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**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Tuesday 21 January 2025

House of Commons

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The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

COMMITTEE OF SELECTION

Ordered,

That Tom Morrison be discharged from the Committee of Selection and Charlie Maynard be added.—(*Mark Tami.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

TREASURY

The Chancellor of the Exchequer was asked—

Servicing Government Debt

1. **Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): What the annual cost to the public purse is of a 0.1% increase in the cost of servicing Government debt. [902276]

9. **Dr Luke Evans** (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): What assessment she has made of the implications for her policies of recent trends in the level of interest on Government debt. [902284]

17. **Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on levels of debt interest spending. [902294]

19. **Sir Ashley Fox** (Bridgwater) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential impact of the autumn Budget 2024 on levels of debt interest spending. [902296]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): When we entered office, debt was at highs not seen since the 1960s. My commitment to the fiscal rules is non-negotiable, and we will drive debt down to a sustainable level. There have been movements in global financial markets, and the UK is not immune. The Office for Budget Responsibility will produce a forecast in the usual way, and I will respond with a statement to Parliament on 26 March. I will not be giving a running commentary on that forecast.

Mr Holden: Labour came to office promising to kick-start growth. Instead, it has kicked growth into the gutter. Over the last few months we have seen some of the slowest growth in the G7—in the actual figures rather than the projections. Where will the money for the public sector and public services come from with zero economic growth?

Rachel Reeves: Yesterday's PwC report shows that the UK is the second most attractive place in the world to invest for global CEOs—it is the first time in 28 years that we have been in that position in the league table. And the International Monetary Fund forecast on Friday that the UK will be the fastest-growing major economy in Europe next year.

Dr Evans: Last time I raised the markets' concerns about debt with the Chancellor, she told me to "get real." What is real is that the cost of debt interest is over £10 billion. What is real are the three choices she has: to increase taxes on people and businesses in Earl Shilton, Burbage and across the country; to cut services for people in Hinckley, Donisthorpe and across the country; or to borrow on the country's credit card. Will she now be real with the public and tell them which of the three it is going to be?

Rachel Reeves: We inherited a high amount of debt from the previous Government, and we have to pay interest costs on that debt. The forecast I set out in the Budget in October showed that debt falling to a sustainable level. As I said, the OBR forecast will be published on 26 March, and I will make a statement at that time.

Sir Desmond Swayne: The Chancellor's increased demand for Government borrowing drives up its price and crowds out investment by productive private enterprises, doesn't it? [HON. MEMBERS: "No."]

Rachel Reeves: Let me have a go. There have undoubtedly been moves in global financial markets this year, and the UK is not immune to those movements. The OBR has not yet started its forecast. It will update that in due course, and I will make a statement on 26 March.

Sir Ashley Fox: Since coming to office, the Chancellor has increased taxes by £40 billion and borrowing by £30 billion and her Employment Rights Bill has increased the costs of employers by a further £5 billion. Does she accept that her decisions have led to a loss of confidence in the British economy and an increase in our borrowing costs?

Rachel Reeves: I do not think the borrowing costs in every major country in the world can be explained by the decisions made by this Government. As I said to the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) last week, the hon. Gentleman has to get real. There have been global movements in financial markets that have affected the United Kingdom, but if he looks at the PwC report from yesterday, the most recent report on market confidence, global CEOs see the UK as the second best place in the world to invest, after the US.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): The International Monetary Fund forecasts that the UK is set to be the fastest-growing major economy in Europe, which one would have thought Conservative Members would welcome. I know my right hon. Friend the Chancellor will not be satisfied until residents in Bracknell, and across the country, feel the benefits of economic improvement in their pay packets and their day-to-day lives, so will she set out what more she can do to ensure we tackle the cost of living and fix the economic mess we have inherited from the Conservatives?

Rachel Reeves: After 14 years of stagnant growth and the decline in living standards during the last Parliament, my hon. Friend is absolutely right that we must turn around that performance. That is what this Government are determined to do. The planning and infrastructure Bill will come to Parliament shortly, followed by the pensions Bill, which will unlock long-term pension capital and make it easier for businesses to get things done in this country.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): The Chancellor makes reference to the PWC report, but half of the survey in that report was done before the Budget. The Chancellor and I spent a very happy three years sitting next to each other at the Treasury Committee, and she was incredibly good at demanding straight answers from the witnesses that came in front of the Committee. She has already been asked questions about the fact that the fiscal headroom is only £10 billion and the increase in the cost of borrowing is now going to go through the roof so, at some point, she will have to raise taxes, cut investment or increase debt. Which will it be?

Rachel Reeves: The headroom in our Budget was larger than the headroom that we inherited from the previous Government, so we have put aside more money for changes in economic prospects. The OBR has not yet done its forecast, which will take a whole variety of factors into account, and we will make decisions based on that. I have been really clear that our fiscal rules are non-negotiable because, unlike the Conservatives, we are determined to meet the fiscal rules, not break them time and again.

Mr Speaker: I call the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrat party.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): The rising cost of borrowing will bring more misery to mortgage holders, with reports suggesting that some mortgage holders could pay an extra £500 a year. Given that potential global trade tensions could further affect the UK's financial stability, what assurances will the Government provide that UK lenders remain in a strong position to support households and small businesses?

Rachel Reeves: Labour and Liberal Democrat Members are mindful of the last Government's impact on mortgage borrowing costs for many of our constituents, and we are determined to tackle the cost of living crisis. As the hon. Member knows, I have written to financial regulators, including the Financial Conduct Authority, about regulating for growth, not just for risk, so that we can help more people get on the housing ladder and help grow our economy.

Official Development Assistance

2. **Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): What the fiscal circumstances are that would allow official development assistance to return to 0.7% of gross national income. [902277]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): The Government remain committed to restoring ODA spending to 0.7% of GNI as soon as fiscal circumstances allow. The latest OBR forecasts show that the ODA fiscal tests are not due to be met within this Parliament,

but we will continue to monitor future forecasts closely and each year we will review and confirm, in accordance with the International Development (Official Development Assistance Target) Act 2015, whether a return to spending at 0.7% of GNI on ODA is possible.

Emily Darlington: I thank the Minister for protecting the level of ODA given the fiscal situation we inherited, but there are more wars going on in the world than at any time since world war two. Will he review the fiscal formula, which he and the Chancellor rightly voted against when put forward by the previous Government, put the ODA budget on a long-term settlement, and meet me to discuss how we can improve UK safety through the ODA budget?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for her question on a topic that I know she has great expertise in. She will know that it is important that spending across Departments, whether on military, humanitarian or economic support, is aligned with our ODA spending. The multi-year spending review is under way, and we will confirm budgets in June for the years ahead. As I have confirmed, we will come back to the House every year to review and confirm the fiscal tests as they relate to 0.7% of GNI on ODA.

Monica Harding (Esher and Walton) (LD): Given that the Office for Budget Responsibility forecasts that the fiscal test of returning to 0.7% will not be met in this Parliament, and that there has been no equivalent uplift to the £2.5 billion that the Conservatives put to spend on in-country refugee costs, are the Minister and this Labour Government content to have presided over a real-terms cut to the ODA budget compared with the previous Conservative Government?

Darren Jones: One of the issues, to which the hon. Lady alludes, is that under the last Administration, when they lost control of the borders and the asylum system, the cost of hotels to house asylum seekers waiting for their decision was included in the ODA definition of spending. That is why the Home Secretary is working at pace to reduce that backlog as quickly as possible, and we are making much more significant progress than the previous Administration did in many years.

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): To follow on from the Minister's answer, Members will be reminded of the fact that ODA costs spent in the UK are now at record levels, thanks to the last Government. That should not be the case. ODA should be spent, as much as possible, in the world's poorest countries. What steps are the Government taking to help the Home Office bring down those costs so that more aid can be spent where it is truly needed?

Darren Jones: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is why both dealing with the Home Office backlog in processing claims and returns and working with counterparts in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that the tribunal process is up to speed are intrinsically important to the ODA budget. Under the last Administration, crucial ODA for bilateral aid in countries around the world that were in desperate need of it was

cut at short notice because of their mishandling of the asylum system. That will not happen under this Government.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): I know that Members on the Treasury Bench attach great importance to the international development budget, not least because I recall that the Chancellor of the Exchequer supported my efforts to stop the 0.7% being cut by my own Government, even winding up the debate with great skill and flair. Will Treasury Ministers therefore follow in the footsteps of the Chancellor's predecessor, my right hon. Friend the Member for Godalming and Ash (Jeremy Hunt), and top up the budget with an additional £2.5 billion so that the Foreign Office and the Government can achieve their own international development objectives?

Darren Jones: I thank the right hon. Gentleman, as I am sure the Chancellor does, for his kind words. A key part of the test on ODA spending in terms of fiscal circumstances requires those circumstances to improve. One of the reasons we are in this problem in the first place is because of the mess the previous Administration left this country in. We are working hard to turn that around.

Mr Speaker: I call Helen Maguire.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): Recent flooding in Leatherhead left footpaths near essential services such as train stations overflowing—

Mr Speaker: Order. It is the question number I need. Minister, you can just answer the question and then we will have the second part.

Green Infrastructure Investment

4. **Helen Maguire** (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her fiscal policies of recent trends in levels of investment in green infrastructure. [902279]

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): Too many parts of the country and too many families have felt the devastating effects of flooding in recent months, not least in South Wales and in the hon. Member's constituency. The Government have committed £2.4 billion over the next two years to increase community flood resilience. Everyone in this House recognises that flooding is a challenge that will be with us for years to come, and we will set out further plans at the spending review.

Mr Speaker: Right—oh, go on, Bill Esterson.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The vote of confidence by PwC, the upgrading of the growth forecast by the International Monetary Fund and the £63 billion announced at the growth summit are all indications of this Government's successful plans. Does the Minister agree that they are added to by the clear direction on green investment in energy projects and that that will deliver success for our economy, as well as contributing to our climate targets?

Torsten Bell: We take very seriously the need to protect communities from flooding and to deliver on our commitments on climate in the years ahead. It is important that we consider both principles and that is what the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero are doing.

Mr Speaker: Let's go back to Helen Maguire.

