. One farmer has quoted a total loss of over £37,000 as a direct result of HS2's shoddy practices. How is that morally justifiable for this project? How can a hard-working farming family be left with such heavy losses?

Then there is blackleg, a disease in cattle that is caused by bacteria released from disturbed soil. I am aware of at least one case in my constituency that the farmer has attributed to HS2's malpractice—it is noteworthy that farmers in this area have never seen a blackleg case before. No prizes are available for guessing how much compensation has been offered, but for the avoidance of all doubt, it is zero. We need all parts of Government to wake up to the devastating impact these projects have on real people, real farmers and real businesses, and put

proper processes in place to support and compensate them. I gently urge the Minister to ensure that DEFRA plays its part in that.

The land take for state projects more widely must stop, not least in my constituency. The determination of the Ministry of Justice to compulsorily purchase a farm adjacent to HMP Spring Hill and HMP Grendon to build yet another mega-prison is universally opposed by all the local communities that surround it, and by me. Again, DEFRA must get more involved in stopping this nonsense, which will take away farms and further hit our food security.

Earlier, I referred to rural crime. I am assured by police that my private Member's Bill—now an Act—to prevent agricultural equipment theft will make a difference, but farmers are suffering on a daily basis from thefts and other rural crimes. I urge DEFRA to do more to work with the Home Office and our police forces to combat those crimes. My own local force, Thames Valley, is leading the way: its rural crime taskforce is doing heroic work every single day of the week, and our police and crime commissioner, Matthew Barber, has ensured that the force has the resources to double the number of officers in that team in the 2024-25 financial year. However, more needs to be done.

I have probably spoken for too long. There are many more subjects that I could cover, including trade deals; flooding; water quality; the excellent points that my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) made, and which I entirely endorse, about the need to keep the badger culls to prevent further outbreaks of bovine TB; mental health; and the RPA. However, I will conclude by saying that we must get all the points that I have mentioned right, but we must also be positive about the future of British agriculture. We must celebrate our farmers as the very best in the world. They are the custodians of our countryside who maintain its beauty, but most of all they are the producers of what we all love to eat.

7.26 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Buckingham (Greg Smith), who made a series of very good points about his own constituency and agriculture in general. It is my great privilege to represent around 1,100 farms across Westmorland and the rest of my very beautiful constituency in the lakes and the dales. When I talk to those farmers, it is clear that they feel a sense of deep anger at the situation they currently face. I pay tribute to them for providing our food, being the custodians of our countryside, protecting our towns and villages from flooding, and maintaining the backdrop to an outstanding and world-class tourism economy worth £3.5 billion a year.

My views on how wise it was for the United Kingdom to leave the European Union are a matter of record. Having said that, as many of us will acknowledge, leaving the common agricultural policy strikes me as one of those rare things: a potential Brexit benefit; a silver lining to a deep, dark cloud. However, the Government have managed to botch it. Pretty much everybody in this House got behind the general principles of the environmental land management schemes—public money for public goods—but my great fear is that the

Government have failed in the delivery of those schemes, for two obvious reasons. The first is the accidental nature of the transition and the things that they have predictably got wrong; the second is the design of the schemes themselves.

On the accidental part of it all, the Government promised to ringfence £2.4 billion for agriculture in England, and they have not spent it. Over the past two years, they have underspent by £270 million. We do not need a mathematical genius to work out how that has come about: if the Government predictably take away big chunks of the basic payment every year—£500 million has now gone out of farmers' pockets—and then introduce the things that replace it in a haphazard manner, to the tune of just over £200 million, of course people are left with less money and money is taken out of agriculture. We have heard about the difficulties people face in getting into the SFI, so 100% of those who are in the BPS will have lost half of that money by the end of this year, while only one in eight farmers is in the SFI. That was all totally predictable, yet the Government apparently did not foresee it.

Various people have talked about the iterative process of bringing in the SFI scheme. Of course DEFRA is going to develop new schemes and improvements along the way, but because that is happening, many farmers are holding back; they are not applying, because they think something good might come around the corner. Meanwhile, they are losing their basic payment and getting more and more desperate, and the consequences are really awful. One consequence is that many farmers I speak to, including some I spoke to last week, are making the decision against their better judgment to massively increase their livestock numbers. I spoke to one farmer who was more than trebling their livestock at their Lakeland farm just because they thought it was the only way they could manage to pay the rent—the only way they could keep their head above water—even though they know that very act will undo the good work that they and their family have done for 20 or 30 years beforehand. It is heartbreaking and counterproductive to our aims to increase and improve nature as a consequence of these plans.

The other consequence is even more awful, however: farmers facing complete and total ruin. People who have farmed their farm for generations—perhaps the fifth, sixth or seventh generation—are now looking down the barrel of a gun, realising they could be the one who loses that farm. Many people have talked about the great threat of mental health crises facing farmers. I have never seen anything as frightening as what is facing farmers at the moment when they see not just the loss of their business and income, but that great sense of shame that they are the one who will lose the family farm, even though it is no fault of theirs; it is the fault of this botched transition. For upland livestock farmers this has meant a 41% decrease in income in the last four years, just during this Parliament. People who were poor to start off with and were working at below the living wage are now earning even less.

We have heard scathing remarks about the Welsh Labour Government, justified I am sure. I am told this is merely a consultation, but what Conservative Members are accusing the Welsh Labour Government of doing top down they have already done bottom up in England. They have done exactly the same thing, taking land out of food production and impoverishing farmers.

[Tim Farron]

Farmers will be pushed out of farming and that will reduce the number of hands available in the countryside to deliver environmental goods. We could have the best environmental policies on the planet, but they will achieve the square root of zero if there is nobody there to deliver them. If we take farmers off the land, we have nobody to introduce and implement our green policies.

Perhaps the most obvious thing that reducing the number of farmers will do is reduce our ability to feed ourselves. This is an absolute nonsense: we have a range of public goods and none of them seems to include providing food for the people of Britain. At a time when we have war in eastern Europe, trade routes disrupted in the Red sea, and climate change rendering land around the world unfarmable, it is utter madness to be taking land out of active food production and reducing our ability to feed ourselves.

It is also environmentally counterproductive because we will still eat, I assume, so what will we do? We will import more food from overseas and that in itself is damaging to the climate because of the food miles involved in getting the food here. Also, where will that food come from? If we do not rear cattle in the United Kingdom, where will we get our beef from? It will come from cattle reared on pastureland in South America that used to be rainforest.

Britain feeding itself is important for the environment locally and globally, but there is also a major moral reason why Britain should feed itself. We are, relatively speaking, a wealthy country and will probably, war and disruption aside, be able to feed ourselves, so where will we go to feed ourselves? We will raid and put pressure on the commodity markets where the poorest countries in the world also go for their food. We will impoverish and take food out of the mouths of some of the poorest people in the world. To feed ourselves is not just intelligent and about security, and is not just environmentally sensible, but there is also a very strong moral imperative as to why we should do it.

We have heard reference to the trade deals and the reality is that, yes, the UK has the best farmers in the world, but the reason why we have the best farmers is because of the model of the family farm—the culture that underpins the way we farm in this country. That means high standards, and if we trade away those standards not only is that wrong because we undermine the importance of animal welfare and environmental standards, but we throw our farmers under a bus, which is what this Government did in the Australia and New Zealand trade deals. I am not saying those on the Front Bench think this at the moment, but many in the Conservative party, including a former Prime Minister, take the view that it is far better for us to be buccaneers on the international trade market and that, through the free market, we will feed ourselves by cheap imports so we do not really need to grow our own food here.

Fairness is vital to food security on trade deals. The Groceries Code Adjudicator is a wonderful potential referee, but it needs cards, red ones in particular. It needs the ability to investigate all parts of the supply chain, not just the retailers. It needs the freedom to be able to take referrals from the likes of us—Members of Parliament—the NFU and others, and not just rely on a farmer dobbing in the person he or she sells his

produce to, because that is not going to happen very often. The GCA should be given more powers and more reach and be able to take referrals from anyone.

Grants were discussed. One of the things the Government are doing as part of ELMS is grant support for farmers. That is very good, but many farmers need money in the bank in the first place to prove that they can fund the other part of the infrastructure project they are funding and bidding for grant support for. That means many farmers will have to be wealthy in order to bid for a grant in the first place. That is not acceptable.

I want to make a few remarks about tenants. Fairness in the food chain, and in farming in particular, has to focus on the deep unfairness in our land around the country, particularly in the design of the Government landscape recovery programme. I was up Kentmere on Thursday morning with farmers who are in a landscape recovery project and doing really good work—woodland pasture and keeping a flock on the fells, a good example of how this can be done well. However, those farmers said to me that they are a rare example of it working well, because the problem is there are not enough people working in Natural England to help farmers into those schemes, either the higher tier scheme or landscape recovery. As a result, only the large farmers with sufficient resources and enough time on their hands to be able to get into the schemes are doing so. Smaller farmers, owner-occupiers and tenants are not getting into those schemes, and the environment is suffering as a result, and the farmers are suffering because of the lack of income as they lose their basic payment with nothing really to replace it. I am deeply concerned about the impact on tenants of the reality of what is going on out there.

I was just outside Kirkby Stephen on Friday morning, speaking to a group of farmers, most of them tenants, and what they reported and what I have heard from other sources is deeply chilling. Landlords are riding roughshod over tenants, using landscape recovery as a means to do so, and it is utterly appalling. We are seeing tenants being evicted and being pushed to give up AHA—Agricultural Holdings Act 1986—tenancies, and we are seeing large landowners putting pressure on smaller landowners to evict their tenants as well so they can form part of a wider landscape recovery system.

Baroness Rock put together an excellent report and review with 70 recommendations, and the Government have not enacted them. I am seeing tenants in our communities in Cumbria being forced off the land. We are referring to it, justly I am afraid, as the Lakeland clearances, all because of the way the Government have designed this scheme and are allowing it to work. We desperately need the recommendations of the Rock review to be in place now. I ask the Government, and the Minister in particular, to pay particular attention to this outrage. We have Government money—public money, landscape recovery money—going into the hands of wealthy owners, including City financial institutions. There is no doubt whatsoever, as farmers tell me this up and down Cumbria, that less and less money is going into the hands of fewer but wealthier farmers, and all because the Government will not ensure—this is something we are allowed to do now we are no longer in the EU—the farm budget goes to active farmers.

Natural England needs more resource, but it also needs to learn from its actions and the mistakes it made over the Dartmoor debacle, because many farmers facing

the roll-over of higher-tier schemes are being held to ransom by Natural England. They are being told they have to reduce 25% or more of their stocking numbers despite there being no evidence of what good this will do to the environment—no evidence is being put out there at all.

Our communities in the Lake district were awarded world heritage site status just a few years ago. In the report UNESCO presented when we got that status it gave as much credit to the farmers as to the glaciers. We saw Liverpool lose its world heritage site status the other year, which is a reminder that it can happen. Natural England is pushing farmers, not on new schemes but on the roll-over of existing schemes, to reduce their stocking numbers on the basis of no evidence whatsoever, and we are putting our world heritage status at risk due to this massive overreach.

I believe the Government have fallen for that nonsense that there is a divide between food production and environmental protection. There is no such thing. Farmers are the custodians of our environment, and they are the ones who feed us. The greenest thing this Government could do is keep farmers farming so they can deliver those environmental schemes, and the most intelligent thing this Government could do is set a real target for how much food we will produce in this country—up from 60% to at least 70%—to make sure they do what their first principle must be: ensure that every single home in this country has enough food to eat.

7.39 pm

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron). I do not often agree with him, but on farming I am pretty much on board with him. I pay tribute to Minette Batters, who has done a wonderful job as president of the NFU, and good luck to Tom Bradshaw, who is taking over. I pay tribute to the NFU as an organisation, with which I work extremely closely. Before I carry on, I refer to my declaration in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Before I first got this job back in 2010, I set up a quarterly meeting for Dorset farmers, starting with south Dorset farmers. In those days, two or three attended. Now the meeting has gone to about 50 or 60 farmers who meet every quarter to discuss all the farming issues. I am grateful to several Ministers who have come down to talk to them personally at my request. What is rather alarming is that the issues they raised back in 2008, 2009 and 2010 are in many cases still relevant today. When I ask them, "Have things improved?" their answer, on the whole, is no. They are amazed, as am I, that food security is now something we all talk about. It had not been talked about for an awfully long time, and hon. Members have already noted that food security has been ignored for far too long. Now, we have another war in Europe, and the world is in a terrible state. Food security, not least for these islands, has now become a prominent issue, as it should be.

What my farmers say is that we left the EU to reduce red tape and to get out of the common agricultural policy, and it is an extremely good thing that we did, but they are now asking for common sense—not targets, not overly environmental eco-zealotry and not forcing issues on to farmers that turn them to growing wild flowers.