Helen Maguire: Thank you, Mr Speaker. Recent flooding in Leatherhead left footpaths near essential services such as train stations overflowing with sewage. In Leatherhead, there are no alternative options to divert water. Given the importance of long-term flood preparations, will the Chancellor commit to securing funding for flood defences beyond 2025-26?

Torsten Bell: The hon. Member will know that specific flood defence schemes will be considered in the normal way. When it comes to funding beyond 2025-26, those will be decisions on overall levels of funding that are taken in the spending review later this year.

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us move to Dr Allison Gardner.

Dr Allison Gardner (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab) *rose—*

Mr Speaker: No, we have Gareth Davies up next. We are in complete chaos—[*Laughter.*] We have the wrong names coming in. What has confused everybody is the fact that Question 3 was withdrawn. Everybody is a question behind. Right, I call the shadow Minister next.

Gareth Davies (Grantham and Bourne) (Con): Never in doubt, Mr Speaker.

May I welcome the Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for Swansea West (Torsten Bell), to his place? The removal of investment allowances from our domestic oil and gas industry is strangling domestic supplies at a time when our storage levels are depleted. Labour's ideologically driven, unachievable obsession with decarbonising the grid by 2030 might be good news for Chinese renewables manufacturers, but it is bad news for British households. Is it not the case that the only growth that we will see from Labour's energy policy is in the amount that people pay for their energy bills, or can the Minister stand up now and commit—just as Labour did during the general election campaign—to cutting energy bills by £300?

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): Get real!

Torsten Bell: I think that remark was directed at the hon. Member in a previous life.

We have committed to 100% first year allowances and to maintaining that going forward, but unless we deliver secure energy, generated at home through cheap renewables, there is no energy security to be had in the years ahead.

Economic Growth

5. **Helen Morgan** (North Shropshire) (LD): What fiscal steps she is taking to help increase levels of economic growth in rural areas. [902280]

6. **Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help increase economic growth in Stoke-on-Trent. [902281]

15. **David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in Stoke-on-Trent. [902291]

16. **Jonathan Davies** (Mid Derbyshire) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in Derbyshire. [902292]

21. **Mrs Emma Lewell-Buck** (South Shields) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in the north-east. [902298]

23. **Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): What steps she has taken to help increase economic growth in North Yorkshire. [902300]

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): The Government are better targeting these reliefs to make them fairer. The latest figures for 2021-22 show that the top 7% of claims are counted for 40% of the total value of agricultural property relief.

Helen Morgan: The Chancellor will know that one of the biggest factors holding back the rural economy is poor public transport. When I visited the jobcentre in Oswestry last year, I was told that one of the biggest impediments to people finding a job is that they cannot get away from where they live because of poor public transport. Can she update me on the discussions that she has had with her colleagues in the Department for Transport over reinstating projects such as the Oswestry to Gobowen railway line and step-free access at Whitchurch railway station?

Rachel Reeves: At the Budget, we introduced sustainable transport settlements, with £650 million of funding for local transport, and confirmed an extension of the UK shared prosperity fund, providing £900 million to local authorities to invest in local growth. We also announced money in the Budget for some trailblazer projects to help those furthest from the labour market back into work. On the specific issues around transport in her constituency, I am very happy to set up a meeting for her with the relevant Minister.

Dr Gardner: The A50/500 growth corridor, a significant transport corridor in my constituency of Stoke-on-Trent South, enjoys an extraordinary concentration of advanced manufacturing, including anchor companies such as JCB and Michelin. With modest targeted investment in transport, energy and digital infrastructure, this vital corridor could generate £12 billion in gross value added and create 18,000 jobs. Will the Chancellor meet me to discuss the targeted investment needed to develop a detailed growth plan for this vital industrial artery and help deliver it on this Government's mission for growth?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for the work that she has put into this proposal and for her commitment to delivering growth in her constituency of Stoke. On a recent visit, I had the opportunity to meet JCB in the region and see its important work, particularly on the use of hydrogen. I encourage my hon. Friend to meet the Minister for Services, Small Businesses and Exports—I am happy to set up that meeting—whose portfolio includes local growth. The Government are committed to driving growth in the midlands, which is why I confirmed funding for the west midlands investment zone at the autumn Budget and also confirmed an extension of the UK shared prosperity fund.

David Williams: I warmly welcome the recent investment of an extra £20 million for our buses and an extra £11 million to fix our broken roads across Stoke-on-Trent and Staffordshire. Does the Chancellor agree that continuing to invest in our roads and public transport is an excellent way to keep our communities connected and to increase job opportunities to boost our local economy?

Rachel Reeves: It is great to see two strong advocates for Stoke in the Chamber today. A number of local authorities and, indeed, Labour mayors have raised with me bus procurement and the importance of buses for the local economy. I look forward to working with them, particularly David Skaith in York and North Yorkshire and Steve Rotherham in Liverpool, to boost bus services in communities, and particularly rural communities, to support jobs in the UK. At the Budget, I allocated more than £1 billion for local bus services, and that includes £712 million for local authorities to support and improve bus services in the next financial year.

Jonathan Davies: Museums make an important contribution to our cultural life, but also to our economy. The Arts Council and the Museums Association found that net expenditure on museums and galleries has decreased by almost 40% in real terms since 2009. I welcome the Chancellor's recognition that the creative industries are key to delivering growth and that national museums were given support in the recent Budget, but what steps can the Government take to support regional civic museums, such as Derby museum, which did not benefit from that funding?

Rachel Reeves: The Culture Secretary was pleased that the creative industries were one of the sectors included in our industrial strategy. She hosted an event with members of the creative industries taskforce in Newcastle just last week to emphasise the importance of having good cultural offers and art and museums in local communities. I am happy to sort out a meeting for my hon. Friend with the relevant Minister to discuss access to the arts and culture in Mid Derbyshire.

Mrs Lewell-Buck: As my right hon. Friend knows, South Shields is a gorgeous coastal tourist town. We pride ourselves on our small businesses and our strong hospitality industry, but she will also know they are struggling after years of neglect by the Conservatives. To help those businesses, will she outline what consideration she has given to reducing VAT on our hospitality, leisure and tourism sectors?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I remember a very nice dinner of fish and chips with her in her constituency just a few years ago, and she is a strong advocate for local businesses in South Shields. In the Budget, we were able to extend business rates relief to the retail, hospitality and leisure sector of 40% for the next financial year and then to move it on to a fairer footing, so that high street businesses and smaller businesses pay fairer rates of business tax compared with, for example, the online giants.

Alison Hume: The bus manufacturer Alexander Dennis builds innovative electric buses, employing 800 people in Scarborough. The Chancellor has spoken about the need for public procurement to take better account of employment and environmental standards. As bus services are brought back into the control of mayors and local authorities, will the Government use public procurement to back British companies such as Alexander Dennis to boost economic growth?

Rachel Reeves: My hon. Friend is a good advocate for businesses, including Alexander Dennis in Scarborough. The Government will soon publish a new national procurement policy statement, which will set out our priorities for public procurement in support of our mission to grow the economy. In addition to the answer I gave my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams), we recognise the importance of buses in growing our economy by getting people to work, but also the opportunities to use public procurement to buy more buses made in this country, supporting good jobs here in Britain.

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

Dame Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Former Chair, Mr Speaker, but thank you very much for calling me.

It is clear that we all want to see economic growth in rural areas and across the UK, but I am concerned that some of the measures in the Chancellor's Budget are having the opposite effect. Which statistic worries her most: the fact that we are at a 20-year high for business closures, or the 100% increase in millionaires leaving the UK?

Rachel Reeves: I have already outlined some of the positive numbers, including the upgrade in the IMF forecast, the PwC report and the fact that the economy had returned to growth in the most recent data and inflation is falling. Instead of talking our country down, I will be banging the drum to bring in investment and jobs to our country.

Josh Babarinde (Eastbourne) (LD): A new hospital in Eastbourne would help to drive economic growth in my town and across rural Sussex, but years of Tory tumbleweed and, I am afraid, yesterday's announcement mean that it will not be delivered and built until 2041. Will the Chancellor accelerate the release of funds to the Department of Health and Social Care to bring forward the building of our new hospital, to support patients in Eastbourne and beyond, and of course to support wider economic growth?

Rachel Reeves: I recognise the strength of feeling about this issue. We were left a terrible situation by the previous Government, with a £22 billion black hole in the public finances and the promise of things for which absolutely no money had been put aside. We have now done the responsible thing by reviewing the programmes that we inherited from the previous Government. That means that the timetable for some projects has had to be pushed back, but it is because the previous Government made promises knowing that the cheque would bounce.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): Businesses in my constituency and across the country are still reeling from the Chancellor's damaging Budget. She made a commitment at the Confederation of British Industry conference that she would not come back for more taxes. Does she stand by that commitment?

Rachel Reeves: I had to do a once-in-a-generation Budget in October to fix the mess in the public finances left by the previous Government. I will never have to do a Budget like that again because we have now fixed that terrible inheritance.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Devastating changes to inheritance tax, increased environmental costs because of net zero policies, and diversion of farming support to foreign countries—with those kinds of policies, how does the Chancellor ever expect to generate economic growth in rural areas?

Rachel Reeves: Bringing stability back to our economy by fixing the public finances is the No. 1 thing we can do to help businesses to grow, alongside our planning reforms to make it easier to build things in Britain and our reforms to the pension system to help businesses access long-term patient capital. As for agricultural property relief, the latest figures show that the top 7% of claims—117 claims—accounted for 40% of the total value of the relief, costing the taxpayer £219 million. We cannot afford to carry on like that, which is why we made those progressive and fair reforms in the Budget.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): Farming's vital role in growing our rural economy, growing our food and protecting the countryside is threatened by Labour's family farm tax. The self-proclaimed "iron Chancellor" is proving herself to be the tin-eared Chancellor, ignoring evidence from the National Farmers Union and others showing that the tax is based on flawed assumptions. Ahead of Saturday's farming day of unity, rather than threatening family farms, will she speak to farmers, think again and withdraw those damaging proposals?

Rachel Reeves: The problem with the Conservatives is that they support increased spending in vital areas but they have not supported any of the tax increases necessary to pay for them, which, frankly, is why we are in the situation we are in today, having inherited a £22 billion black hole in the public finances. The hon. Gentleman will know that in the Budget we announced £5 billion for the farming budget over two years—including the largest funding directed at sustainable food production and nature recovery in this country's history—and £60 million to support farmers affected by flooding.

High-emission Steel

7. **Antonia Bance** (Tipton and Wednesbury) (Lab): What steps she plans to take to help protect the steel industry from high-emission steel being diverted away from the EU to the UK following confirmation of the UK carbon border adjustment mechanism for 2027. [902282]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The UK carbon border adjustment mechanism will be introduced in 2027. It will ensure that imports face a carbon price that is comparable with domestic products, giving UK industry the confidence to invest without its decarbonisation efforts being undermined. UK steel producers will continue to benefit from high levels of free allowances in the UK emissions trading system until at least the end of 2026, protecting them against carbon leakage via high-emission imports.

Antonia Bance: Newby Foundries and Alucast in my constituency of Tipton, Wednesbury and Coseley have raised with me the impact of the UK CBAM coming into effect later than, and differing from, the EU CBAM. This could threaten domestic steel production and make the export of metal products to the EU more difficult. Can the Minister please support the UK's steel and metal finishing industries by reassuring me that the UK CBAM will not be weaker than the EU CBAM, and will he meet me and other steel MPs to discuss this?

James Murray: As I have set out, the UK CBAM will mitigate the risk of carbon leakage by placing a carbon price on some of the most emissions-intensive industrial goods imported into the UK, including in the iron and steel sector. The UK CBAM is designed for the UK context, and in some areas, its emissions scope is wider than the EU CBAM—in respect of indirect emissions, for instance. The first CBAM industry working group was held earlier this week, and I understand that a representative of the UK steel sector attended. I will make sure that my officials continue to engage with the industry sectors most affected, and I am very happy to discuss this further with my hon. Friend.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Heavy industry, whether it is steel, ceramics or so many other areas, is totally dependent on low energy costs. The trajectory is that energy costs are rising, especially in industry, whether as a result of regulation or world markets. Many other countries are doing more to protect their heavy industries by making sure they can have low input costs for energy. What more can the Minister do to protect our heavy industry in the future?

James Murray: The No. 1 thing for industry and households is to bring down the cost of energy. That is why we are investing in renewable home-grown energy for the future, to make sure we have energy independence, energy security and, crucially, lower bills for those households and businesses.

Money Laundering in Retail Businesses

8. **Bradley Thomas** (Bromsgrove) (Con): What assessment she has made of the potential implications for her regulatory policies of recent trends in levels of money laundering in retail businesses. [902283]

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): This Government are committed to tackling money laundering. Money laundering through cash-based high street businesses is a known issue, and the Treasury works closely with law enforcement agencies to monitor trends in criminality and ensure resources are deployed towards the most significant threats.

Bradley Thomas: Hard-working shopkeepers and entrepreneurs across the country, including in Bromsgrove and the villages, play by the rules and pay their taxes. What is the estimated loss of revenue to the Exchequer from money laundering in retail environments in towns and villages across the country, and what are the Government doing to crack down on this?

Emma Reynolds: It is right that we take a robust approach to money laundering, and we have a tailored approach to cash deposit limits to reflect the differences in needs and risk profiles across businesses' customer bases. I am committed to working with the Financial Conduct Authority and others to ensure we strike the right balance—one that allows businesses to continue their operations but also ensures that we assess the risk posed by those who might be using their businesses to launder money.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): What additional support can the Government offer to Customs and Excise, local authorities and police forces in gathering supporting evidence that can then be provided to His Majesty's Revenue and Customs? High street money launderers are brazen fronts for significant criminal enterprises.

Emma Reynolds: We take this issue very seriously. The Treasury owns the money laundering regulations, but the FCA has a key role as a major supervisor, and we work very closely with the criminal enforcement agencies. Of course, those agencies are independent, but we are absolutely committed to clamping down on money laundering.

Former Mineworkers' Pensions

10. **Richard Baker** (Glenrothes and Mid Fife) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to uplift former mineworkers' pensions. [902285]

20. **Nick Smith** (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): What steps she has taken with Cabinet colleagues to uplift former mineworkers' pensions. [902297]

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): This Government recognise the contributions that miners made to the prosperity of the nation and the challenging circumstances in which they worked. That is why the Government agreed to transfer the investment reserve

fund to members of the mineworkers' pension scheme, so that the mineworkers who powered our country receive a fairer pension.

Richard Baker: Does my right hon. Friend agree that ending the injustice of the mineworkers' pension scheme is great news not only for the 849 former mineworkers in my constituency who will benefit, but for the economies of the local communities where they live, which were left behind by the previous Government? Will he and his colleagues in government continue to engage with the trustees of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme to ensure that, in the same way, the funds built up in that scheme are used for the benefit of its members?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and his work on behalf of his constituents. He may know that, in the previous Parliament, I and colleagues worked on the mineworkers' pension scheme through the Business and Trade Committee to lay the ground for the initiatives that this Government were quickly able to implement on coming into government. Unfortunately, that work had not yet been done for the British Coal staff superannuation scheme, which is why Ministers are meeting the scheme's trustees to consider the options.

Nick Smith: This is an important issue for south Wales families. My uncle Jacky was a deputy at Cwm Marine pit and my uncle Georgie was a deputy at Oakdale. Sadly, they have now passed, but they were members of the British Coal pension scheme. Many of their mining friends will be in their 80s and 90s, and their pensions deserve uplifting, so will the Minister please commit to making good progress here? Time is running out for the men and women who fired our industrial past.

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for raising that question on an issue that I know is deeply important to him, his constituents and his family, and on which he has worked for many years. The Government are actively considering proposals from the scheme's trustees, and we will set out the next steps in due course. My hon. Friend the Minister for Industry in the Department for Business and Trade will be working on the detail, and I will be meeting her shortly to consider the options.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): I have significant former mining areas in the Douglas valley and Upper Nithsdale in my constituency. Constituents there are concerned about the British Coal scheme, because many people in that scheme actually worked underground before being promoted into other jobs. To ensure fairness in the implementation of this Government policy, will the Minister make sure that the timescale on which they are compensated is the same as that for those in the other scheme?

Darren Jones: I thank the right hon. Member for his question, and I think "fairness" is the right word. That is why we worked in opposition to try to persuade the last Government to act on the mineworkers' pension scheme, but we failed because the last Government did not think this was an urgent issue for them to consider. The Labour Government have implemented this change at our first Budget, and that is fairness in

action. We will continue to work with trustees of the BCSSS, and we will come back with further options in due course.

Mr Speaker: Let us go to the Member for that well-known mining area of Strangford.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Mr Speaker, I spoke to the Minister beforehand, so he knows where I am coming from with my question.

I understand that some families of those affected who have passed away have retired to Northern Ireland, and they deserve their pensions. That being the case, has the right hon. Gentleman had an opportunity to ascertain the numbers of those in Northern Ireland who will qualify for such pensions, and will he chase up those people to ensure they get the moneys they deserve?

Darren Jones: I thank the hon. Member for his question. I am afraid I have not had time to do so since he told me 35 minutes ago that he was going to ask that question, but I have heard it clearly. I will take that away and come back to him in course.

Supporting SMEs, Retail, and Hospitality and Tourism

11. **Bobby Dean** (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): What steps she is taking through the tax system to support SMEs. [902286]

12. **Michael Wheeler** (Worsley and Eccles) (Lab): What steps she is taking through the tax system to support the retail sector. [902287]

22. **Steve Darling** (Torbay) (LD): What steps she is taking through the tax system to support the hospitality and tourism sectors. [902299]

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): The Government announced a range of measures at the autumn Budget to support SMEs, including in the retail, hospitality and leisure sectors. They include more than doubling the employment allowance, freezing the small business rates multiplier, extending RHL relief to 40%, maintaining the small profits rate and reducing the duty on qualifying draught products, which represent 60% of alcoholic drinks sold in pubs.

Bobby Dean: The Labour manifesto committed to replacing the business rates system. However, last week at the Treasury Committee, the Minister seemed to rule out the kind of comprehensive reform that the Liberal Democrats and others have been campaigning for, and indicated that there might only be a tinkering around the edges of rates and reliefs. Can the Minister confirm today whether the Government still intend to replace the business rates system, or will they just be tinkering around the edges of this broken system?

James Murray: I think that retail, hospitality and leisure businesses, which are the backbone of our high street, might object to the idea of permanently lower tax rates as "tinkering around the edges". That is a fundamental change that we want to bring in from April 2026 to make sure they have stability, certainty and permanently lower rates. Alongside it are our wider

ambitions in the “Transforming Business Rates” discussion paper, which I invited the hon. Gentleman to read and respond to at last week’s Treasury Committee.

Michael Wheeler: I draw Members’ attention to my declaration in the register of interests.

Retail is an important part of the economy in my constituency, which includes many wonderful independent businesses. Will, who runs the excellent Wandering Palate in Monton, wrote to me about the challenges he is facing. Will the Minister outline the measures the Government are taking to support small business owners like Will in my constituency and across the country to enable our high streets to thrive?

James Murray: I thank my hon. Friend for his question and for referencing Wonderful Palate, the business in his constituency. I do not know the details of the rateable value of that property, but I point the owner to the fact that we are retaining small business rate relief, freezing the small business multiplier next year and extending the retail, hospitality and leisure relief in 2025-26. I also point the owner of that business and other businesses to our future plan, as I mentioned, to have permanently lower tax rates for retail, hospitality and leisure businesses with values of below £500,000, as well as to consider reforms to small business rate relief to better support businesses that want to expand into a second premises.

Steve Darling: What consideration have Ministers given to exempting the seasonal tourism industry from the national insurance hikes set to kick in this summer? That would benefit Paignton zoo and Splashdown in the Torbay constituency.