There is a place for wild flowers, but why does this country of ours look so beautiful? Why do so many millions of people come to this country and go to Scotland, Ireland and Dorset? It is because the countryside is absolutely stunning. In most cases, who has done that? It is the farmers. They are tired, as am I, of being attacked left, right and centre for doing all these things it is claimed they are doing when in many cases they are not.

I want to touch on a few issues from my farming group. The first is the Poole harbour catchment area. The Minister is listening intently, and I am glad that he is. I hope he is aware of the issue we have at Poole harbour. I know that the Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset (Chris Loder) is actively involved in trying to get that across to Government. We understand that nitrate leaching into Poole harbour is a problem; we have no issue with that. Where we have an issue is that the tool the Environment Agency has used to measure it has now been changed. When it did the first test, to everyone's delight the test was way below the level they thought it would be, so what has the Environment Agency done? It has moved the goalposts, with no consultation at all with the farmers. They did not have much faith in the Environment Agency, and they now have even less.

I touched on quangos in an intervention on the shadow Minister. I remember that Lord Cameron, as he is now, said back in 2010 that we would have a bonfire of the quangos. There is a place for such organisations, but they have become extremely powerful. They are implementing policy that does not ring true with the Government's direction of travel. Natural England and the Environment Agency are now doing things that, if I am hearing those on the Front Bench correctly, I cannot believe they agree with. We have no issue with trying to reduce nitrates into Poole harbour, but there is no way as we understand it—we had the water company come to talk to us—that it can gauge the volume of sewage going into the rivers. We know it is happening, but the actual volume is almost impossible to gauge.

Tenant farmers have been mentioned, and I entirely concur with the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale from the Liberal Democrats that some tenants are feeling extremely vulnerable. We are hearing stories of land being taken back in hand to take advantage of environmental schemes, and in some cases rents are being increased significantly. Others are experiencing problems with land agents employed by landlords. The Rock review has been mentioned, and I urge the Government to look at it and enact many of its excellent recommendations.

My next topic is slightly off farming, but it relates to it, and that is the reintroduction of beavers. There has been a report of a beaver being released illegally in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for West Dorset. That is causing concern. I believe that reintroduction has been experimented with in Scotland to a large degree. If we are to re-wild, I suppose there is some sense in putting beavers in large rivers, but there is no sense in reintroducing beavers into small chalk streams, or any other form of stream in Dorset. Beavers dam rivers. They would be protected, no doubt, by every organisation that would want to protect them. Farmland would then flood. As has been proven in Scotland, beavers do not hang around and say, "This is my home." They breed and move elsewhere and do the same in other rivers.

[Richard Drax]

As I understand it, they had to be culled in Scotland, because they broke out of the area given to them. Can the Government please look not only at the illegal releasing of beavers into rivers, if that is happening—it has not been proven yet—but the legal release? There is an emphasis on re-wilding. While we all want to see wild animals, there is a proper place and location for each species.

Next is the move from stewardship schemes to the sustainable farming incentives. We have heard about that from many Members tonight. It has been promised by DEFRA, but we are yet to see a clear mechanism or process for how it will work, and we receive questions on it every single week. As we have also heard from Members from all parts of the House, farmers are there to produce food—and to look after the environment, of course, but not to the detriment of food production, which is so important right now.

Mental health has been touched on. The Farming Community Network in Dorset reports an ever-increasing number of farmers suffering from mental ill health. I have to say that the Poole harbour catchment area, to which I have referred, is not exactly helping their mental health. That is not all the Government's fault; I am not necessarily banging on the Government's door. World events over which the Government have no control are also putting pressures on food production. I certainly understand that, as I am sure does everyone in the House. Mental health is a problem in the farming community, and a lot of that is because of the rules, regulations and other things imposed on them, when all they want to do is produce food and look after the countryside.

Lastly, tuberculosis has been touched on. It is a major problem in the south-west that particularly affects the dairy industry. Culling has proved to work. Rather than our talking about stopping the culling of badgers, and introducing other species, may I suggest that all wild animals have to be culled? If they are not, their health deteriorates. Foxes, deer and badgers do not have any predators in today's world. We do not want to wipe them out; we simply want them controlled. It is pure common sense. As I understand it, were the Opposition to win the election—God forbid—they would stop the badger cull. I am interested in whether that is true; perhaps the shadow Minister can tell us.

The British farmer is without doubt the best in the world. I ask the Government to continue to do the best that they can to ensure that rules and regulations are sensible and, above all, to ensure that common sense prevails.

7.50 pm

Alistair Strathern (Mid Bedfordshire) (Lab): Having grown up in the countryside, I have great memories of spending my childhood on my friend's family farm mucking about on tractors and taking in all that our great countryside has to offer. I am not sure that his parents have quite such fond memories of what we got up to on the farm back in the day. It has been a real pleasure for me to see him step up, take over the reins of much of that work, and take that farm from strength to strength.

It is a real privilege for me to represent so many of Bedfordshire's fantastic farmers, but having spoken to them, I know that the sad reality is that many of them really need representation in this place at the moment. I have visited farms at the Whitbread estate. The fantastic work being done there on regenerative farming was a real eye-opener for me, but it was deeply frustrating to hear from farmers there about the challenges they have had in accessing the SFI scheme, as it was to hear that only 12 farms across my constituency are in the scheme; 20 more started but failed to complete applications, weighed down by bureaucracy. That is only those who could apply to begin with. Many more are unable even to start applications after the Rural Payments Agency bungled remaps of their estate. They are bogged down in negotiations finally to get boundaries agreed, so that they can start accessing vital funding to support their crucial work.

It was a pleasure to visit Clifton Bury farm and see its world-famous shallot fields, but it was quite painful to hear about the challenges that the industry faces due to increasingly tight margins, and the risk that the ending of access payments poses to the beloved access walks around the farm, which were used by people from across my community throughout covid and beyond it. Parish councillors have stepped up, but without a long-term, accessible scheme supporting access to our brilliant countryside, landowners may struggle to make such walks viable.

It was a pleasure, too, to speak to the people at Browns of Stagsden and see their fantastic livestock farming. I took great joy in purchasing my fair share of fantastic goods from one of the best farm shops anyone could hope to see. However, it is clear from speaking to people there that they face real pressures on their business, whether from high energy costs or the lack of action on rural crime, and those pressures continue to grow.

The sad truth is that those are not the only such stories; these issues face farmers and farming communities right across my constituency. They have seen a real increase in their energy bills, post Ukraine; the Government failed to deliver home-grown energy, and they were left exposed to the volatile world energy markets. The challenge of getting on top of rural crime has led many of my farmers to depend on private security firms for action and follow-up. The sad reality is that that new overhead has been added to their business when they can barely afford it. There is also the brutal reality of a broken funding model for farming. Just 1p of the profits associated with much of our produce makes its way back to the fantastic farmers who produced them, and who have been looking after our brilliant countryside in the process.

Our farmers deserve better than that. Our farmers deserve action. From speaking to my farmers, I know that they are desperate for a clear Government commitment to genuinely sustainable domestic food production that delivers not only for the environment, but for all land tenures and all farm business models. They see at first hand how important co-operation with councils is if we are to reverse the decline in council farms and ensure accessible routes into farming for young people right across our communities. Most of all, they are keen for a renewed commitment from a Government who will finally put farming and farming communities back at the heart of their vision for our economy and our

country. I am incredibly proud to be a Labour MP, and to be part of a Labour party that is committed to doing just that.

I am proud of being part of a Labour party that is committed to finally making use of the great strength of public procurement, and of ensuring that 50% of public money spent on food goes to British farmers and supports British farming communities. I support the Labour party policy that will finally get us domestic energy security. That will protect our farming communities from some of the volatility in energy prices that they had to endure in recent years. I support a Labour party that will simplify the ELM schemes and ensure that we cut through the red tape that holds back my farmers and sometimes stops them accessing vital funding for the crucial work that they do.

Those good measures are Labour party measures, but they need not be just that. If press rumours are to be believed, the Government recently developed a bit of a penchant for pinching Labour party policies. I urge them to keep going. Labour Front-Bench Members have today outlined fantastic steps that are vital for supporting our farming communities right now. Let us not wait for a general election to deliver some of the changes that my farmers are crying out for. Let us bring forward measures in the dying embers of this Parliament. If not, I look forward to campaigning with Labour party colleagues from right across the country for a national Government who support the interests of the British farming community and deliver a decade of national renewal that our farming community desperately needs.

7.55 pm

George Freeman (Mid Norfolk) (Con): It is a great pleasure to speak from the Back Benches in this farming debate, and to welcome the Secretary of State—I have not seen him yet in this role—and the great Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore). I come from a farming family; it is nice to know that we are in such strong hands, and to hear such cross-party support for this key industry. The sector will be grateful to know how strongly it is represented across this House.

I do not have an interest to declare, except that as I come from a farming family, I narrowly escaped a career in farm management. I worked for Greens of Soham and used to be a director of Elsoms Seeds. I also worked for the National Farmers Union back when there was a thing called the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, and I used to chair the all-party parliamentary group on science and technology in agriculture. I take this opportunity to thank Minette Batters for her extraordinary leadership of an organisation that is at times not given to agility and clarity. She has brought clarity to the sector. I wish Tom Bradshaw, her successor, all the very best.

I think the House knows that I was not a great believer that the Brexit referendum would be immediately and easily implementable—I thought it would cause some difficulties and problems—but the one thing that I was very excited about was the opportunity to replace the appalling common agricultural policy, and all its mess, bureaucracy and chaos, with a UK farm and agriculture support framework. That remains an exciting opportunity. Such a framework would give this great industry—that is what it is—security in the long term. History

shows that when we give that to farmers, they give us back exactly what we want. We need a long-term, secure policy, that has enough support and flexibility to allow marginal hill farmers to protect the uplands and the beautiful countryside that we love; that supports small family holdings, whose economic marginality requires diversification; and that supports all those other activities that we want to support. In my part of the world, East Anglia, global, world-class, competitive agriculture can lead the way in growing the food that the world needs. There is a huge opportunity.

I observe that in my 14 years in the House, agriculture has gone from not being properly recognised as an industry, and almost being seen by the Government as an activity of park keeping, to being, after the pandemic and Ukraine, a hugely important strategic sector that is key to food security and an opportunity for us globally. We need to double world food production by 2050 on the same land area, with half as much water and energy. That is a global grand challenge. This country is a powerhouse in agricultural science, research and technology, and can help make that possible. The opportunity is for us to set out a framework that unlocks the genius of our agricultural sector, so that we can show the world how it is done. If we get that right, we will invigorate the rural economy.

Of course, Brexit was eight years ago. I pay tribute to the Government's various commitments: the £2.4 billion ringfenced commitment, the sustainable farming incentive, countryside stewardship, the food innovation programme, the food strategy, the animal health and welfare pathway, ELMS, and the Prime Minister's commitment at the recent NFU conference. The real key is ensuring that the farming community feel and see long-term, clear, sustainable support.

I want to highlight one or two things that the farmers of Mid Norfolk say we have still to get right. First, they highlight the importance of a really reliable, long-term policy framework for the commercial sector, as well as an environmental framework for skills and for innovation. For 40 years after the war, the sector knew what we wanted it to do. It needs to know that we know what we want it to do, and that we will not change our mind every five, three or two years.

Secondly, agriculture must be recognised as a strategic industry that is key to our balance of payments, food security and ability to connect to those huge global markets. Public support figures show that the public are with us now—they were not 20 or 30 years ago; they did not think of it as a great industry that they wanted to support, but they do now.

Thirdly, we must understand that farmers are, first and foremost, mainly small businesses. They are not sophisticated; generally, they are not people with degrees or MBAs in business management. They are people who love what they do. We need to give them a framework that works for them as small businesses. Farming is a very unusual business, which invests most of its costs up front in the hopeful pursuit of revenue and profit downstream. Not many businesses do that. We need to understand that reality, as that is partly why farms need such security.

A number of colleagues have talked about food security. We are not destined only to grow the root crops, potatoes and traditional crops here, and to import the salad crops. Incredible innovations in vertical farming mean

[George Freeman]

that we are now able to produce salad crops in this country. I have visited vertical farms—we have a great one in Norfolk at Fischer Farms. They use a fraction of the land area, with a fraction of the energy and chemicals used in traditional farming. There is no reason why that food security target could not be a lot higher.

Of course we all want environmental agriculture. I pay tribute to Kevin Bowes, the Breckland farmers, the Upper Wensum farmers group and the farmers at Wendling Beck. Farmers in Mid Norfolk are shaping best practice for agri-environment schemes. I recently visited a flagship project with Natural England: 20 or 30 people had come up from London, having bought their wellies at the garage; and Tony Juniper was preaching rewilding. I went to look at some land that, as a farmer's boy, I would think you could probably get two hectares or an acre out of—and the finest minds in the land were trying to work out how to get nothing out of it, at a time when we really need food production. I am worried that the E in DEFRA sometimes triumphs over the F, the R and the A. Food needs to be right back at the heart of the Department; I know that the Secretary of State and the Minister are committed to that.

I make the point about the environment because we all know that, traditionally, agriculture has been a very high emitting industry. We need to show the world how to move to a low-emission agricultural sector. We are well positioned to do that, not least in agricultural genetics and breeding science at the Norwich Research Park, where we are pioneering drought-resistant crops that do not need highly carbon-intensive chemicals, and disease-resistant and drought-resistant crops for the rest of the world. In our chase for net zero, the left hand and the right hand need to be co-ordinated. We are not doing anything for net zero if we are disrupting farming in East Anglia with endless solar farms, cables and pylons.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): There is a simple thing that the Department can do, which I have asked it to do again and again: not put solar farms on 3b land. We put them on warehouses or inferior land, but not on good agricultural land in Lincolnshire and Norfolk.

George Freeman: I agree. If we are to lead the world in net zero agriculture, it is all about metrics and data. It is about picking up a pint of milk, a potato or a loaf of bread and knowing its environmental footprint. With that, we can start to give the sector incentives and rewards for driving down the environmental footprint. Without it, we are condemned to follow environmental policies that are emotional and not connected to proper science and research. If we get that right, the UK could be a leader in setting those environmental metrics.

That brings me to water quality. I commend the fact that UK agriculture has achieved a 75% reduction in pollution—that is very right. In our part of the world, the nutrient neutrality muddle has been a serious blow to farmers who are taking water quality seriously by reducing pig effluent and trying to get the balance right. Clunky, bureaucratic, big schemes in Whitehall that were not thought through properly are causing chaos in our part of the world in both agriculture and housing.

That brings me to flooding, on which I agree with the hon. Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather)—it is good to hear colleagues from all corners of this House getting the problem. Large parts of Mid Norfolk are currently under water. That is not good for agricultural productivity. Farms are holding water, for which they receive no support. There has been a lot of talk recently of “from the river to the sea.” The basics of drainage are that rivers are there to drain water off the land into the sea, and we could do with the Environment Agency putting dredging and the clearing of rivers at the top of the priority list to ensure that we get the water off the land properly.

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): My hon. Friend is making a powerful point. That issue is not just limited to Norfolk. The Secretary of State will know, being a Fylde lad, that it is affecting my farmers. We are crying out for water draining off land and letting farmers farm.

George Freeman: I could not agree more. The Secretary of State, whose constituency is North East Cambridgeshire, has lived the reality of getting water off the land as much as anybody.

That brings me to labour shortages. We have had real problems in the last few years: post Brexit, post pandemic and with the minimum wage, farmers are struggling. When a horticultural grower of the calibre of Andy Allen has to plough his prime English asparagus crop back into the land because he cannot find anyone to cut it, we are in real trouble. Some of our agricultural colleges are fantastic—I think I still have a place at Harper Adams if this career does not work out—but I worry that Easton College in Mid Norfolk is not properly anticipating the future needs of a high technology agricultural industry. We need to nurture the skills of tomorrow. Our young farmers get it, but we need to give them the courses.

I echo the comments that a number of Members have made about the difference between landowners and farmers. They are not the same thing. Many farmers I see are contract farmers—they are working 24/7, covering huge amounts of land and operating with higher and higher costs. The environmental payments tend to go to the landowners. We need to look after the farmers: the people who are developing those skills and inspiring the next generation to come into this great industry. If we end up with an industry where the hedge funds own all the land and no one is able to farm it, we will have done ourselves no favours. Quite a lot of those pressures explain why we have such a problem with mental health in agriculture. One farmer a week is taking their life. We need to think about what is driving that.

I applaud the Government's work on production standards. We have a great opportunity in free trade deals to set the higher standards and to show the world how the UK produces more with less. I would offer a zero tariff only to those who are using the world's very best technologies for zero-emission agriculture, and create a market for the exporting of our net zero technologies. Sustainable intensification—delivering more with less—is not just a strapline. The world desperately needs us to help deliver that. In our sector we have huge strength: the John Innes Centre at the Norwich Research Park, the Sainsbury Laboratory in Aberystwyth, and at Roslin and Wellesbourne. We are a global powerhouse in science research. We spend about half a billion a year on it, but it does not yet feel like the agricultural sector is underpinned

by a half a billion of research. I know that the Secretary of State is thinking hard about how that science and research is better pulled through.

That brings me to agritech—a huge global sector. I was proud to set up our first agritech industrial strategy, the catalyst fund and the centres with my noble Friend Lord Willetts. We have some amazing agritech companies, but the key is to adopt the technologies they are producing. I pay tribute to companies such as Tropic Biosciences and to the work going on at Rothamsted. But when a company like the Small Robot Company develops brilliant technology but cannot find a market here to use it, I think that tells us as policymakers that we have to create a market in which those technologies are commercially viable and adoptable—otherwise we will end up incubating the rest of the world’s agritech sectors and not actually deploying the technologies here.

I will close by mentioning gene editing, which is a huge strength here in the UK—not just in disease resistance and drought-resistant crops, and shifting from chemical to biological control systems, but in nutraceuticals, functional foods and novel foods. We could lead the world in a whole new sector of agriculture, but that regulatory leadership is key.

The opportunity that people voted for eight years ago is still there. It is being born slowly and there have been many disruptions, but it is exciting. If we get this right, we could trigger and be the crucible of a new agricultural revolution in which we show the world how to deliver high-quality, safe, highly productive, low-input agriculture based on innovation with science, data and metrics. The UK could export that around the world. The alternative is that we create a jungle of well-intended green tape that gets in the way of a fundamentally commercial sector leading us into that new dawn. I know that DEFRA Ministers understand that. My job is to speak for the people of Mid Norfolk, and to ensure that we in this House show that we get it and that we are there for a new generation, who want to do the right thing for this country and for the globe.

8.9 pm

Sarah Dyke (Somerton and Frome) (LD): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). I recommend that he takes his place at Harper Adams University; as a former student, I know how good it is.

I am proud to represent a beautiful rural constituency in Somerset, which has a strong tradition of family-run farms. Indeed, Thomas Hardy called the Blackmore vale, part of which is in my constituency, the “vale of the little dairies”. The farms are managed by successive generations of families, including my own family’s farm.

Farmers are the lifeblood of rural communities. They are the custodians of our beautiful countryside. They care about the environment and work hard day in, day out to produce food for our tables. Yet there is a litany of ways in which the Government have ignored and neglected farmers for far too long. The Prime Minister recently said that he has got the “back” of farmers, but the farmers I speak to tell me that the Government have turned their back on them. The potential Brexit benefit, the promised “public money for public goods” environmental land management scheme, has been horribly botched and delayed, leaving many farmers on the brink. Some do

not know if they will be able to survive the next 12 months. If they are forced to leave the industry, they will join the 110,000 farms that have been lost to the industry since 1990.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) mentioned, only one in eight farmers is signed up to the sustainable farming incentive, because there is no incentive to switch. There is little flexibility, meaning many are stuck on lower payment rates. I am not alone in my concern that the SFI may discourage food production over environmental schemes. One farmer in my constituency suggested that they will need to farm nearly double the area they normally farm to achieve the same output alongside meeting their targets under the SFI. Farmers are worried that their central task of producing food is no longer the Government’s central concern. Farmers want to put food on our tables. If they cannot, we will be less food secure and we will need to import more food. I welcome measures to improve our environmental standards, but disincentivising food production will just shift environmental problems.

I agree with the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin): our farmers are certainly not revolting—but they are revolting against this woeful Conservative Government. When we Liberal Democrats say we get it, we mean it. Three rural by-election results in as many years prove it is the Liberal Democrats that farmers trust to back British farming. Farmers have told us they need three things: proper funding, workforce planning and the renegotiation of recent trade deals. Only the Liberal Democrats have a real plan to support farmers and rural communities, and that starts with a £1 billion boost to the farming budget so farms can thrive. We need small and medium-sized farms to be given the support they need to boost domestic food production and conserve our environment: things they want to do, but often do not have the time, manpower or budget to do.

The recent announcement of £220 million of funding seems fairly similar to the £227 million the Government have underspent in the past two years’ farming budget. It will not go anywhere near to addressing the crisis that farmers are facing. Farms desperately need workers, yet the seasonal worker visa scheme allows farms to recruit just 45,000 workers from abroad. According to the NFU, farmers say they need nearly double that—around 70,000 workers. We cannot leave our farmers and their crops to languish when we can act to solve the situation.

Lastly, we must urgently renegotiate the free trade agreements that the Government have used to shackle our farmers, disproportionately punishing them for holding some of the very highest standards in the world. The free trade agreements threaten to undercut and undermine our farmers even further, with cheap food hitting the supermarket shelves produced to lower welfare standards. The Farming Community Network ran a survey of over 500 farmers at last year’s LAMMA show, asking them what they are most proud of in their work. They answered: high standards of animal welfare, sustainability, and the strong sense of community in farming. Yet the trade deals threaten that. I once again call for them to be renegotiated, with proper parliamentary scrutiny of each one.

I spend much of my time out on farms. During recess week, I visited farms around Wincanton and Castle Cary in my constituency. Hon. Members may know that our recent recess week was during Mind Your Head Week,

[Sarah Dyke]

run by the Farm Safety Foundation, which raises mental health awareness among farmers. The Government announced a £500,000 boost for charities working on farmers' mental health. I have written to the Department to request more details of that funding, which were absent from the recent announcement. I look forward to a written response, but I wonder if the Minister might share those details with the House this evening. I am very pleased to hear he was at a roundtable event this afternoon to discuss just that.

I have spoken with charities in this field, such as the Farm Safety Foundation, the Farming Community Network and the Royal Agricultural Benevolent Institution. They agree that the funding is welcome. The Farm Safety Foundation told me that it might reach 2,500 agricultural students a year if the new funding is given and maintained, but it needs comprehensive action from DEFRA and it needs to be invited to play a role in shaping the policy. We need to fund farmers properly and fund support services, so farmers and the people who interact with them are equipped with the knowledge they need to intervene early. We need clear, simple and targeted communications from DEFRA that recognise the pressures on farmers' time. I want to see a style guide for DEFRA, similar to the one used by the NHS, to ensure that all users can understand the information clearly. It is unacceptable that DEFRA has been asking charities to simplify and rewrite its communications for it.

Finally, we need a long-term plan for British farming that safeguards our farmers, safeguards our food production and safeguards our environment. The financial pressures and bureaucracy that farmers face need to be eased, allowing them to focus on their core business of farming. Instead, the Government continue to undermine farmers who are at risk of losing their livelihoods. Our farmers and rural communities have been let down and taken for granted by the Conservatives for too long. Food security, environmental sustainability and rural economic prosperity are goals that farmers and the Government should share, but the Government simply do not care or just do not get it.

8.18 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke).

It was 40 years ago, at just about this moment, that I asked a gorgeous farmer's daughter from the Isles of Scilly if she would go out on a date with me. She said yes, and a couple of years later we were married, so for 40 years this very night I have been connected to the farming community. It has been an incredible time and I am incredibly grateful to her for sticking with me through all that time. Members of my wider family are still farming on the Isles of Scilly and many of them work in agriculture in Cornwall. Some members of the family even farm in that strange place called Devon. Over that time, they have given me a real insight into farming, the life of farmers and the challenges they face.

In Cornwall, we are blessed to have some of the very best farms and farmers that this country has to offer. When we start naming farmers, there is always a risk that we will upset those we do not name, but I have had the privilege of spending time on dairy farms with

Andrew Brewer in Fraddon and with Martin and Bridget Whell in Golant, getting up at 5 am and experiencing what it is like to milk cows with them. I have visited James Kittow the grazer at Kilhallon just outside St Blazey, who not only rears his own cattle but sees the whole process through, butchering them himself and selling them to many hotels and restaurants. I have visited St Ewe, which produces some of the finest eggs in the country, and Will and Kate Martin at Treway farm, who specialise in free-range turkeys for Christmas—and very good they are too. Tomorrow, we shall be hosting a Taste of Cornwall here in Parliament to celebrate St Piran's day. Everyone is welcome to come to the Jubilee Room tomorrow afternoon and sample the produce of some of the people I have just mentioned, and I encourage them to do so.

It has troubled me for many years that we seem to have set up a dichotomy between farmers and the environment, as though they were somehow at odds with each other. In my experience, farmers understand the need to protect our environment more than anyone else, because their livelihoods depend on it more than anyone else's. They want to enhance the natural environment, and not just so that they can continue to be productive themselves. Many of those running family farms want to pass on a viable business to their children and grandchildren, and if they destroy the environment in the meantime, they will not have a productive farm to pass on. We need to kill the idea that farmers are the enemy of environmental protection. They really are not, and we need to work with them because, as I have said, they understand the need to protect the environment better than any of us.