James Murray: We set out the details of our decision to increase the rate of national insurance contributions from employers and to reduce the threshold, and we have added the different benefit we will give, particularly to small businesses and charities, by more than doubling the employment allowance. The employer national insurance contribution changes were among the toughest we took in the Budget, but they were necessary to repair the public finances and deliver the economic stability that is so crucial for investment and growth.

Mr Speaker: We have had the former Chair of the Treasury Committee, so let’s now have the current Chair.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend the Exchequer Secretary rightly said that small and medium-sized enterprises are a vital part of our high streets and our economy, and one of the biggest changes is, of course, the change to business rates. He was not tempted at the Select Committee last week to give more detail on the timeframe for that, but many businesses want certainty about business rates as they go forward. May I tempt him to give an indication of the Government’s thinking about how quickly this change might be introduced and whether the small business rate relief is likely to survive or to be subsumed into a new regime?

James Murray: I thank the Chair of the Select Committee for her questions. If she did not succeed in tempting me at the Select Committee, I doubt she will succeed today, but I can reassure her that the decisions we have set out

about introducing the permanently lower business rate for RHL—retail, hospitality and leisure—properties below a £500,000 rateable value will be coming in from April 2026. Specifically in relation to small business rate relief, I can confirm that the Government are committed to retaining that. One of the options we are looking at in our “Transforming business rates” discussion paper is how to support businesses that want to expand into a second premises, thereby growing the business, because at the moment there is the cliff edge where they lose small business rate relief.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Richard Fuller (North Bedfordshire) (Con): Confidence on Britain’s high streets is sliding faster than the Chancellor will be down the ski slopes of Davos later today. With retail sales down—rather than up, as expected in the run-up to Christmas—and with the British Retail Consortium saying that two thirds of stores will raise prices to cover her national insurance increases, when will the Minister accept that the Chancellor’s economic strategy of raising taxes and increasing regulations is not working?

James Murray: I am glad to know that the shadow Minister’s morning was well spent cooking up that line about the Davos ski slopes. What he will know, and what sectors across the economy will know, is that having a stable economy is a prerequisite for the investment we need to get the economy growing. That is why we had to take difficult decisions at the autumn Budget, including those to increase the rate of employer national insurance contributions. Alongside that increase, however, we more than doubled the employment allowance and set out our plans to have permanently lower tax rates for high street RHL properties from April 2026.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Daisy Cooper (St Albans) (LD): A number of small high street businesses will be hit hard by the Government’s jobs tax and the dramatic reduction in business rates relief, and House of Commons Library research that I commissioned shows that from April 2026 the Government’s reforms to business rates could leave small and independent businesses in effect subsidising the big chains. Will the Chancellor meet me and a delegation of small and independent businesses from St Albans so that we can make the case for fairer reforms and for wholesale reform of the broken business rates system?

James Murray: One of the problems with the Liberal Democrats is that they support all our spending plans, but they do not support any of the tax changes to fund them. This is a prime example. When we talk about increasing employer national insurance contributions, we acknowledge that that was one of the toughest decisions we took at the Budget, but it was necessary to fix the public finances and provide support for those public services, which I note the Liberal Democrats are very keen to support.

Topical Questions

T1. [902301] **Frank McNally (Coatbridge and Bellshill) (Lab):** If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Rachel Reeves): When I became Chancellor, there was a £22 billion black hole in the public finances. We simply could not carry on like that, which is why I have taken control of our public finances and made growth the No. 1 priority of the Government to improve living standards.

In December, I launched the second phase of our spending review, where for the first time in 17 years every single pound of taxpayer money will be investigated line by line to ensure that it is being spent well. The spending review will set resource or day-to-day departmental budgets until 2028-29 and capital departmental budgets until 2029-30. On 11 June, when we conclude the review, I will present departmental budgets to the House.

Frank McNally: The recent drop in the rate of inflation is welcome news for those facing financial pressures across Coatbridge and Bellshill, as is the expectation that the UK will become the fastest growing economy in Europe. What further action is my right hon. Friend taking, working in partnership with Cabinet colleagues, to ensure that working families continue to see prices fall and living standards rise?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know that the cost of living has a deep impact on all our constituents, including in Coatbridge and Bellshill. Like my hon. Friend, I was pleased to see the reduction in inflation last week. The Bank of England's independence is sacrosanct to carry on those efforts. In addition, we increased the minimum wage in the Budget, we have reformed universal credit to reduce deductions and we have extended the household support fund, all to help ensure that working families have more money in their pockets.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Chancellor.

Mel Stride (Central Devon) (Con): A moment ago, the right hon. Lady spoke about the importance of spending money wisely, so in the light of the Treasury Committee's conclusion that her new Office for Value for Money is a waste of money, does she agree that one of its early actions should be to abolish itself in order to save money?

Rachel Reeves: I was pleased to appoint Tom Hayhoe to run the Office for Value for Money—somebody who has a track record of delivering value for money for taxpayers. What the Government want to scrap is giving contracts to friends and donors, because that was a colossal waste of money instigated by the Conservative party.

Mel Stride: The Chancellor's answer was an answer, but I do not think that it connected in any way with my question. Could I perhaps ask her about national insurance hikes? A full two thirds of the revenues raised through Labour's job tax is simply going on servicing the additional debt being run up by this profligate Government. Given that, does she really believe that the catastrophic effects of that tax on businesses right up and down the country are a price worth paying?

Rachel Reeves: We inherited a £22 billion black hole in the public finances, and we set out the detail of that at the time of the Budget. It was essential to close that

gap to bring stability back to the public finances. That required difficult decisions, but they were the right decisions to ensure that our country has the stability that it lacked for so many years and under so many different Prime Ministers and Chancellors under the Conservative party.

T3. [902303] **Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): My constituency of Mansfield has more members of the British Coal staff superannuation scheme than any other constituency in the country. Will the Chief Secretary outline the process and questions that need to be satisfied to release the investment reserve fund to the surviving beneficiaries of the scheme?

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones): I thank my hon. Friend for raising this issue, which clearly is important to him and his constituents. I confirmed to the House today that the Minister for Trade in the Department for Business and Trade is working with the trustees of the BCSSS to consider options. I will meet the Minister to look at those options and provide further updates to the House in due course.

T2. [902302] **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): The Local Government Association estimates that the Budget's increases to employer national insurance contributions will cost local councils an extra £637 million per year. The Government's funding settlement for councils in relation to that of £515 million will leave them with a gap, putting key services such as social care, pothole repairs and leisure facilities at risk. Will the Chancellor commit to fully finding that gap for local councils, rather than them having to look for savings?

The Exchequer Secretary to the Treasury (James Murray): During the passage of the National Insurance Contributions (Secondary Class 1 Contributions) Bill, we set out clearly how the scheme would work to reimburse costs for public departments or local government. That measure is in line with what the previous Government attempted to do with the health and social care levy. Where third-party private contractors are engaged, those costs will be considered by local government or other public sector organisations in the round.

T4. [902304] **Brian Leishman** (Alloa and Grangemouth) (Lab): The previous Conservative Government decided to back an INEOS project in Antwerp, with a £600 million loan guarantee. I have spoken with the current the Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero and the Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero, my hon. Friend the Member for Rutherglen (Michael Shanks) about that, and I have been told that the Government have no plans to stop that money, even though INEOS plans to close the Grangemouth refinery, with the loss of thousands of jobs. Why is there £600 million for Antwerp and not Grangemouth, and why would the Government allow that to happen and not use the £600 million as leverage with INEOS, to avoid Scottish job losses?

Rachel Reeves: This Government cannot account for the decisions made by the Conservative party, but we have created the Office for Value for Money, to ensure value for money when we use taxpayer's money.

T6. [902306] **Rupert Lowe** (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): As someone actively involved in a number of businesses, unlike the majority of Front Benchers, I have spent far too much of my life trying to communicate with His Majesty's Revenue and Customs, and I am not alone. Taxpayers cumulatively spent 798 years on hold with HMRC in 2022-23, and letters often go unanswered for months. When the phone is picked up, decent British taxpayers and their advisers increasingly are treated like criminals by arrogant, petty, unaccountable bureaucrats. Will the Chancellor commit to a comprehensive review of HMRC, to make it as accountable to the taxpayer as the taxpayer is to them—

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Lowe, topical questions are meant to be short and punchy. I am sure that you are very good at that normally.

James Murray: One of my key priorities as Exchequer Secretary and the Minister with responsibility for HMRC is to oversee a programme of transformation at HMRC to improve its customer service, to digitise the service, to close the tax gap and to ensure that we have the modern, reformed service that we need for the future.

T5. [902305] **Steve Witherden** (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I draw Members' attention to my entry in the register of all-party parliamentary groups. During the covid-19 pandemic, 3.8 million self-employed UK taxpayers were shamefully excluded from Government financial support. Many, including pregnant women and war veterans, were forgotten about by the Conservative party. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how to address the unfairness faced by so many during the pandemic?

James Murray: As my hon. Friend set out, decisions on eligibility for covid-19 financial support were taken by the previous Government. The current Government have no plans to assess the financial compensation scheme, but the covid-19 inquiry has recently launched its module to investigate the economic response to the pandemic. The Government are committed to learning from its findings.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): When I visited St Barnabas hospice in Lincoln recently, the chief executive told me that it was having to pay £350,000 extra every year to cover the national insurance increase. I do not expect an answer now, but as we all agree that palliative care is so important and we want to encourage it, and the Terminally Ill Adults (End of Life) Bill started its Committee stage today, will the Government keep that increase for hospices under review?

Rachel Reeves: The Health Secretary set out the settlement for hospices just before Christmas to ensure that they have the money they need, including to compensate for the national insurance increase, but I am happy to arrange a meeting for the right hon. Gentleman with the relevant Health Minister.

T7. [902308] **Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): On new year's day, hundreds of my constituents woke up not to hangovers and warm homes, but to floodwater rushing into their houses. I watched as families with young

children were pulled from their homes in Platt Bridge, and there was flooding in Ashton and Bickershaw. I welcome the £2.4 billion that the Government have committed to flood defence schemes, but will the Minister commit to protecting funding for flood victims and flood defence schemes?

Mr Speaker: I call the Minister—welcome to the Front Bench.

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): My hon. Friend is a powerful advocate for his constituents, and particularly for those who have suffered in recent weeks, including others across Greater Manchester. As I set out earlier, the Government have put in £2.4 billion to ensure flood resilience over the next two years; as he will be aware, future decisions on flood defence funding will be taken in the spending review in the normal way. I know that he will continue to be a powerful advocate for his constituents.

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Schools in Westmorland have been told that they will have to meet the costs of teacher pay rises next year, at least in part, from existing funds and by making efficiencies. Does the Chancellor not understand that all that is available to schools in my constituency is sacking teachers and merging classes? Will she instead commit to fully funding the teachers' pay rise and other cost increases, so that our schools can do the job that they are meant to do?

Darren Jones: The hon. Gentleman knows that in order for us to restore public finances and put them on a firm foundation, departmental settlements have to reflect the cost of the civil servants they employ; that is how the Departments are working. As the Chancellor has previously confirmed, the Department for Education has received money to cover the cost of running the education system, and the details will be provided to schools in the normal way in due course.

T8. [902309] **Gill German** (Clwyd North) (Lab): The Secretary of State for Transport, the Secretary of State for Wales, the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee and the Welsh Government all went on record last week to recognise the previous Government's low spending on rail infrastructure in Wales. Does my right hon. Friend agree that this Government must put that under-investment right, and can she assure me that the Treasury recognises the crucial part that our railways play in economic growth in Wales?

Darren Jones: I thank my hon. Friend, who is an important champion for the Welsh economy. Wales can and will play a vital part in our growth mission. Our two Labour Governments continue to work together as we review the position inherited from the Conservative Government, including on rail infrastructure, and decisions will be set out in the spending review in June.

Alex Easton (North Down) (Ind): Will the Chancellor advise businesses in my constituency that are having to make staff unemployed and stop expansion plans in order to pay for her increases in employer national insurance contributions?

James Murray: We have been clear since the Budget that the decision to raise employer national insurance contributions was one of the toughest we have taken as a Government, and we recognise that it has consequences for businesses. However, we think all businesses will benefit in future from the economic stability that this decision will bring; it will drive investment and growth across the country.

T9. [902310] **Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): Will my right hon. Friend join me in congratulating Intasite, a technology business in Stockton that is celebrating its 10th anniversary with 40% growth? Does she agree that our industrial strategy will help businesses to invest and grow in Teesside?

Rachel Reeves: I join my hon. Friend in congratulating Intasite on its 10th anniversary as a business, and on the rapid growth it is enjoying. The announcement we were able to make last year on the carbon capture and storage work in Teesside will be a big driver of jobs and growth there, and I look forward to working with him and local businesses in Stockton to make that a reality.

Sir Oliver Dowden (Hertsmere) (Con): Does the Chancellor of the Exchequer propose funding the reported £9 billion bill to the Mauritians for the continued use of Diego Garcia through higher taxes, more borrowing or spending cuts?

Rachel Reeves: We are in discussions with the new Administration in the United States around the future of Diego Garcia. We will set out details in the spending review, as the right hon. Gentleman would expect.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): It is estimated that 148,000 people had their lives cut short between 2010 and 2020 as a result of austerity measures; on top of that, poor health led to more than £13 billion in lost productivity under the previous Government. What are my right hon. Friend's estimates of the different choices, and the impact that they will have on the health of the nation and economic growth?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. I know she studies closely the work of Professor Michael Marmot on life expectancy and the impact of health inequalities on our country. At the Budget, we increased the minimum wage. In addition, we extended the household support fund and reduced the amount that could be taken in deductions from universal credit, all to try to put more money in the pockets of ordinary working people, to reduce some of those inequalities and tackle the cost of living crisis.

Jerome Mayhew (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): One of my GP surgeries called me this morning to highlight the impact of the rise in national insurance contributions, which will cost it £40,000. It can only respond by freezing cost of living pay increases for all its support staff. Does the Chancellor finally accept that working people up and down the country are paying the price for her tax rises?

James Murray: What we accept is that the difficult decisions we took at the Budget enabled extra funding to be put into the NHS. GP surgeries have had a funding settlement that considers all the pressures on them in the round.

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): My constituency has a proud industrial heritage, with manufacturing still worth £1 billion a year to the local economy from sectors that account for nearly 10% of the UK's total economic output. What steps have the Government taken to promote the growth of the manufacturing sector and ensure that towns like Dudley continue to build on their industrial traditions?

Rachel Reeves: I thank my hon. Friend for that question, and for the work she does to support and promote businesses in Dudley. Through our modern industrial strategy, and the targeting of eight sectors in which there is huge potential for growth, we will work with businesses right across the country on, for example, reform of the planning system to make it easier for them to build, and reform of the pension system to get funding for businesses, including those in Dudley, that are looking to grow and expand.

Dave Doogan (Angus and Perthshire Glens) (SNP): Neither the US Federal Reserve nor the EU Central Bank are engaged in active quantitative tightening, but the Bank of England is. The Bank of England is costing the public finances in the region of £13 billion a year as a result of a fire sale of UK Government bonds. Last time I spoke to the Chancellor about that, she said that that was because of the Bank of England's operational independence, which we all value, but that is not a licence for impunity. What discussions will she have with the Bank of England about releasing UK Government debt in a way that benefits everybody in the UK?

The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (Emma Reynolds): It is our view that it is absolutely right that the Bank of England has operational independence. That is in line with international standards and what is happening in jurisdictions around the world, including in the United States and the eurozone.

Callum Anderson (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Recent developments in the UK investment trust sector have once again shone a light on the crucial role that retail investors play in our financial markets. In her Mansion House speech last November, the Chancellor rightly prioritised leveraging domestic pension capital to drive the Government's economic growth mission. Does the Minister agree that greater retail participation in UK financial markets also supports growth and democratises wealth, and will she meet me to discuss how the Government can better support access to financial markets for individuals, including in my constituency?

Emma Reynolds: I am always happy to meet my hon. Friend, who is a near constituency neighbour. We absolutely agree that retail investment is crucial. I want more progress on the advice guidance boundary and

targeted support. I will be working closely, in my new role, with the Financial Conduct Authority to take that forward.

Sarah Olney (Richmond Park) (LD): Residents in my constituency will have been extremely concerned to read the news this morning that the Chancellor plans to announce next week the expansion of Heathrow. I invite

her to tell us, on the Floor of the House this morning, yes or no: will the Government back expansion at Heathrow?

Rachel Reeves: I am not going to comment on leaks. I will say that the Government are absolutely committed to growing our economy, and making this a great place for businesses to invest in and trade.

Community Engagement Principles and Extremism Definition

12.39 pm

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government if she will make a statement on community engagement principles and extremism.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris): National security will always come first for this Government, and we will always treat the threat of extremism with the seriousness that it requires. As the Prime Minister said this morning,

“Britain now faces a new threat”—

a threat of extreme violence from people who are driven by material online. They are often now lone individuals who are driven by a twisted desire for notoriety. It is a threat that we must contend with, alongside that from traditional terrorist groups.

The House will be aware that the Home Secretary will make a statement to the House shortly. All aspects of this changing threat will be considered in her rapid review, ordered last year, which will inform the Government’s counter-extremism strategy. The review panel is considering the current understanding of extremism, including Islamist and far-right extremism, and its work will include a focus on how best to tackle the threat posed by extremist ideologies, both online and offline. Early findings were set out in December, alongside initial measures to tackle the challenges that we face. The Home Office will provide a further update on the measures and actions arising from the counter-extremism sprint shortly.

Our Department retains responsibility for communities and cohesion policy, and the Deputy Prime Minister has convened a new cross-Government communities recovery steering group to develop a comprehensive strategy to address the underlying causes of divisions in our local communities. In particular, it seeks to address some of the causes of the disorder across the UK following the Southport tragedy last summer. We have made it clear that a new approach is urgently needed, and we have backed that with an initial £50 million from the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government community recovery fund to support areas that were impacted over the summer.

David Simmonds: This question relates to an announcement made last March by Michael Gove, who was then Secretary of State for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities, in which he set out some new definitions of extremism, including the activities of Islamist and far-right groups, and robust non-engagement principles for the Government to apply when there were serious concerns. That is particularly relevant to the MHCLG portfolio, which covers social services departments and other organisations, youth justice and Prevent, through which public services engage at community level with a variety of organisations to gather intelligence, help people to move away from extremism, and intervene and disrupt emerging challenges, such as those posed by

grooming gangs. The issues are also important for our often vilified Muslim communities, who contribute so much to our nation.

The principles having been set out, the aim was to set out a new system for structured engagement. However, in July the Chancellor announced £120 million of savings in the MHCLG from “small projects”. It subsequently emerged in answers to written parliamentary questions that an element of that was reduced funding for “legal fees” which were no longer expected “to arise from the previous Government’s”

cross-party

“approach to extremism”.

A series of Ministers have, since then, found it very challenging to determine exactly what this means, but Ministers have told the House in answer to written questions that the March statement reflects the position of the last Government—in other words, that this Government have chosen to ditch the last Government’s policy on the non-engagement principles.

I am conscious that this is very sensitive, given the statement about the Southport case that we will hear later, but will the Minister answer some questions? Does the Department still adhere to that working definition of Islamism? Does it still have a working definition of non-violent extremism on which public bodies can rely, should they need to defend themselves when challenged? Can he tell the House why Ministers have not been—to quote from the “Ministerial Code”—“as open as possible” on this issue? Will he share with the House details of correspondence and any meetings that have taken place, and, in particular, the membership of the steering group to which he referred, so that more transparency and confidence surrounds this process?

Alex Norris: I do not think it will be a revelation for Members to hear that a change of Government often means a change of approach to what have been shared views and shared problems. I believe that the last Government deeply wanted to tackle extremism in all its forms across the country, and we share that desire. Where we differ is on the approach taken by the Department.

In last year’s written ministerial statement—this, I have to say, is something with which I simply cannot agree—the previous Secretary of State, for whom I have a lot of respect, chose for the Department to assume a great deal of responsibility for the issue, essentially on the part of the entire Government. I do not think that is the right approach, for very good reasons. Counter-extremism should, I believe, be the fundamental purview of the Home Office, not least because of the Home Office’s access to confidential information that is often not available to the MCHLG. The approach that we have chosen in the new Government is to have a cross-Government but Home Office-led counter-extremism sprint, which will lead in due course to a counter-extremism strategy that shapes the Government’s way forward. That is a different approach to what is, I believe, a commonly understood problem.