All the farmers I have spoken to have broadly welcomed the schemes that the Government have introduced to replace the common agricultural policy, such as the sustainable farming incentive and the environmental goals that it seeks to introduce. However, whatever schemes we introduce, we must not lose sight of the fact that the main focus must be on food production. Sometimes I think we have got that balance wrong, and many of the farmers I speak to feel that at times the focus has shifted too much from food production to the environment.

The problem with much Government policy is that things are done for all the right reasons but produce unintended consequences. In Cornwall in particular, landowners are taking land back from tenants because they make more money by taking it out of production and producing non-food items on it than by continuing to let their farms. The Government have said that they are looking and listening carefully to ensure that they have got the policy right, but I suggest to the Minister that we should also be careful not to produce outcomes that we do not intend.

We must never forget that every farm is a business. It is a lifestyle, and it might even be described as a calling, but at its heart it is a business whose owners simply want to produce food at a price that enables them to make money. Most farmers I know do not want to be incredibly wealthy; they just want to make enough money to live on, and to run their farms well. We need to be honest with the British public, and say that all the support that we give to farmers does not mean we are subsidising them. What we are doing is subsidising food, and subsidising households. It could be said on occasion that we are subsidising supermarkets.

Most farmers I speak to would rather be able to sell their produce at a price that gives them a profit than be caught up in a complex world of subsidies, grants and continual applications. I do not foresee a day any time soon when we will be able to get away from that, but I would love to see the day when we can move away from the continual subsidies and live in a world where farmers are able simply to make an honest profit and sell their produce at a price that reflects the cost that they incur in its production.

I know that others have touched on this, but one of the biggest fears that my local beef and dairy farmers have at the moment is bovine tuberculosis. We have done very well, in Cornwall as in other parts of the south-west, in driving down cases through the combination of measures that the Government have introduced, but at the heart of that has been the badger cull. Farmers are worried that we will move away from that without replacing it with measures that will be equally effective in driving down badger numbers. One of their greatest fears is the prospect that, one day, a Labour Government will abandon the cull without an effective replacement, and the examples we have heard of what is happening in Wales reinforce that fear.

I ask the Minister to reassure farmers that this Government will continue an effective policy of controlling TB, and will not simply abandon the cull for ideological reasons until we are entirely confident that we have other measures, such as vaccines, to keep on top of this terrible disease. Visiting farms that have experienced TB has brought this home to me. It is not just an economic tragedy for the farmers who have to see their herds destroyed; it takes a huge emotional toll as well. That creates a world of uncertainty, and many of them are struggling with that now. Farmers have asked me to raise the matter of high-frequency bovine electronic IDs. I know that there has been a consultation on that, but I understand that the Government have not yet responded. Farmers want us to urge the Government to introduce high-frequency rather than low-frequency IDs, because that would make their lives much easier, saving them both time and money. A response from the Government as soon as possible would be greatly welcomed.

I am pleased that the Government are actively encouraging people to buy more locally. Cornwall has done very well in that regard. During the pandemic, people became much more aware of supply chains and the source of their food. Some great farm shops have opened throughout Cornwall. It is important for people to have that connection, especially in rural areas, but those in many urban areas would also do well to understand where their food comes from. The more local it is, the better.

This has also been mentioned, but I wholeheartedly support better labelling, not only to help people to identify the source of their food but to make clear its environmental impact or the food miles involved. I hear some strange arguments, such as the suggestion that eating an avocado from Madagascar is somehow better than eating a steak from the farm down the road. To my mind, that is complete nonsense. If we actually labelled food to make people realise how far it has travelled and the real impact before it arrives on their plates, maybe people would make informed choices and choose to buy and consume locally sourced food.

Before I wind up, I want to put in a final word for the horticulture sector. My right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) made the point that, in Cornwall, it is not just about livestock; we also have a very important horticulture sector, which we need to continue to support. I was delighted when the Government eventually agreed to include horticulture and, indeed, flower pickers in the seasonal agricultural worker scheme. It is so important that we continue to do that and to make sure that the sector has the manpower it needs to bring in crops as they become ready.

As other colleagues have mentioned, this sector has a great future in the UK. The Eden Project recently opened some big greenhouses that are heated from its on-site geothermal plant, and it is now looking to grow virtually all the vegetables and salad produce for its restaurants. There is a great opportunity for more of this type of thing across the UK, so that we become more self-sufficient in home-grown food and do not need to import quite so much.

I am delighted that we have been able to have this debate today and that I have been able to share a few thoughts. I believe passionately that this Government and the Conservative party are on the side of farmers. We get what farmers need. We may not have got absolutely everything right over the last few years, but I believe we have been trying to do the right thing. I am confident that we will continue to back farmers and to provide them with the policies and support they need to ensure that they can go on being productive and feeding our country.

8.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is indeed a pleasure to speak in this debate. I declare an interest as a farmer and landowner in Strangford, and as a member of the Ulster Farmers Union, which is the sister of the National Farmers Union.

I will put out an advertisement, if I may. I chair the all-party parliamentary group for eggs, pigs and poultry—there is no better APPG to chair. I invite all hon. Members to come along to one of our events at 8.30 am on Wednesday 20 March, where they will hear more about eggs, pigs and poultry. Members will be able to do all the things they have said here that they will do and make sure that we can deliver for our farmers.

It is a pleasure to see the Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley (Robbie Moore), in his place, and I look forward to his contribution. In her introduction, the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones) did a fine job at telling us where we are and what we have to do.

My family have owned our farm since 1979. Unfortunately, my father took ill shortly after we bought the farm, so we never really farmed it, but our neighbour farms it. He is a dairyman, and he does beef, sheep and arable farming. He looks after the farm and maintains it well. My job on a Saturday afternoon is quite simple: I maintain all the gates, all the fences, all the roads, all the guttering, and all the roofs. It is good to be a handyman. The reason why I am handy is that I live there, but it is always good to have a different activity on a Saturday afternoon.

Farming should be of great importance for every person, because without the farmer, everybody goes hungry. The agrifood industry as a whole is under threat, and this House needs to use the opportunities afforded to us

[Jim Shannon]

by Brexit. I know that some people are very keen to whip Brexit. I am not one of them, even though we may not have the same Brexit in Northern Ireland as we have in the rest of the United Kingdom, but we want to take advantage of the opportunities.

I will speak briefly about the important agrifood sector in my constituency. Lakeland Dairies employs 270-odd people—one of the biggest employers. Lots of farmers feed into Lakeland Dairies with their milk from Mid Down, which is part of the area I represent. Given the constituency changes that will take place before the next general election, even more of Mid Down will come into my constituency. Mash Direct and Willowbrook Foods operate in the arable food sector and the vegetable food sector, too. Between them, those three companies employ almost 1,500 people, including farmers and dairymen, so one can quickly understand why the sector is important. We also have a very active and productive lamb sector in Mid Down, North Down and Strangford. There is also a very large pig unit, with 1,000 sows, down at Portaferry—probably the only one left. That gives a flavour of what happens in Strangford.

I want to make a point just for the record, because it is factually correct, about the Comber potato, which is recognised by the EU. I pushed that matter with the EU some time ago. Early Comber potatoes are called Comber Earlies, and there is really no potato in the world like a Comber Early. The hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) referred to what his constituency does, and I am going to do the very same for mine, because I can tell you it will look really good next week in the *Newtownards Chronicle*—my local paper. It is important to do this because I remember all the good things that the farming community has done in Strangford. The rise in energy costs has put many a farmer or producer in almost dire straits. It is past time that the drop in oil and gas prices was passed to the consumer and those who need it the most.

I wish to focus on one issue in particular, and it is a request on which I will seek the assistance of the Minister. The Ulster Farmers Union has expressed concern that the ammonia proposals could delay progression and reduce farm income further. I am not sure whether anybody else has spoken on this, but I am going to talk about it right now if I may. Research conducted by KPMG on the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs' proposed ammonia restrictions, set out in the call for evidence issued during the autumn in Northern Ireland, shows that the impact of unsuccessful planning applications for on-farm developments could hamper efforts to reduce emissions and could reduce farm family income between 7% and as much as 38%. That is quite a large factor, and it shows the impact of the ammonia issue in Northern Ireland.

I know that this is not the Minister's responsibility directly because we have a working Assembly again with a Minister in place, but I always seek the help of Ministers. They help us so that we can help them, and I believe that this is an issue that we really need to focus on together. It has the potential to affect agriculture's primary economic output, which could fall by as much as £35 million. Northern Ireland exports almost 80% of its produce, so this is really important for us from an export point of view. It comes to the UK mainland and

goes down south to the Republic of Ireland, as well as across to Europe. Indeed Lakeland Dairies' milk powder products go across the whole world. It is one of the biggest export companies. I have had opportunities to promote Lakeland Dairies in this Chamber to ensure that Ministers are aware of the company. I have had various meetings with Ministers on this over the years.

Going back to the issue of ammonia, the Ulster Farmers Union president David Brown has said:

“We have now submitted KPMG's findings to DAERA, and the report clearly shows that ammonia restrictions in planning could delay progression in reducing emissions and have severe consequences for the future of farming in Northern Ireland. Ammonia is a very complex issue and our farmers are very aware of this, but these proposals have the potential to do the opposite of what is intended.”

There are good intentions, but the good intentions could be detrimental so I would very much value the Minister's input, alongside that of the DAERA Minister in Northern Ireland, to see how we can better work together. A worrying aspect of this is that the report was commissioned before DAERA and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency announced their move in December to go beyond what was set out in the call for evidence paper. Sometimes it is good to get all the facts in the paper before we make decisions, and I think that on this one, DAERA and the Northern Ireland Environment Agency jumped the gun just that wee bit too quick. The report therefore does not take account of the more extreme position that has been adopted in recent weeks.

The report shows that these harsher ammonia rules will mean that fewer planning applications will be successful, preventing hundreds of farmers in Northern Ireland from being able to develop and modernise sustainably so that they can reduce emissions further. The farmers want to do that. The hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay (Steve Double) clearly outlined the importance of farmers and what they want to do, but they want to commit themselves to the environmental issues as well. He is absolutely right, but there has to be some realism on how that is done. It cannot be at the behest of all the farmers. It cannot be to the detriment of us in Northern Ireland.

Many farmers have been actively embracing practical mitigation measures, such as low-emission slurry-spreading equipment, feed formulations and fertiliser types, but with all these things that a farmer does, there is so much bureaucracy and paperwork. However, we are concerned that necessary investments in improved agri-housing and manure management facilities are likely to be significantly curtailed. This is a really big issue for us in Northern Ireland, and it is a big issue for the Ulster Farmers Union. Unsuccessful planning applications can lead to a fall in farm infrastructure investment of between 20% and 25%, which is impossible to comprehend, and it has consequences for the wider economy.

Agricultural construction was worth between £60 million and £70 million in 2022, and it is worth even more today. Without investment in farm infrastructure, farmers could struggle to introduce ammonia mitigation measures such as improved scrapers, slat mats in livestock sheds and covers for the slurry pits. These critical improvements are needed to reduce ammonia emissions from agriculture, and their absence delays progress towards our targets. Farmers want to help us meet those targets, but they need some realism in how it is done. It is important that we get it right.

Infrastructure improvements are also vital to improving animal health and welfare, which support the production of high-quality food for our growing population—that is what we do best in Northern Ireland. If a farm family's planning application is rejected, not only does it derail their morale in reducing ammonia emissions but there will be significant costs to the business. Farm incomes could drop by 21% for dairy farmers, including my neighbours, by 30% for beef farmers and by 38% for pig farmers. There will be massive reductions if it is not addressed, so we seek the assistance of Ministers both here and in Northern Ireland. Such reductions would mean that farms become inefficient, making it impossible for them to remain competitive, which will impact Northern Ireland's ability to produce food locally.

Every right hon. and hon. Member has spoken about farmers producing more food. If we produced all the food we could in the United Kingdom, we would not have to import anything. That would not be entirely realistic, of course, but the fact is that we can do more and we can do better. We would not be honest if we did not talk about those reductions whenever we talk about building our agrifood businesses. Our rural economy, our communities and our consumers are severely affected, too.

The Ulster Farmers Union has said that farmers want to reduce their emissions, but the KPMG report clearly shows that these proposals have more potential to stop positive on-farm development than to benefit the environment—that is the point made by the hon. Member for St Austell and Newquay. There is a balanced way forward that allows farmers to develop and deliver ammonia reductions while ensuring that farm families can maintain a viable business as food producers.

I have been anxious to understand how co-operation across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland can be achieved. I ask the Minister to make contact with the devolved Assemblies in Scotland, Wales and especially Northern Ireland to ensure that our targets do not eliminate our food-producing farms, which is where we seem to be heading.

Time is moving fast, so I conclude by saying that there is work to be done on the seasonal worker schemes, which everyone has mentioned. The hon. Member for Somerton and Frome (Sarah Dyke) said that there are 70,000 seasonal workers, and we in Northern Ireland will need some help too. Over the years, with Home Office assistance, we have been instrumental in bringing over seasonal workers from Ukraine, Estonia, Latvia and Poland. Lots of people have integrated into my Strangford constituency, and 40% of the workforces at Mash Direct and Willowbrook Foods—the two examples I mentioned at the beginning of my speech—are from Europe. It is important that such schemes and employment practices are in place.

The message from this House must be that we understand the pressures and will work to alleviate them. For the farming community across this United Kingdom, the plough will go straighter knowing that we will reap the benefits of the seeds that we sow in this debate. As I said to the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, the hon. Member for Brecon and Radnorshire, I believe in my heart that there is so much that we can do better together. I am very proud to be British by choice, by birth and by nature because it is the best thing for us.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): I call the Opposition Front Bencher.

8.44 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I thank colleagues for a full, excellent and thoughtful debate. I was delighted to hear contributions from new, young, Labour rural voices: my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Alistair Strathern) spoke well about some of the limitations of the SFI, and raised the issue of rural crime; and my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty (Keir Mather) talked knowledgeably about flooding issues. Although he is not in his place, we also heard from someone who is eternally youthful but not so new, my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), who also touched on SFI issues. *[Interruption.]* Oh, he is here, just in time. He also discussed green skills and biodiversity.

We also heard thoughtful contributions from two former Secretaries of State, which I listened to closely, and an excellent introduction from the hon. Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin). I thought there was a theme running through some of the contributions from Conservative Members, which was that not all is entirely well with Government policy. They made sensible observations about how long we have been waiting for the response to the Shropshire review, and about the demise of the horticultural strategy. A range of other criticisms were made, which I hope the Government will take on board.

I also very much enjoyed the characteristically optimistic contribution from the hon. Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman). I was not that far from his constituency last week, when, at the invitation of Labour's excellent Keir Cozens, I went to Great Yarmouth to meet a group of farmers. Like many others, they have, I suspect, been following this debate with interest, because their issues and concerns are typical of those of many across the country. They want to farm in environmentally sensitive, nature-friendly ways, but they run businesses and they need to make a return—that point was well made by my hon. Friend the Member for Selby and Ainsty. That requires the right regulatory frameworks, appropriate support, and help where necessary. Frankly, that is not what they are getting at the moment. They look at the SFI and rightly warn that the money on offer for growing flowers is so tempting that many will take it—we are talking about whole farms. That makes no sense, not for food production, the environment or the Exchequer. We need flour as well as flowers—that is what needs to be sorted out, Minister, and quickly. So, too, does the fundamental flaw in the Government's approach to the agricultural transition. They are spending large amounts of our money without knowing what they are getting for it. They cannot say they were not warned, but they pushed ahead regardless.

Halfway through the transition, the Government do not know whether their measures have improved the environment, or whether any progress is being made on reducing emissions. In addition, as the *Farmers Guardian* headline recently put it, we have "Farm Output in free fall".

Those Norfolk farmers are frustrated by a whole range of Government agencies, and we have heard reference to some of the problems there from Conservative Members. Whether it be muddle over responses to flooding or endless frustration with local planning, these are issues that Labour has identified, and that are central to our plans to keep Britain farming. Farming is a hard business, and times are difficult. The weather is more challenging

[Daniel Zeichner]

than ever, with sheets of water sitting on so many fields across the country. Too many farmers have had to endure the distress of witnessing the destruction of their crops or livestock due to those floods or, in some cases, the persistent shortage of workforce and labour. Although we are all relieved that the threat from avian flu has receded to some extent this year, I think we all know that had we faced bluetongue, which will continue to be a problem, or African swine fever at the same time, the already very stretched systems that the Government had in place would almost certainly have buckled.

As Members have said, we still have a supply chain contract system that we all know does not work for too many farmers. Stakeholders tell me that things are actually getting worse. I was in Hexham at the northern farming conference last year, where a point was strongly made that Labour's Joe Morris recently reinforced to me: we have too many buyers taking too long to consider cost price increase requests, taking too long to pay invoices, failing to honour their original order and rejecting perfectly good produce because it does not quite fit some aesthetic criteria. That leads to appalling waste; one producer told me that he had to throw away 50% of the lettuces he grows. That is terrible for the environment, an insult to farmers, and deeply problematic when working people all over the country are struggling in a cost of living crisis to get a meal on the table. More than a quarter of all the food grown in the UK is never eaten, and this wasted harvest accounts for between 6% and 7% of total UK greenhouse gas emissions. That waste has been made worse by severe and persistent labour shortages, which the Government have been too slow to address.

It is therefore no great surprise that UK farmers are producing less and less of our food. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Steve Reed) said, over 6,000 agricultural businesses have closed down since 2017. At the same time, as we have heard repeatedly, the Government have let farmers down on trade deals, opening the door to food produced to lower standards. Given all that, it is hardly surprising that a severe toll has been taken on farmers' mental health.

A Labour Government will resolutely back British farmers, reducing our reliance on insecure imports, supporting high-quality, local produce for consumers, and ending the shameful new reality we have come to almost accept: that there will be gaps on supermarket shelves. For Labour, food security is national security, and that starts with our new deal for farmers.

Labour will seek a veterinary agreement with the European Union that will get British food exports moving again and ensure standards are safeguarded. We will buy, make and sell more homegrown, sustainable, nutritious food. We will support farmers across the country through public procurement, and use the Government's purchasing power to ensure that at least half of all food in our hospitals and prisons is locally produced or certified to higher environmental production standards. We will deliver price stability for farmers by establishing GB Energy, a new publicly owned energy company that will direct public and private investment to harness clean, homegrown wind, wave, solar and nuclear power. We will have energy independence, with

100% clean energy by 2030. That means cheaper energy for farmers and less volatility, which is vital to long-term businesses.

The Government seem to have taken forever to respond to Baroness Rock's report on the tenanted sector, but we will inject a new urgency into that, as we will into finding ways to help new entrants into farming, because those young people are the future of the sector. We will support research and innovation, so that we can make productivity gains that have been elusive for too long in many parts of the industry.

We are committed to making the environmental land management schemes work. Frankly, the Government simply do not have a strategic approach to ELMS, or to the crucial challenge of balancing producing nutritious food, protecting nature, mitigating climate change and upholding animal welfare standards. They are failing on all these important fronts. The Government's failure to deliver on their environmental targets means that their promise to protect at least 30% of our land, waters and ocean by 2030 is in serious doubt. The Climate Change Committee's latest report makes grim reading for the Government. Emissions from agriculture are going in completely the wrong direction; they actually rose last year.

The Government have failed in their task of establishing a post-Brexit vision and framework for farming in this country. It will fall to Labour to pick up that mantle and create the land-use framework needed to meet the multiple demands made on our land in a more strategic way—to deliver stability that optimises the achievement of our social, economic and environmental objectives, and to enshrine food security as a key public good, backing British farmers while restoring nature and protecting the environment for future generations. That is the future for British farming, and it is a future with Labour.

8.52 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Robbie Moore): I thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the debate. I particularly thank the Under-Secretary of State for Wales, my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Fay Jones), for opening the debate. Why? Because this Government strongly believe in the importance of our Union and the industries that sustain it, including our mighty food and farming industries.

I have been involved in the agricultural sector all my life, since, aged two or three, I was placed in my pram, positioned carefully in the milking parlour, down in the pit, to watch Dad milk our Holstein and Friesian herds. I have driven the combines during many harvests on our family farm, and was even lambing yows in Yorkshire just yesterday. I know the importance of our agricultural sector, especially to the people who work in it.

On that note, it was an honour to host this morning in Parliament the next crop of Nuffield farming scholars, as they set out on their journey to undertake valuable research to drive productivity, innovation and growth in a sector that we all love. It was also brilliant to host a further group of farmers in Parliament this morning from God's own county—our future farmers of Yorkshire. I put on record a tribute to Minette Batters for leading

the NFU as president for many years. I wish Tom Bradshaw, a fellow Nuffield farming scholar, the best of luck as he takes on the presidency.

We have heard many excellent speeches from colleagues from right across the House. It is clear that farming is complex; pressures are being placed on the sector from all sides, including from the skies above. Farmers have to feed a growing nation, address environmental considerations and balance public will, expectations and perceptions of the industry. That is why, from a Government perspective, it is vital that policy works and drives forward productivity, innovation and efficiency in the sector.

The Government are committed to continuing to produce at least 60% of the food that we eat in the UK, and have ambitions to produce more food domestically. We will continue action where it matters, to support farming businesses, so that they grow and thrive. Farming contributes a staggering £127 billion to the economy, and we want to enhance and secure nature while ensuring food production. We have a key focus on driving productivity in the sector, as food security must always be at the forefront of our mind. As has been mentioned, we recognise that it is vital to balance the priorities of protecting food security, restoring biodiversity and tackling climate change, while, of course, ensuring that farming is profitable and productive, so that farming businesses can thrive, and so that farming continues to attract the very best and the brightest.

Let me turn to some of the points made in the debate. Our farming schemes are delivering for farm businesses of every type and size, unlike the bureaucratic common agricultural policy, under which 50% of the budget went to the top 10% of landowners. Believe me, having worked as a farm business consultant before entering this place, I can say that there was no policy that frustrated me more than the common agricultural policy. It undoubtedly led to a lack of innovation and stagnation in farming businesses, and, for tenants, a base level in rent that was unfairly inflated.

We have been released from the shackles of the common agricultural policy and are midway through a period of transition. In January this year, we published the agricultural transition plan update, setting out our biggest upgrade to farming schemes since the UK has had the freedom to design our own policy. As the Secretary of State has set out, we have increased payment rates for the sustainable farming incentive, and the countryside stewardship's mid tier, by 10% on average, and announced a further 50 new actions that will be available from the summer. That will give farmers more choice, more freedom and more money in their pocket.

The biggest changes to farming in a generation do not happen in a vacuum. Farmers have been dealing with soaring global prices for fuel and fertiliser, so the Government have been working hard to get inflation down, from 11% last year to 4% now. Our transition is not just a move away from the basic payment scheme to the roll-out of environmental land management schemes. We are placing our confidence in the schemes working, and that confidence has been borne out partly by the uptake in farmers getting involved. Almost half of farmers who have got involved in the scheme are progressing. We have received more than 11,000 applications for SFI alone since last autumn. There were 35,000 live countryside stewardship agreements in place across England in January 2024. That is a 112% increase since 2020.

Upland farmers, as has been mentioned in this debate, are incredibly important in our new schemes and grants offer. There is something for every type of farm. Hill and upland farmers have been mentioned, and I want to take the opportunity to highlight the offer for the sector. We have worked incredibly hard with our upland farmers to increase payment rates and develop new actions on moorland that offer great flexibility. They include new actions to support management of upland peat and non-peatland soils for flood and drought resilience. We have also increased payment rates for species-rich grassland actions. For example, the payment rate for managing wet peat on moorland has increased to £181 per hectare. We have reviewed the payment rates for similar upland and lowland options, and have agreed to pay the same rate to everyone.

It is important that we are rolling out the SFI, countryside stewardship schemes and landscape recovery schemes, but driving productivity, innovation and growth is equally important, which is why we have announced the largest ever grant offer for farmers for the next financial year, which is expected to total £427 million. That includes doubling the funding for productivity, providing more support for farmers to invest in automation and robotics, and soil installations to build on-farm energy security.

Many Members have welcomed the new annual food security index, which will be rolled out to capture and present the data needed to monitor levels of self-sufficiency, and the Farm to Fork summit will be held annually. That builds on the great work at our last summit, held in Downing Street, which brought together many key stakeholders from across the industry. Many Members referred to the announcement of £15 million to tackle food waste, which will enable farmers to redistribute surplus food that cannot be used commercially at the farm gate.

New regulations will be laid before Parliament to ensure fair and transparent contracts for dairy farmers, and a review will be launched to improve fairness in the poultry supply chain. In an effort to drive more opportunity, we are expanding permitted development rights to help farming businesses to diversify should they so wish. That builds on the announcements at the Oxford farming conference in January. We have something to offer every type of farmer in England, so they can choose what works best for their business, from the uplands to the lowlands. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice) said, that builds on the great work that many Secretaries of State, past and present, have done to ensure that the Government not only deliver on our environmental credentials but are focused on driving productivity, innovation and growth in food and farming businesses.

Many Members across the House mentioned flooding. As the floods Minister, I recognise just how much increasing our flood resilience matters to our farming community. Farmers are already eligible for support through the flood recovery framework, including a grant of up to £2,500 as part of the business recovery grant. As I announced from the Dispatch Box earlier in the year, we have gone beyond the measures previously put in place by announcing that farmers who have suffered uninsurable damage to their land will be able to apply for grants of up to £25,000 towards repair and reinstatement costs through the farming recovery fund.