I cannot accept the hon. Gentleman’s characterisation of the previous process as robust. Let us be honest: it was not used. The previous Secretary of State made a detailed written ministerial statement and set out a system that could have led on this issue. He named some

[Alex Norris]

organisations, but it was very clear in the written ministerial statement that he was not prejudging any process for those organisations, and he subsequently did not use the process. I would question the hon. Gentleman's attachment to a previous process that the previous Government chose not to use.

On the point about openness, I have answered multiple questions from the shadow Secretary of State and the shadow Minister. I will continue to do so, and we will be as open as we possibly can be. Similarly, with regard to the steering group, I do not think we have made that information public, but I am sure there is no problem in doing so. I will make sure that it is available.

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

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): At a time when we are seeing such an increase in religious hate crime, including Islamophobia and antisemitism, we all have a duty in this House to be careful about the language we use. I hope that the Government will look at their language, because it is vital for community cohesion that we are careful and do not unintentionally inflame tensions.

There are some really critical issues to consider, not just in this country but around the world. The Minister said that he is looking at the definition of extremism, and at changing measures put in place by the previous Government. Will he outline whether the Government will consult on any new definition? If we are honest and look back, there was a lack of consultation by the previous Government.

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the Chair of the Select Committee's question. Language is important, and it is reasonable and right that our constituents expect us to be robust with those who choose to challenge and undermine democracy and the basic principles that guide our society, but also that we do not use our very privileged platform to give succour to hateful ideas and prejudices. Indeed, one thing that we know about the changing nature of terror is that individuals are taking cues from organisations that stop short of the threshold for inflaming terrorist-type behaviours. They are using that as encouragement, so we all have a responsibility to be measured in our response. With regard to the engagement with the Home Office, we want to make sure that anything that comes out of the cross-Government sprint and into the strategy can be bought into and owned by communities across the country, so there will be engagement.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Vikki Slade (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): As we know, the world is a fast-moving and scary place, and people who feel disempowered and isolated often turn to the internet. They are often vulnerable, and their reliance on the internet for everything in their world puts them at even greater risk. We must work with our community leaders to make the most of the information that they hold, and get early notice of problems.

What worries me is that if we make assumptions and do not work with our communities, there is a risk of authoritarian decision making that affects all of us.

What consultation has there been with communities on the changes, and what additional burdens might fall on local authorities following changes to how the Government work? Furthermore, with such extreme things taking place online, especially on the platforms of social media giants based across the pond, what are the Government actively doing to unite faith and cultural leaders, environmental groups, industries and people across generations to foster unity and stop extremism across the whole spectrum?

Alex Norris: I agree with a lot of what the hon. Lady's says about earlier interventions and tackling isolation at its root. As she says, local authorities are really important partners in that endeavour. That is why we will ensure that whatever comes out of our communities and recovery steering group leans into the partnership with local authorities and local law enforcement, where possible, to ensure that the right resources and support are in place.

The hon. Lady asks about engagement and ensuring that we have a contribution from those affected across our faith communities. My noble Friend from the other place, Lord Khan, the Faith Minister, has met representatives of all faiths and will continue to do so. The Government will keep having that important dialogue with different faith groups to ensure that the ideas that we bring forward will be effective and are rooted in real life, but we will also promote inter-faith work, which she mentioned. I know from my own community that when we have had challenges, the best thing we have had to lean on to tackle hate, wherever it might emerge, is the inter-faith relationship.

Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab): There is real division in our communities, and extremism is changing at great speed. Although the vast majority of Members in this House treat such division as a tragedy and as something that needs to be solved calmly, there are some, sadly, who appear to view it as a political opportunity. Does the Minister agree that Members need to be calm in their dialogue on this issue, and that when they are not, they should be called out by all political parties?

Alex Norris: I have always felt that there were two types of politician. There are those who seek to move things forward politically by bringing people together, and those who seek to exploit division. It is up to individual hon. and right hon. Members to decide which is their personal approach. When there is divisive—or bordering on hateful—language in political parties, we would expect them to resolve that in their normal ways. With regard to leadership in this country, we are certainly the luckiest people in the country. We get to come here every day and tackle these issues head-on in the interests of our communities and our country. Almost exclusively, Members use that platform for good. We have important distinctions and differences, and that is great in a democracy, but we want to bring the country together and move it forward together. That is certainly the approach that I will be using.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Can the Minister reassure the House on the Government's approach to the Muslim Council of Britain? The previous Government decided to break off engagement with the MCB for very real reasons,

including the infiltration into that organisation that had happened. Can the Minister tell the House that he and his Government will not be engaging with it?

Alex Norris: Those whom I and all my ministerial colleagues in the Department—and all Ministers including the Prime Minister and across the Government—meet with is a matter of public record, which can be interrogated in its right way. I am going to stop short of providing a running commentary, organisation by organisation, with regard to who we will not meet—*[Interruption.]* As I say, I am not going to provide a running commentary on that organisation. It is very clear from the record who I do and do not meet.

Debbie Abrahams (Oldham East and Saddleworth) (Lab): I was a little bit concerned by the shadow Minister's conflation of extremism with child sexual exploitation and grooming gangs. Does my hon. Friend agree that how we use language is important if we are to avoid eradicating the social cohesion that many of us have spent many, many years establishing in our communities?

Alex Norris: It is important that we are careful with our language and with connotations. One thing I know about, after the many years of building trust in my community, is that it takes a long time to build that trust but it can be lost very quickly if we are thoughtless in the language that we use.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): When a crime has the attributes of a terrorist outrage, but the police, in their engagement with the community, proactively announce that it is not initially being treated as such, is that not bound to give rise to public suspicion that the truth is being covered up?

Alex Norris: I do not know what in particular the right hon. Gentleman is referring to—*[Interruption.]* Well, he did not have to use coded language if he meant a specific incident. There is rightly a distinction between what the Government of the day do and what the police do. We are not here to direct the police. In line with what I have said, however, all public bodies need to be careful about the language they use because it has real-world consequences.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): Members across the House will know how important community engagement is to building strong communities, and that working together with those whose views we may not share but can respect is really important. I want to pay tribute to the fantastic work of the Bracknell Forest Interfaith Forum for doing exactly that in my community. The Conservatives, when in government, cut funding to the Inter Faith Network, which was working at national level. What can we do to support organisations such as the Bracknell Forest Interfaith Forum to bring religious groups together and to help us understand that we do indeed have more in common than that which divides us?

Alex Norris: There was real sadness when the previous Government moved away from interfaith as a model. My hon. Friend the Faith Minister has been clear about how important he thinks it is, and that is why promoting interfaith work has been a core part of the work he has done so far.

Kirsty Blackman (Aberdeen North) (SNP): We know that a number of the individuals who are radicalised are encouraged to find that radicalisation by high-risk platforms on the dark web. Will the Minister and the Home Secretary ensure that they work together with the Department for Culture, Media and Sport to ensure that the Online Safety Act 2023 does as it was intended to do, which is to regulate those high-risk platforms, rather than the Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport just allowing Ofcom to step away from them and let them do what they like?

Alex Norris: I share the hon. Lady's intent. We know that, whether it is in publicly available online forums or on the dark web, there are people who will use all corners of the internet to promote their views and to promote hateful ideologies. As part of our counter-extremism sprint and the strategy that will follow from that, we are looking very carefully at this and at the tools that we need to tackle it.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): We will all be sadly familiar with the shocking and racist remarks made by the Conservative party donor Frank Hester last year. I do not intend to repeat them in this House, so that we do not have to relive them, but does the Minister agree that that kind of language encourages extremism and has no place in our politics?

Alex Norris: We all have to be careful, both as individuals and collectively within our parties, about the individuals with whom we choose to associate and from whom we choose to take money, so that we do not send messages that we would not want to send.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): The Minister mentioned a rapid review; perhaps he can give the House a timetable. As part of that review, could he include the Charity Commission and ask what charities might be dividing our communities rather than unifying them? Also, could more officials from the Cabinet Office and the Home Office be seconded to his Department so that the decisions around Prevent and this review are taken in a better way?

Alex Norris: On the development of the strategy, I do not want to pre-empt the Home Secretary because I am conscious that she is making the next statement. On Cabinet Office resourcing and secondments, our commitment, as the House would expect, is that fundamentally we are one Government and we must find internal ways to work effectively. Come what may, we will not hide behind that as an excuse for why things are not effective. Instead, when Ministers ask questions, we will address them in the spirit of one Government.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I commend both sides of the House on how they have respectfully approached this statement, because that is really important. The Minister talked about the robustness of this topic, and I am keen to pick him up on that, because one tenet in the UK is all about safety and the other is freedom of speech. Can the Government rule out changing any definitions that could lead, intentionally or unintentionally, towards blasphemy laws, because free speech is really important?

Alex Norris: The Home Secretary will have the chance to talk about the counter-extremism strategy in due course, but I assure the hon. Gentleman that we have been looking at the early signs from that review, and these were talked about in December by my hon. Friend the Security Minister. To some degree these were about the places in which hate festers rather than about legislative changes.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Our thoughts today are with the families of those three poor little girls and with everybody who was hurt in that terrible event last summer. It is inexcusable that state agencies missed vital opportunities to intervene in this devastating case, including at three crucial points following Prevent referrals. These failings shine a grim light on the significant cracks in our public services, following years of spending cuts and underinvestment. Will the Minister join me in calling for the public inquiry to consider the role of austerity since 2010 as a contributing factor to these terrible failings?

Alex Norris: Again, I am afraid I cannot pre-empt what the Home Secretary is about to say, but the hon. Lady will have the chance to put that point to her soon. In our community strategy and our attempts to ensure that communities are resilient ones where people can live together in harmony, we are of course considering what was said in Dame Sara Khan's review, and one of the underlying causes that she raised concerns about was austerity. We need to make sure that we have well-resourced public services. We also need to ensure that people do not feel that there is any division in the allocation of resources that is in some way targeted against them. We know that that should never be the case and would never be the case, so of course we are considering that as part of our communities work.

Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con): The independent review of Prevent, the Government programme that tries to stop people being radicalised by extremist views, said on its very first page that

"the facts clearly demonstrate that the most lethal threat in the last 20 years has come from Islamism, and this threat continues." The last Government knew this to be true. Do this Government?

Alex Norris: This Government have taken on the independent review of Prevent, and 33 of its 34 recommendations have been implemented. We are engaged in the counter-extremism sprint, and our counter-extremism strategy will flow from it. The hon. Lady will have a chance to see that.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): I will have a go at getting an answer from the Minister, even if he did not answer the questions of my hon. Friend the Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson).

Yesterday, the Department confirmed in answer to a freedom of information request that there is internal Government correspondence about the Muslim Council of Britain that it refuses to publish. Can the Minister overturn that decision, publish the papers and confirm that there have been no discussions and no correspondence within Whitehall proposing re-engagement with the MCB?

Alex Norris: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that the position has not moved. I have previously stated in answer to written questions that we are not meeting the Muslim Council of Britain. [HON. MEMBERS: "Say it again!"] I am not sure I can say it any more clearly than at the Dispatch Box in the Chamber of the House of Commons. The position has not changed from the previous Government.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his answers to all the questions. In Northern Ireland, of course, we face extremism from the left and right, but at the same time we have managed to have community engagement, and I believe lessons can be learned. It is essential that our police forces have the wherewithal to deal with threats through an appropriate mechanism. The designation of community threats and extremism is truly essential. Will the Minister outline whether the process of designation can be streamlined to ensure that the police have all the powers they need to work within communities to root out and deal with paramilitaries and extremists, with safeguards for human rights?

Alex Norris: I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman's question. His work on the persecution of Christians across the world reads across to some of those challenges in making sure we have cohesive communities across the UK. Of course, policing in Northern Ireland is a devolved matter, so it is not for a Minister in the UK Parliament, but I assure him that we give the best insight to make sure that public institutions are interacting in the best way possible. I often feel for junior officers who, early in their service, are having to deal with what are often quite complicated issues in live time. We want to make sure they get the best information so that they are able to do so.

Southport Attack

Mr Speaker: Before we come to the Home Secretary's statement, I want to say that I appreciate that it has been most frustrating for the House that we have not been able to discuss the issues relating to this case because of ongoing prosecutions. Although the case is still technically sub judice until sentencing on Thursday, given that the accused has pleaded guilty to all charges and that there is strong public interest in the House being able to discuss these matters, I am granting a waiver so that Members may discuss it freely. I am confident that the House's sub judice resolution has been followed correctly, and I am grateful to Members for their patience in not discussing this case substantially before now. I am going to ensure that the House's sub judice resolution is reviewed to ensure it is fit for purpose.

1.3 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper): With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on the Southport murders.

None of us will ever forget the events of 29 July. The school holidays had just started, and little girls were at a dance class to have fun, dance and sing. A moment of joy turned into the darkest of nightmares. We think especially of three little girls—Elsie Dot Stancombe, Bebe King and Alice da Silva Aguiar—their precious smiles and the dreams their families had, and we think of their families' agony to have that future so brutally destroyed. They are in all our hearts and prayers, as are those who survived the attack but live with the physical and emotional scars. Nothing will ever take away their trauma and loss, and we will ensure that they receive the support and care they need in the years to come.

We think, too, of the police and first responders who ran into that scene of unspeakable horror. The courage they showed and the lives they saved are public service at its very best.

Yesterday, Axel Rudakubana pleaded guilty to all charges. He stands responsible for one of the most barbaric crimes in our country's history—the most vile and cowardly attack on little children who could never defend themselves, carried out in the most horrific and traumatic way. The Crown Prosecution Service has described him as

“a young man with a sickening and sustained interest in death and violence”

who has

“shown no sign of remorse.”

On Thursday, before sentencing, the prosecution will set out what happened that day and the nature of those offences.

Now that the conviction has been secured, the families, the people of Southport and the entire country need answers about how this horrendous attack could ever have happened. The Government have been constrained in what we could say up to this point about Rudakubana's past to avoid prejudicing any jury trial, in line with all the normal rules of our British justice systems, because nothing is more important than securing justice, but now we can start to lay out that background.

Multiple different agencies were in contact with Rudakubana and knew about his history of violence. He was referred to Prevent three times between December 2019 and April 2021, when aged 13 and 14.

Between October 2019 and May 2022, Lancashire police responded to five calls from his home address about his behaviour. He was referred repeatedly to the multi-agency safeguarding hub. He had contact with children's social care, the Early Help service, and child and adolescent mental health services. He was convicted of a violent assault against another child at school and was referred to the youth offending team. He was excluded from one school and had long periods of absence from another.

All those agencies had contact with him yet, between them, they completely failed to identify the terrible danger he posed. How did he fall through so many gaps? It is just unbearable to think that something more could and should have been done. There are grave questions about how this network of agencies failed to identify and act on the risks. There were so many signs of how dangerous he had become, yet the action against him was far too weak. Families need the truth about why the system failed to tackle his violence for so many years.

That is why we are setting up an independent public inquiry. Like the Angiolini inquiry into Wayne Couzens, it will begin work on a non-statutory basis so that it can move quickly into action, but with statutory powers added later, as required. We will set out the terms of reference and appoint the chair once we have consulted the coroner and given the families the opportunity to comment. In addition to examining what went wrong in this horrific case, I am also asking the inquiry to consider the wider challenge of rising youth violence and extremism.

I have been deeply disturbed at the number of cases involving teenagers drawn into extremism, serious violence and terrorism—including Islamist extremism, far right extremism, mixed and confused ideology, and obsession with violence and gore. In just three years, there has been a threefold increase in under-18s investigated for involvement in terrorism. Some 162 people were referred to Prevent last year for concerns relating to school massacres; the Met Commissioner has warned about

“young men who are fixated on violence...grazing across extremist and terrorist content”;

and Five Eyes counter-terror partners have warned about growing radicalisation of minors, happening as so many of our children and teenagers are being exposed to ever more disturbing materials online. An online ecosystem is radicalising our children while safety measures are whittled away.

The Online Safety Act 2023 illegal content codes of practice come into force in March and the child safety codes should be in place this summer, but companies should take responsibility before then. The prosecution will provide more detail on Thursday about material Rudakubana searched for online, but I can tell the House that the Government are this week contacting technology companies to ask them to remove the dangerous material that he accessed. Companies should not be profiting from hosting content that puts children's lives at risk.

Let me set out four other areas where we are taking action in advance of the inquiry. First, on Prevent, the Government and counter-terrorism policing jointly commissioned an immediate Prevent learning review during the summer, and I will publish detailed findings following the sentencing. The three referrals took place between three and four years before the Southport

[Yvette Cooper]

attack, including following evidence Rudakubana was expressing interest in school shootings, the London Bridge attack, the IRA, MI5 and the middle east.

On each occasion, Rudakubana's case was assessed by counter-terrorism policing, but in each instance there was no onward referral to specialist Channel support. The learning review has concluded that the referrals should not have been closed, and that cases such as these, given the perpetrator's age and complex needs, should be referred to Channel. It concludes that too much weight was placed on the absence of ideology, without considering the vulnerabilities to radicalisation, or taking account of whether he was

“obsessed with massacre or extreme violence”,

and that the cumulative significance of those three repeat referrals was not properly considered.

The Prevent programme is vital to our national security and its officers work with huge dedication to keep us safe, but we need it to be effective. Some changes have already been made since 2021, including new Prevent duty guidance, new training for frontline workers on radicalisation and stronger policy on repeat referrals. In September 2024, a new Prevent assessment framework was launched, supplemented by robust training for all Prevent police officers, but those changes do not go far enough.

Given the importance of the programme, I cannot understand how it has been allowed to operate for so long without proper independent oversight. That is why I announced before Christmas the introduction of a new independent Prevent commissioner with power to review cases and ensure standards are being met. I am today appointing Lord David Anderson KC as the interim Prevent commissioner, to start work immediately. His first task will be to conduct a thorough review of the Prevent history in this case to identify what changes are needed to make sure serious cases are not missed, particularly where there is mixed and unclear ideology.

I have also tasked my Department with conducting an end-to-end review of Prevent thresholds, including on Islamist extremism, where referrals have previously been too low. We are looking at cases where mental ill health or neurodivergence is a factor, and developing new arrangements with other agencies for cases that may not meet the threshold for Channel counter-extremism support, but where violent behaviour must be addressed urgently.

Secondly, two shocking facts around knife crime have emerged from this case. The Prevent learning review found that Rudakubana admitted to having carried a knife more than 10 times, yet the action against him was far too weak. Despite the fact that he had been convicted for violence and was just 17, he was easily able to order a knife on Amazon. That is a total disgrace and it must change. We will bring in stronger measures to tackle knife sales online in the crime and policing Bill this spring.

Thirdly, as the Prime Minister has set out this morning, we need to ensure our laws keep up with the changing violent and extremist threats that we face. It is for the police and CPS to decide whether individual cases meet the definition set out in the Terrorism Act 2000 when making charges, but given the growing number of cases

where perpetrators are seeking to terrorise, even without a clear ideology, we need to ensure that the law, powers and sentencing are strong enough to cope. I have therefore asked the independent reviewer on terrorism powers to examine the legislation in this area in light of the modern threats we face.

Finally, let me address the issue of contempt of court. The British way of justice means that information is presented to the court by the police and CPS with restrictions on what can be said beforehand, so that the jury does not get partial or prejudicial information in advance, and to ensure the trial is fair and justice is done. Social media puts those long-established rules under strain, especially where partial and inaccurate information appears online, and the Law Commission is reviewing the contempt of court rules in that light. But let me be clear that where the police, Government and journalists are given clear advice from the CPS about contempt of court and about not publishing information in advance of a trial, if we did not respect that and a killer walked free, we would never be forgiven.