[Robbie Moore]

We also need to go above and beyond in ensuring that we have a proper maintenance programme that works for Environment Agency assets. That will come out of the money we are providing to double the £2.6 billion to £5.2 billion, to increase our maintenance provision. I know what a vital role internal drainage boards play. They do an excellent job, not only in Lincolnshire but across East Anglia and further afield, as has been mentioned. I reassure Members that all options will be considered. Dredging will be considered, as will removing the vegetation that has blocked our Environment Agency assets for far too long. We need to ensure that we are not only using nature-based solutions upstream but focusing on our lowland farmers, ensuring that the water can be moved off their land as quickly as possible. Having visited farmers in Lincolnshire, Nottinghamshire, Gloucestershire and East Yorkshire since taking up this role, I know how important this issue is to all of them.

More trust is vital. As has been mentioned, we need to ensure that farmers feel that the Government are onside regarding mental health provision. Working in a farming community presents significant difficulties, particularly during the winter months, with many farmers working on their own, often in difficult weather conditions. There is no doubt that farming is not an easy job, with long hours in remote rural areas. In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of the importance of farming mental health and wellbeing. We provide support through the farming resilience fund, which has benefited over 19,000 farmers to date, but we know that there is more work to do. That is why the Prime Minister announced at the NFU conference that we are making up to half a million pounds available to deliver projects that specifically support mental health provisions within our farming sector. That builds on the work being done by the Farming Minister, who attended a farm roundtable earlier today with key stakeholders from across the charitable sector. I want to give a special thanks to all those involved in ensuring that our farming community benefits from the Government support that we are rolling out.

Many Members mentioned trade. We have expanded our global network of agrifood attachés to 11 roles in our top export markets, and five more have been recruited and will be starting in post later this year. They include attachés in Europe for the first time, and we are strengthening our engagement in other countries to boost trade, resolve barriers that UK exports face and provide market insight to help businesses capitalise on the high demand for UK exports. We are also delivering the export package that the Prime Minister announced at the UK Farm to Fork summit last May, including by implementing the dairy export programme, which will help businesses grasp new opportunities around the world. We have been clear that agriculture will be at the forefront of any trade deals that we negotiate. We reserve the right to pause negotiations with any country if the progress we want is not being made, as we did with Canada recently.

Several hon. Members spoke about food labelling—my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire (Sir Bill Wiggin) did so eloquently. We plan to launch a consultation on improving food labelling to tackle the unfairness created by unclear labelling and to protect farmers and consumers. The increased transparency will help shoppers

make informed choices, and will back British farmers producing food to world-leading standards of taste, quality and animal welfare. The consultation will include proposals to improve and extend the current mandatory methods of production and labelling, including options for production standards, and we will explore how we can better highlight imports that do not meet our high UK animal welfare standards.

I know bovine TB worries many Members and many in our farming community. Our bovine TB eradication strategy is working, and has brought about a significant reduction in the disease. Progress has been made, and we are now able to move on to the next phase of the long-term eradication strategy, which will include badger vaccination, improved cattle testing and work towards developing a cattle vaccine. DEFRA has increased funding for badger vaccination through a range of activities, but I stress to all Members that we will continue to be informed by the science and culling will remain part of our wider toolkit for tackling the disease for as long as necessary.

Many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for North Herefordshire and the right hon. Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael), spoke about small abattoirs. Small abattoirs in England can apply for capital grants through the new £4 million fund, which is designed to boost the sector. They are an important part of the rural economy that offer a high-value route to market for many native and rare breeds, among others. Through our smaller abattoir fund, grants of between £2,000 and £60,000 are available at a 40% intervention rate. Our selection is intended to improve productivity, enhance animal health, add value to primary produce and encourage innovation in the sector.

I went to Dorset last Thursday and met more than 120 farmers from the constituencies of my hon. Friends the Members for South Dorset (Richard Drax) and for West Dorset (Chris Loder), who cannot speak in this debate, and I want to assure them that I am concerned about the tool that is being rolled out by the Environment Agency, which is being used at Poole harbour. I give both Members the reassurance that I gave their constituents last Thursday: I want to review that tool. I also assure them that I will work with them, Baroness Rock, who was also at that meeting, and their constituents to ensure that the tool achieves the outcomes that we all want.

I say to the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that, having visited Northern Ireland, I know that cross-departmental learning can always take place. Although the matter of policy is devolved, I can assure him that I am more than happy to engage.

Skills are incredibly important. I reassure my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Norfolk (George Freeman) that skills are a top priority for the Government to ensure that we drive innovation within the sector. He will know that we have provided funding to the Institute for Agriculture and Horticulture to help it to create a continued professional development system for farmers. The institute is now live, and many members have signed up.

Dr Coffey: I am conscious that Mr Deputy Speaker encouraged us to curtail our speeches earlier, and I appreciate that the Minister is being encouraged to wind up, so I am sure that he will write to us on the several questions that have been asked, but let me focus on one area: skills. More than 7 million people registered through the EU settlement scheme, but not all of them have chosen to come back to work in the UK. I want to

understand whether we have breached the number of visas that had been set aside. I say that because a lot of effort went into ensuring that there were visas so that farmers would have enough labour to work in the sector. Have the Government extended the number by the extra 10,000 visas that were negotiated, or were we fine with the coming up to 45,000 that we had reached?

Robbie Moore: We have not reached that figure yet. I am more than happy to keep that engagement going and to take that away and have a conversation with my right hon. Friend. I assure all Members that helping our farming community as much as possible through all measures is a key priority, including through the roll-out of the schemes that she refers to.

Finally, the land use framework will be published in due course. I want to reassure all Members that the Secretary of State, alongside his ministerial team, rightly wants to give that full consideration to ensure that it works in relation to food security and food productivity, and that it drives innovation in the sector. To that end, we will cross-check it with our energy security policies and all other policies to ensure that food production is at the heart of the Government's agenda.

Labour says that it wants what it is doing in Wales to be a blueprint that will be rolled out across the rest of the country, but I fear for the agriculture sector if that is the case. This is a period of change and adjustment, and the Government are in listening mode and ready to act to support hard-working farmers right across the United Kingdom. By prioritising a profitable and sustainable food and farming sector, we can keep the nation healthy and happy, support our rural economy and ensure that our mighty farming businesses continue to thrive long into the future under this Conservative Government.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered farming.

PETITION

Morecambe and Morgan Offshore Wind Farms project

9.13 pm

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): Recognising the enormous impact that the plans will have on Fylde's ecology, economy and communities, I rise to present a petition. I thank the parishes of Newton, Clifton, Freckleton, Westby and Wrea Green and the town councils of Kirkham and St Annes for asking EnBW, BP and the other organisations behind the Morecambe and Morgan project to reconsider their proposals for transmission assets. Residents are understandably concerned by the proposals, given the audible buzz generated by two massive substations, the disruption for local schools, the footprint of a single substation being the equivalent of 13 football pitches at a height of 20 metres, and the fact that the 122 metre-wide cable corridor will rip through the heart of rural Fylde.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the constituency of Fylde in Lancashire,

Declares that the Morecambe and Morgan project should reconsider their plans for Transmission Asset cabling and proposed substations in Fylde; further declares that the proposed plans of the project will disrupt wildlife, communities and agricultural land.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to heed the residents' concerns and work with those leading the project to share all relevant documents and studies transparently, and seek alternative connections to the National Grid.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002920]

Byers Gill Solar Farm

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(*Aaron Bell.*)

9.15 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton South) (Con): My neighbour and hon. Friend, the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell), and I are incredibly grateful to be able to bring before the House this debate on the proposed Byers Gill solar farm. It stretches across agricultural and arable land between Stockton and Darlington. The proposed site neighbours a number of other solar farm sites that have already been approved and others that are being brought forward for approval, meaning that the cumulative impact on this beautiful rural community will be almost 2,500 acres.

The plethora of solar farms snake through and encircle some of the most beautiful rural villages in the region—and, in fact, the country. Villages, farms and even a local primary school are merely metres away from some parts of those sites, but it is not only villagers and farmers who will be impacted: the area is inhabited by a rich tapestry of wildlife and biodiversity. I have been contacted by one resident whose family had farmed locally for generations, and who will have the solar farm just feet from her boundary. She shared with me the list of species that regularly visit her plot: badgers, foxes, hares, deer, pheasants, woodcock, snipe, and grey partridge—which are, of course, a red-list species. That plot has daily visits from herons, and has seen coots, moorhens, geese, swans, various ducks, swallows, owls, buzzards, sparrowhawks and bats. A 2,500-acre scar on that countryside will undoubtedly affect those animals, their habitat and their food chain, and this resident is rightly devastated.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Member for securing this debate. He is absolutely right to highlight the wildlife impact, but also the loss of good agricultural land. Is it not time that the Minister and Government, and any potential developers, understood that good agricultural land should be retained for food production? That is what we want, not the loss of that land to solar farms.

Matt Vickers: I could not agree more, and I will come back to that point. There is a balance between energy security and food security, and food security is incredibly important to many of the jobs that we talked about in the previous debate.

Where now people drive along country roads and look on to beautiful rolling fields, those views will be replaced by miles of 7-foot-high fences to prevent the movements of deer. Residents, many of whom have lived in the villages and farmed the fields in that area for generations, have shared with my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield and me their huge concerns about the impact that a development of this scale will have on their community. They understand the need to improve our energy security and the move to renewables, but the sheer cumulative scale of the solar farms densely packed into this small rural community will change it completely. An area characterised by rurality, nature and agriculture looks set to become characterised by industry, panels and battery substations.

Aside from the aesthetics, the complete change in the character of this rural community, the damage to people's quality of life and the huge impact on biodiversity,

this decision will also be about balancing competing interests and priorities. Energy security is a huge challenge for our country, but so is food security. Ironically, this debate follows one about the challenges that our farmers face. Many of them are looking at how to improve their financial outlook; they are being approached by developers, and have to make incredibly difficult decisions for themselves and their families. Our Great British farmers are the stewards of our countryside, who care for our natural environment and put food on our plates. We must back them, so that they can carry on doing that.

We are talking about prime agricultural land. Residents and I agree with the words of the Prime Minister:

“We must also protect our best agricultural land. On my watch, we will not lose swathes of our best farmland to solar farms. Instead, we should be making sure that solar panels are installed on commercial buildings, on sheds and on properties.”

I hope that the Planning Inspectorate will ensure that a robust and independent grading of this land takes place, so that it is given fair consideration, and ultimately protected for generations of farmers to come.

At present there are more solar farms pending approval than the national grid could hope to service. Let us ensure that we develop solar farms that are proportionate and rightly placed. There are further concerns about what the scale of this industrialisation will mean for the community. There are huge concerns that moving permeable, greened land into the muddy underbelly of acres of solar panels will have real consequences for country roads already suffering from flooding problems. The dangers of battery storage systems such as those destined for the site are well known and documented, and such a battery storage system being put near residential properties and in close proximity to a school is deeply worrying to residents.

Many residents have expressed their concerns about the developer JBM failing to undertake adequate consultation; in fact many would go as far as to say that it has actively stifled it. I have heard from several residents who feel that they have been given no voice in the process. Many residents were not afforded sight of circulated consultation materials; I understand that just 12 of the 356 affected residents received them. Only 120 planning brochures were provided and, illogically, these were placed at a library 9 miles away, inaccessible to many residents. Stakeholder meetings were organised, but residents were never informed. A face-to-face consultation was held in Stockton market place, miles away from the site, and an incorrect location was given to residents. Then the representatives left early, so those who did turn up did not get to speak to them. This catalogue of failings is well documented and will be made available to the Planning Inspectorate ahead of its decisions.

I pay tribute to residents from the affected villages, and those who have taken a role in bringing together the Bishopton Villages Action Group, which stands up for local residents. They have shown how amazing the power of community can be and what it can achieve. They have shown exceptional professionalism. They have mustered and used all the expertise in their community, and raised a huge amount of money to oppose these plans. They have produced professional submissions at every level, and I hope that the Planning Inspectorate will carefully read the report they have issued on JBM's failure to consult in line with its duties under the Planning Act 2008.

I thank the Minister for her time. I hope that today we have allowed residents' concerns to be thoroughly aired, and I look forward to this proposal, with its cumulative overwhelmingly negative impact on this community, being roundly rejected.

Paul Howell (Sedgefield) (Con) *rose*—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Roger Gale): Order. I have no notice that the hon. Gentleman has asked permission to take part in the debate. Do the owner of the debate and the Minister agree that Mr Howell should speak?

Matt Vickers *indicated assent*.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway) *indicated assent*.

Mr Deputy Speaker: I call Paul Howell.

9.23 pm

Paul Howell: I apologise, Mr Deputy Speaker; you should have had notice. That was an oversight by my office and me.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for highlighting the scale of the problem, which is clear from the fact that we are both here speaking about this matter. I am sure that if my hon. Friend the Member for Darlington (Peter Gibson) were able to be here, he would contribute, too; he is another constituency neighbour aware of the concerns about this proposal.

As has been said, the proposed Byers Gill solar farm would cover land between Bishopton and Brafferton in the Sedgefield constituency. I am particularly familiar with the area, as I was married in Bishopton nearly 39 years ago. The farm would cover over 1,200 acres of land, and in the nearby region, there are further proposals from other developers that would increase the land affected to well over 2,000 acres. Residents have approached my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South and me with significant concerns about the scale of the developments individually and in aggregate, as well as concerns about the “consultation process” that has been followed. To be fair, the proposals were refined after an initial round of consultations, and changes were made, reflecting some concerns.

I would like the Minister to be cognisant of the following critical points. Consultation must be real. I got into politics because I felt that the local Labour council was paying lip service to consultation; it was basically just telling people what was going on, instead of engaging and trying to consult properly, so I am particularly sensitive when I hear concerns about poor engagement. After my last meeting with the residents action group, I reached out to the developers to discuss the concerns. They have agreed to meet, but unfortunately I had to postpone the scheduled meeting. I will be catching up with the developers in the next few weeks, and I hope they will listen to what is going on today and react to the concerns. After all, it is not what the developers say to me that matters; it is what they say to my constituents and the people affected at the sharp end. My residents' feedback concerns me massively, and I will be raising it again when I meet the developers.

Although communication always requires two parties to engage—sometimes people do not listen or hear—I always believe that the primary responsibility for good communication rests with the sender, not the recipient, and I encourage the developers to get on top of their game in that respect. On a slightly linked point, if the Minister caught the farming debate earlier, she will have heard about the concerns of farmers in this space. Farming economics are pushing farmers to accept solar farms on their land when they may prefer to keep farming. It is imperative that this country develops our food resilience, and it is critical that we are robust in our assessment of the land that could be used for solar to ensure that it is not consuming good farming land. I have heard concerns, as has my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South, that the assessment of land, whether at grade 3a or 3b, is possibly being done by some who may have a vested interest in the process. We must ensure that the assessment has integrity and robustness.

It is of real value to our rural communities that their character is maintained. We need to ensure that the multiplicity of schemes in an area are jointly assessed to be certain that planning creep does not overwhelm that area. As I said, the possibility of more than 2,000 acres being covered in such a small and concentrated area is surely not reasonable.

We also have rules and guidance about the payments made to communities to support them when such schemes are approved; they must be explicitly fair and robust, and not merely bribes for compliance. It is important for the long-term resilience and value of our rural communities that they do not effectively turn into large industrial parks destroying our green and pleasant land. I support solar—it is one of the green power sources that we must develop in the right place—but it cannot be at the expense of the rural community's way of life.

9.27 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Amanda Solloway): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Stockton South (Matt Vickers) for securing this debate relating to the development consent order for Byers Gill solar farm. I also acknowledge the contribution of my hon. Friend the Member for Sedgefield (Paul Howell). They have both shown incredible commitment today and previously in raising awareness of this case within the House.

I must say from the outset that for propriety reasons, I am unable to comment on the specifics of the proposal. Byers Gill is considered a nationally significant infrastructure project, as defined in the Planning Act 2008, and any application would be determined by the Secretary of State. I understand that an application for the Byers Gill solar farm was received by the Planning Inspectorate on 9 February 2024. The Planning Inspectorate is considering whether the application should be accepted for examination and, if accepted, will carry out the examination on behalf of the Secretary of State, who will review the report and make the final decision. Given the quasi-judicial role of the Secretary of State in determining applications, I hope the House will appreciate that I cannot comment on the specifics of Byers Gill solar farm or any other proposed infrastructure project, as that could be seen as prejudging the outcome of any

[Amanda Solloway]

proposal subsequently submitted for decision through the planning process. I can, however, set out in general terms how planning works for large solar projects.

There are established routes in the planning system to consider the impacts of solar projects and to enable communities to raise concerns about developments in their areas. Developers taking projects through the nationally significant infrastructure projects regime must complete considerable community engagement before any approval is granted, giving communities and local authorities ample opportunity to feed in their views.

When a developer submits an application to the Planning Inspectorate, it must be accompanied by a consultation report. In that document, the developer must demonstrate that it has complied with the statutory pre-application consultation requirements and that it has had regard to the responses it has received. Among other things, the report must provide a description of how the intended application was informed and influenced by those responses, outlining any changes made as a result, and provide an explanation as to why responses advising on major changes to a project were not followed, including advice from statutory consultees on impacts. If an applicant has not followed the advice of the local authority or not complied with guidance published by the Planning Inspectorate, it must provide an explanation for the action taken or not taken.

On submission of an application, the Planning Inspectorate will write to relevant local authorities and ask for their views on whether the consultation has been adequate. The Planning Inspectorate will consider the consultation report alongside any representation made by a local authority on the adequacy of the developer's consultation and the other application documents before deciding whether to accept the application for examination.

The planning system sets out how applicants and decision makers should consider the impact of solar projects on land use, the local environment, wildlife, biodiversity and, of course, landscapes. That should also include consideration of cumulative impacts: for example, where several solar projects are deployed in close proximity.

The Infrastructure Planning (Environmental Impact Assessment) Regulations 2017 require all large solar developers to complete an environmental statement as part of any application. The environmental statement requires developers to consider all potential impacts during a project's life from pre-development to construction, operation and decommissioning. The environmental statement must be conducted by a "competent expert", which means that all surveys and studies, including soil surveys, must be conducted and overseen by experienced members of their relevant professional field, such as ecology or geology, and comply with relevant codes of conduct.

As set out in the recently designated national policy statement for renewable energy infrastructure, while land type should not be a predominating factor in determining the suitability of a solar site location, applicants should where possible utilise suitable previously developed land, brownfield land, contaminated land and industrial land. Where the proposed use of agricultural land has been shown to be necessary, poorer quality land should be preferred to higher quality land, avoiding the use of "best and most versatile" agricultural land where possible.

In terms of the safety of battery storage, it is a priority of the Government to ensure that an appropriate, robust and future-proofed health and safety programme is sustained as the industry develops and storage deployment increases. The framework is kept under review to respond to changing circumstances. Recent reviews have considered both the planning system and the environmental permitting regulations.

The United Kingdom was the first major economy in the world to introduce legally binding net zero legislation. We cut emissions by half between 1990 and 2022 while growing the economy by two thirds, decarbonising faster than any other G7 country. In 2021, the Government adopted their sixth carbon budget for the period of 2033 to 2037, to reduce emissions by circa 78% by 2035 compared with 1990 levels.

The Government have also committed to decarbonising the electricity system by 2035, subject to security of supply. That will require deployment across a range of homegrown green technologies at an unprecedented scale and pace. Renewables such as solar and wind, alongside other low-carbon technologies such as nuclear, will underpin the UK's transition from reliance on fossil fuels to the new secure clean energy system. Solar deployment is a key part of the Government's net zero strategy, energy independence and clean growth. We are aiming for up to 70 GW of solar capacity by 2035, which would be more than quadruple our current installed capacity. We need to maximise the deployment of both ground mounted and rooftop solar to achieve that ambition.

I again thank my hon. Friends the Members for Stockton South and for Sedgfield for raising this issue and for championing their constituencies. I will ensure that the points they have raised are brought to the attention of the Ministers who cover solar and planning within the Government. Although I have not been able to discuss the specifics of this case, I assure them when taking a decision on any development consent application, the Secretary of State will follow the relevant requirements in the Planning Act 2008 and have regard to a wide range of matters that are important and relevant to her decision.

Question put and agreed to.

9.36 pm

House adjourned.

Written Statements

Monday 4 March 2024

TREASURY

Advanced Manufacturing

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (Gareth Davies): Today the Government have announced over £360 million of joint Government and industry investment in 16 UK advanced manufacturing projects, securing highly skilled jobs, building a stronger economy and cementing the UK as a global leader in industries of the future.

This involves a combined industry and Government investment of almost £73 million in projects to accelerate the development of zero-emission vehicle technology in the UK, almost £200 million in projects to develop energy efficient and zero-carbon aircraft technology, and almost £92 million in life science manufacturing projects. The funding awarded is targeted to support the sectors where the UK is or could be world-leading and is designed to unlock investment from the private sector to help grow our economy.

The Chancellor is also announcing an up to £120 million increase to the green industries growth accelerator (GIGA) to support clean energy manufacturing. Around £390 million has been earmarked to expand UK-based supply chains for electricity networks and offshore wind sectors, and around £390 million for the carbon capture, utilisation and storage and hydrogen sectors. This is alongside the £300 million previously announced for UK production of the fuel required to power high-tech new nuclear reactors, known as HALEU.

The GIGA funding will enable the UK to seize growth opportunities through the transition to net zero, building on our world-leading decarbonisation track record. It forms part of the Government's priority to grow the economy focusing on making the right long-term decisions for a brighter future by creating better-paid jobs and opportunity right across the country.

This follows £4.5 billion announced in the 2023 autumn statement to increase investment in strategic manufacturing sectors—auto, aero, life sciences and clean energy—across the UK for five years from 2025. This autumn statement announcement included £975 million in funding for the aerospace sector, and the Government have confirmed that this will be allocated to the Aerospace Technology Institute programme.

Alongside this, the Government are setting out further details of the £50 million apprenticeship growth sector pilot announced in the 2023 autumn statement. The pilot will boost funding for eligible providers delivering 13 high-value advanced manufacturing and engineering, green and life sciences apprenticeships standards, and will explore ways to stimulate training and break down barriers to delivery of high-quality training, with a particular focus on up-front capital investment costs.

[HCWS307]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Fairer Regulation of Farming

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Steve Barclay): In June 2023, the Government launched a consultation on how hedgerows should be protected in England. The consultation asked for views on the Government's proposals to maintain protections for hedgerows by bringing management rules into domestic legislation. These rules included maintaining green cover 2 metres from the centre of a hedgerow, prohibiting hedge cutting between 1 March and 31 August, and the relevant exemptions related to these rules. The consultation also proposed a suite of civil sanctions that could be used to address non-compliance with the rules as part of a proportionate, supportive regime.

Hedgerows are an important part of our countryside and have many important benefits for our wildlife and environment as well as their contribution to the landscape. Although this consultation asked specifically about protecting hedgerows on agricultural land, we also asked where the Government should focus our ambitions for future hedgerows policy. Responses to this question showed strong support for extending protections outside of agricultural land as all hedgerows are important havens for wildlife. The Government will continue to consider how best to support the sustainable management and protection of hedgerows in different contexts, taking account of the views expressed through this consultation.

We know that our farmers and land managers value our hedgerows. There are now over 90,000 km of hedgerows with one or both sides being managed under 16,000 countryside stewardship and sustainable farming incentive agreements in England. Through countryside stewardship capital grants over 13,000 km of hedgerows have been created or restored.

We received 8,841 responses to the consultation, which closed in September 2023. We considered all the responses carefully and have today published the Government response to the consultation on www.gov.uk.

There was overwhelming support for hedgerow management measures to come into legislation, and we will now bring forward secondary legislation setting these out as soon as possible, to ensure that these important protections are in place quickly. We trust our farmers to look after hedgerows and the new legislation will provide the reassurance that all are following the same management approach. Alongside the continuation of our hedgerow offers in our environmental land management schemes, this will underline a commitment to protecting hedgerows and supporting those who look after them.

The legislation will maintain the same level of protections as previous cross compliance rules did, but our approach to enforcement of the proposed new regulation will be different, with a focus on being fair and proportionate. We have learned lessons from previous approaches and believe that an advice-led approach will result in the best outcomes. We will be talking to farmers and environmental organisations about this, as well as consulting as required by the Regulatory Enforcement and Sanctions Act 2008.

[HCWS309]

FOREIGN, COMMONWEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICE

Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission

The Minister of State, Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (Mr Andrew Mitchell): I wish to inform the House of the completion of the new framework document for the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission, an arm's length body, funded by the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, which delivers the Marshall Scholarship programme on our behalf.

The Marshall Scholarship programme supports intellectually gifted young Americans to study in the United Kingdom. Marshall scholars return home at the end of their studies with a deeper understanding and appreciation of the United Kingdom and strengthen the enduring relationship between Britain and the United States of America. The Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office is proud to sponsor the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission to deliver this important scholarship programme.

The framework document will be in place until March 2025 and governs the relationship between the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office and the Marshall Aid Commemoration Commission, setting out roles and responsibilities, and governance and accountability, including financial matters. The framework document will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS305]

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Suicide Prevention Grant Fund

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Maria Caulfield): On 25 August 2023, my Department launched a £10 million suicide prevention

grant fund to support voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations in delivering suicide prevention activity in England.

I am pleased to today confirm the 79 successful organisations which have been awarded funding from the scheme. I would like to put on the record my thanks to all those organisations that applied, and for all the suicide prevention activity that is delivered on a daily basis, up and down the country.

The list of provisional awardees was published today at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-grant-fund-2023-to-2025> and can be found below.

The commitment is part of this Government's plan to make health and care services faster, simpler and fairer.

I look forward to seeing the important and innovative activities that will follow as a result of this funding, in some of the most at-risk regions in England and to the groups who most need it. This is an important milestone in delivering the new "Suicide prevention strategy for England: 2023 to 2028" which we published in September 2023 and can be found at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/suicide-prevention-strategy-for-england-2023-to-2028/suicide-prevention-in-england-5-year-cross-sector-strategy>.

The voluntary, community and social enterprise sector plays a critical role in providing support to people experiencing suicidal thoughts or approaching a mental health crisis, as well as intervening early to prevent people reaching these points. Ultimately, their work saves countless lives and this grant will help ensure that they can keep doing that.

This grant builds on the record sums of money this Government have invested to transform and expand NHS mental health services as well as the successes of a previous grant fund of £5.4 million in 2021-22. That fund supported over 100 voluntary, community and social enterprise organisations, with overwhelmingly positive results, including helping to address demand after the covid-19 pandemic, improving access to services for people in need, and helping identify those in need, quicker.

Organisations Provisionally Awarded Funding

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Total Award</i>	<i>Predominant area of delivery</i>
10 Windsor Walk CIC	£233,537.62	In the London Boroughs of Southwark and Lambeth (psychotherapy) and nationally (film tour)
Action on Postpartum Psychosis	£123,668.00	National
Active Prospects	£105,800.00	Mainly in Surrey and West Sussex, but also working with people from Croydon, Sutton, Kingston, Brighton and Hove
AMAT UK	£94,357.00	Medway Council
Aspens Charities	£150,000.00	Kent and Sussex
Base 51	£9,587.00	Nottingham and Nottinghamshire
Beachy Head Chaplaincy Team	£245,386.00	East Sussex at Beachy Head Coastal Cliffs
Bipolar UK	£250,000.00	National
Birmingham Irish Association	£45,375.00	Birmingham with some national reach
Bolton Lads and Girls Club	£9,936.00	Olton local authority
Bradford Rape Crisis and Sexual Abuse Survivors Service	£95,580.00	City of Bradford Metropolitan District Council and Craven Town Council
Brave Futures	£22,530.00	Suffolk: Babergh District, East Suffolk, Ipswich Borough, Mid Suffolk and West Suffolk. Norfolk: North Norfolk, South Norfolk, Norwich, Breckland, Broadland, Great Yarmouth, King's Lynn and West Norfolk.
Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire (CPSL) Mind Ltd	£176,688.00	Cambridgeshire, Peterborough and South Lincolnshire

Organisations Provisionally Awarded Funding

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Total Award</i>	<i>Predominant area of delivery</i>
Chapter West Cheshire	£9,995.00	Cheshire West and Chester
Chesterfield Citizens Advice Bureau	£99,760.00	Chesterfield Borough Council, North East Derbyshire District Council and Bolsover District Council
Cornwall Neighbourhoods for Change Ltd	£171,083.32	Camborne, Pool, Redruth and St Austell
Druglink	£135,000.00	Hertfordshire
Emerge Advocacy	£126,095.00	Surrey, Kent, Berkshire
Empowerment Charity Lancashire	£80,000.00	Blackpool
Every Life Matters	£64,756.00	Cumbria
Fabrica	£9,974.00	Brighton and Hove
Family Action	£197,794.00	Bolton
Family Intervention Counselling Service CIC (FICS)	£113,625.00	Warwickshire
First Step, Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland	£76,845.00	Leicester, Leicestershire and Rutland
Footprints Project Limited	£5,908.00	Regionally across Dorset and Hampshire. Dorset Council, and BCP, Hampshire County council and unity authorities.
Home Group	£200,000.00	Durham and Darlington
Home-Start Trafford, Salford and Wigan	£43,823.77	Trafford, Salford and Wigan
Inclusion Hampshire	£163,531.00	Basingstoke Mencap (Basingstoke and Deane) and Danny's Place Equine Therapy (Winchester, rural Hampshire)
Ipsum	£96,270.00	Swindon
Islington Mind	£65,939.00	Regionally across all Greater London boroughs
James' Place Charity	£625,000.00	Across north-west England including Merseyside, across north-east England including Tyneside and Wear, and London, including the City of London and Greater London
Jigsaw4u Ltd	£68,698.00	Regionally. SW London Boroughs of Croydon, Merton, Sutton, Wandsworth, Kingston and Richmond-upon-Thames
Katie Piper Foundation	£263,192.00	Nationally
Kindred Minds	£7,069.00	Liverpool local authority area with capacity to reach out to neighbouring Merseyside boroughs
Lancashire Mind Limited	£119,981	Regionally within Lancashire with a focus on Chorley, Preston and Lancaster but open to anyone living within Lancashire
Lancaster Men's Hub	£9,950.00	Regionally. Within the approximate boundaries of Lancaster City Council, Lancashire
Lawn Manor Academy	£9,000.00	Swindon (or Wiltshire if extended through the MAT)
Lincolnshire Rural Support Network	£85,918.00	Regionally, primarily in the area covered by Lincolnshire County Council
Listening Place	£51,000.00	London
Mankind UK	£224,830.71	Brighton and Hove
Mental Health Foundation	£110,636.00	Regional, but based in London
Mental Health Innovations	£625,000.00	Nationally, but based in London
Mersey Counselling and Therapy Centre	£42,657.00	Birkenhead and the surrounding area of the Liverpool City Region. LA is Wirral
Merseyside Water Rescue	£5,329.00	Liverpool
Missing People	£199,009.00	South-east, south-west, midlands, north-west and north-east; and adding seven new force areas—Bedfordshire, Humberside, Staffordshire, Kent, Derbyshire, Leicestershire and Essex
Nafisiyat	£79,068.00	North London
Nai's House CIO	£23,050.00	Cherwell and Didcot
National Suicide Prevention Alliance (hosted by Samaritans)	£150,000.00	Nationally
Nepacs (North East Prison After Care Society)	£332,771.00	Regionally in North-east
No Place Productions	£23,602.00	Regionally (north-west). LAs covered are: Liverpool, Wigan, Fylde, Preston and Lancaster
North Devon Against Domestic Abuse Limited	£108,532.00	Devon
Oakleaf Enterprise	£8,645.00	Guildford and Waverley
PAPYRUS Prevention Of Young Suicide	£625,000.00	Regionally across the East of England (but with national reach)
Penhaligon's Friends	£9,400.00	Cornwall
Place2Be	£399,916.00	Nationally—south-west England
Roundabout Ltd	£88,184.00	Sheffield
Safeline Warwick	£415,497.00	Nationally in England and locally in Warwickshire and Coventry
SafeNet Domestic Abuse and Support Services	£36,512.50	Regionally, throughout Lancashire and parts of Greater Manchester (Bury, Oldham, Rochdale borough councils)

Organisations Provisionally Awarded Funding

<i>Organisation</i>	<i>Total Award</i>	<i>Predominant area of delivery</i>
Saffron Sheffield Women's Counselling and Therapy Service Limited (Saffron)	£38,127.00	Sheffield
Samaritans	£530,000.00	Nationally
Samaritans of Harrogate and District	£8,500.00	Harrogate as well as regional/nationally
SJOG (St John of God Hospitaller Services)	£153,461.00	Tees Valley
South Warwickshire and Worcestershire Mind Ltd	£116,730.60	Warwickshire and Worcestershire County Councils
St Giles Trust	£194,912.00	Leeds, Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Wakefield
St Paul's Hostel	£1,000.00	Worcestershire County Council and surroundings districts
Stockport County Community Trust	£16,800.00	Stockport
Stockton and District Advice and Information Service	£108,665.00	Regionally—Middlesbrough and Stockton-on-Tees
Sunflowers Suicide Support	£86,948.00	Regionally in Gloucestershire
Survivors Of Bereavement By Suicide	£50,434.00	Nationally
Talk off the Record Youth Counselling Croydon	£129,250.00	Regionally in London boroughs of Croydon, Merton and Sutton
Teens in Crisis (TIC+)	£100,054.65	Gloucestershire
The Russ Devereux Headlight Project CIO	£9,950.00	Tees Valley combined authority area
The University of Warwick	£8,690.11	Coventry/Warwickshire
The Warren of Hull Ltd	£123,371.00	Kingston upon Hull and East Riding of Yorkshire Council
UK Men's Sheds Association	£143,608.00	North of England and East Midlands
Warrington Youth Zone Limited	£37,359.00	Regionally, across the Borough of Warrington
We Hear You	£90,000.00	Somerset, Bath and North East Somerset, Swindon and Wiltshire
Wirral Mind	£110,856.00	Merseyside, Halton, Knowsley, Liverpool, Sefton, St Helens and Wirral
Wolverhampton Suicide Prevention Stakeholder Forum Charitable Trust	£8,000.00	Wolverhampton

[HCWS308]

JUSTICE**Access to Justice****The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice**

(Alex Chalk): The Government are announcing today that we will introduce legislation in this parliamentary Session that will address the impacts of the UK Supreme Court judgment in PACCAR, which concerned a claim against truck manufacturers regarding anti-competitive behaviour.

Third-party litigation funding enables people to get funding to bring big and complex claims against bigger, better-resourced corporations, which they could not otherwise afford.

The Supreme Court judgment in July 2023 rendered third-party litigation funding agreements unenforceable. Uncertainty around litigation funding risks a detrimental

impact on the attractiveness of the England and Wales jurisdiction as a global hub for commercial litigation and arbitration, and on access to justice more broadly.

This Bill will enhance access to justice and the attractiveness of a thriving UK legal sector, which contributes over £34 billion per annum to the UK economy.

The Post Office Horizon scandal has also underlined the importance of third-party litigation funding, as the postmasters' claim was only possible due to the backing of a litigation funder. This highlights a clear access to justice deficit which, without legislation to mitigate the impacts of the judgment in full, would continue indefinitely.

The new legislation, which will apply to all proceedings, will remove this risk and allow the Government to deliver a return to a funding regime which promotes access to justice, as well as enhancing the competitiveness of the jurisdiction.

[HCWS306]

Ministerial Corrections

Monday 4 March 2024

DEFENCE

Ukraine

The following are extracts from the statement on Ukraine on 22 February 2024:

Grant Shapps: However, as this war drags into its third year, far from winning, Russia has been pushed back since those early days. Putin has achieved none of his strategic objectives, his invading force has suffered a staggering 356,000 casualties, and Ukraine has destroyed or damaged about 30% of the Russian Black sea fleet and retaken 50% of the territory that Russia stole from it.

[Official Report, 22 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 886.]

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): The Defence Secretary was certainly in full Duracell bunny mode today, but it is clear that Britain and this Government have much to be proud of in our response to the Ukraine crisis. It was also clear, however, that right from the outset of the invasion it would be an industrial munitions war, harking back to the last century. While Russia has got itself on to a full war economy footing, our Government machine frankly seems to have failed to mobilise British industry in the same way. To highlight that, I will pose a simple question. Why did it take from February 2022 to July 2023 to place the vital order for additional, desperately needed artillery shells?

Grant Shapps: I do not entirely agree with the right hon. Member's characterisation of the UK response in terms of deindustrialisation. I do agree that it is difficult

overall to suddenly ramp up from whatever level we are producing at on a non-war footing, but it is heartening to know—I think this is right, but it is off the top of my head; I will correct the figures if I have got it wrong—that our munitions and missile production is now eight times the level it was before the war, so we have certainly stepped up.

[Official Report, 22 February 2024, Vol. 745, c. 893.]

Letter of correction from the Secretary of State for Defence, the right hon. Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps):

Errors have been identified in the statement I made on Ukraine and the response I gave to the right hon. Member for Warley (John Spellar).

The correct information should have been:

Grant Shapps: However, as this war drags into its third year, far from winning, Russia has been pushed back since those early days. Putin has achieved none of his strategic objectives, his invading force has suffered a staggering 356,000 casualties, and Ukraine has destroyed or damaged **nearly** 30% of the Russian Black sea fleet and retaken 50% of the territory that Russia stole from it.

Grant Shapps: I do not entirely agree with the right hon. Member's characterisation of the UK response in terms of deindustrialisation. I do agree that it is difficult overall to suddenly ramp up from whatever level we are producing at on a non-war footing, but it is heartening to know—I think this is right, but it is off the top of my head; I will correct the figures if I have got it wrong—that **our production capacity of 155mm artillery ammunition** will be eight times the level it was before the war, so we have certainly stepped up.

ORAL ANSWERS

Monday 4 March 2024

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MINISTERIAL CORRECTIONS

Monday 4 March 2024

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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Monday 11 March 2024**

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