There are times when something so unfathomably terrible happens that whatever words we find feel grossly insufficient, and that is how it feels over the Southport attack. Let there be no doubt: responsibility for this outrage lies squarely with the perpetrator. Equally, in the wake of such a monstrous atrocity, we have to ask every question, no matter how difficult, and where change is needed, we must act. That now is our task. We owe that to the victims and their loved ones, and we owe it to the country, because protecting the public is the first duty of the Government and the shared purpose of this House. I commend this statement to the House.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us start and I will try to call everybody who was here on time. I call the shadow Home Secretary.

1.16 pm

Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement and for the briefing she kindly arranged.

First, let us remember the three young, innocent victims of this savage and senseless attack: Bebe King was just six years old, Elsie Dot Stancombe was seven and Alice da Silva Aguiar was nine years old. Their lives were cruelly cut short as they attended a Taylor Swift dance class. It should have been a time of joy, part of a precious and innocent childhood to be cherished and remembered, and yet the darkest of shadows fell over Southport that day as those girls were robbed of their young lives. Let us not forget that eight more children and two adults were seriously injured on that day as well. Many of us in the House are parents or grandparents, and many people listening today will be too. We can only begin to imagine the pain and grief the parents and family of Bebe, Elsie and Alice must now be feeling. We should recognise and thank the first responders who arrived at the scene.

We owe it to the memory of those children and to their bereaved parents to learn the lessons from this terrible incident and to take steps to make sure it does not happen again. In that spirit, I welcome and support the inquiry announced yesterday. Will the Home Secretary confirm that it will be placed on a statutory footing as

soon as possible, to ensure its independence and to enable it to compel disclosure of the evidence it may need? It is vital to get to the truth about the opportunities that may have existed to stop the evil perpetrator, Axel Rudakubana, from committing those sickening murders.

Rudakubana was encountered multiple times, as the Home Secretary has said, by the police, social services, the school system and the Prevent programme over a period of several years. The inquiry will find out, I hope, whether mistakes were made or whether the law needs to change. The Home Secretary mentioned some areas that will rightly be looked at, and I support that. Will the Home Secretary confirm that the inquiry will include consideration of whether the Mental Health Act 1983 was adequate for this case?

The Home Secretary has rightly referred to Prevent. A review of Prevent was conducted by Sir William Shawcross and the last Government responded to that in February 2024. Will the Home Secretary now commit to implementing all the recommendations of the Shawcross review?

I now turn to what happened after the murders and to the importance of openness and transparency. First—this is a serious and important question—will the Home Secretary confirm that the inquiry will also cover the Government, police and CPS response to the murders and especially the handling of public communications and the appalling riots that followed? It is a very important question, and I will be grateful if the Home Secretary answers that directly in her response.

The Prime Minister this morning acknowledged that he knew about the background to the case and to Rudakubana himself, including that he had been referred to Prevent on three separate occasions and that he had been found to be in possession of ricin—a highly toxic chemical—and a manual detailing al-Qaeda terrorist methods, which is itself an offence under the Terrorism Act 2006. The Prime Minister also said this morning that he did not disclose any of that to the public in the days and weeks after the murders for fear of prejudicing the subsequent murder trial.

It is, of course, important for journalists, politicians and this House to do nothing that might prejudice a trial. However, Jonathan Hall KC, the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, said this, in the context of the case, on the “Today” programme in October:

“The Government has to be aware...that if there is an information gap...then there are other voices, particularly in social media, who will try and fill it.”

He went on,

“if there is any information you can give, put it in the public domain, and be really careful that you don’t fall into the trap of saying ‘we can only say zilch, because there are criminal proceedings’.”

He continued:

“Quite often, there’s a fair amount...that can be put into the public domain”.

Jonathan Hall concluded by saying that that police realise now

“that just saying ‘there’s a charge, we can’t say any more’, is not going to cut it these days.”

The independent reviewer is therefore saying that the Government and police can put some material into the public domain without prejudicing subsequent trials.

In fact, on 29 October, Rudakubana was charged with possessing the ricin and the terror manual, and that was then made public. If that can be made public in

October without risking prejudice of the murder trial, it follows that it could have been made public in August without prejudicing that same trial. Background facts on other cases over the years have been made public after arrest and before trial without prejudice—the shields relating to two of those cases are in this Chamber. Why, therefore, did the Prime Minister not make public some of that background information in August when he knew it, when later disclosure of that information in October demonstrated that such disclosure could be made without prejudice? Why, too, did the Deputy Prime Minister, on 31 July, dismiss as “fake news” those saying that there may be further facts to come out?

Briefly, before concluding, let me explain why that is important. As Jonathan Hall said, if there is a void, misinformation can fill that void, especially online. That appears to be what happened here and some of that information, it is said, originated overseas from hostile states. It is possible—indeed, even likely—that that misinformation that was put into the void fuelled the totally unacceptable riots we then subsequently saw. Will the Home Secretary therefore accept, given what Jonathan Hall and I have said, that there should and could have been more openness and transparency, as I just set out, without prejudicing the trial, and that disclosing more of that truth openly and transparently would have helped combat the damaging misinformation that circulated and which, arguably, fuelled the riots? Will she confirm the inquiry will look at that aspect of events?

This was an appalling tragedy: young girls, murdered, with their whole lives ahead of them. Let us all learn the lessons from this tragedy in honour of their memory.

Yvette Cooper: The shadow Home Secretary raised a series of points, which is obviously a substantial shift in position for him and his party from the one they took in government. He asked about the status of the inquiry. I can confirm that it will start quickly on a non-statutory basis, in the same way that the Angiolini inquiry did. However, I can also confirm that it will be given whatever powers it needs, including on a statutory basis, so that it can get any information that it needs.

The right hon. Gentleman referred to the Shawcross review. I can confirm that the Government have implemented 33 out of the 34 recommendations. I will gently point out, however, that the approach that the Shawcross review took was to say that the Prevent programme should be narrowed and should focus particularly on the cases around terrorism. That could have risked including fewer cases like this one, where ideology is less clear.

The shadow Minister then raised the issue about the information that was provided. He will know that the Contempt of Court Act was set out in 1981. Jonathan Hall has highlighted the problem of disinformation online, with social media actors not bound by the same rules that the police, the media and the Government follow. He refers, for example, to the name and nationality being provided, which in practice they were in this case after misinformation appeared online. Ultimately, he has also said that all that is governed by the Contempt of Court Act 1981, and the Law Commission is reviewing that. However, it is not for the Government to ignore the law or the advice that we are given when justice for families is at stake.

[Yvette Cooper]

I will point out to the right hon. Gentleman that the previous Conservative Government did not publish information before the trial about the Prevent referral for the perpetrator who killed Sir David Amess. None of us criticised them for that because none of us wanted to put at risk justice for Sir David's family. Nor did they publish information before the trial on the Prevent referral of the asylum seeker who killed Tom Roberts. In fact, they did not even publish that after the trial; it only came out in the inquest. Further, the Minister, who even after the trial refused to answer my questions on whether they knew that the asylum seeker was wanted for murdering two people in Serbia when he was allowed to enter the country, was the current shadow Justice Secretary, the right hon. Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick).

We have been keen to publish the information on Prevent referrals from the start, but the advice to us has been clear throughout. If we had ignored the advice that we were given about the case that was put to us and about the information that the police and the CPS were working through in order to get justice, and if, as a result, a killer had walked free, no one would ever have forgiven the Government or anyone else. The most important thing is to get justice and then, once justice is secured, to make sure at this point that the questions are answered about what went wrong and why three young girls' lives were lost. That is the question the shadow Home Secretary should be focusing on right now.

Patrick Hurley (Southport) (Lab): It has been another tough week for my Southport constituency, as I am sure that Members across the House will appreciate. I want to start by thanking the Home Secretary and the Prime Minister for the calm, diligent way in which they have undertaken their work over the last six months, and for the way in which they have been good friends to Southport.

I was clear back in the summer that I did not want people speculating online as to the motives or the background of the person who we can now say was the murderer of those three girls. We were risking prejudicing the trial, and it could have collapsed because of that speculation. In fact, it was not just speculation, but in some respects, downright lies—downright lies that were being circulated in the interests of political gain, with the interests of justice a distant second. Does the Home Secretary agree that the next stage of achieving justice for my community and for the families impacted so desperately by the crime back in July—that is, the public inquiry—should also be allowed to undertake its work and make its recommendations free of the ridiculous nonsense and lies that we have seen from public figures who should know better and which have been circulating purely for their own interests?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend has been an important voice for the people in his community throughout this unimaginably difficult time and has spoken for them with great dignity and passion, including in this House.

My hon. Friend is right that nothing of that sort should be done; it is part of our British justice tradition that information is produced at the trial, but not in advance for fear of prejudicing a jury, of undermining justice and of potentially letting criminals walk free. He is right that we should never do that. He is also right

that his community, including the families involved, need answers now. And the answers that they need include how on earth this shocking, disturbing and barbaric attack was able to happen. What went wrong? What could have been done to prevent it? There is also the question of how we as a society face up to the rising youth violence and extremism that we have seen, with this being just one example among some very disturbing cases. That is the justice and the answers that those families need.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am grateful to the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement. What happened in Southport last year was a horrific tragedy. Three innocent young girls—Alice, Bebe and Elsie—lost their lives to an act of senseless brutal violence, and our thoughts go out to the bereaved families and their friends, for whom this week will be incredibly difficult. We all owe it to these girls to ensure that a senseless tragedy such as this can never happen again.

It has been deeply concerning to hear reports about how, in the lead-up to the attack, warning signs were missed as the attacker fell through the cracks in the system. The Liberal Democrats welcome the Government's commitment to an inquiry, and, clearly, tough questions need to be asked. The inquiry must not shy away from getting the answers. This inquiry, like others, will only reach its full potential when there is a duty of candour that requires public officials and authorities to co-operate fully. I would welcome more details from the Home Secretary on when her Government plan to finally introduce the Hillsborough law to Parliament.

Our country also deserves a counter-terrorism strategy that keeps our community safe and is fit to tackle the modern challenges that we face in an increasingly complex online world that crosses international boundaries. Will the Home Secretary confirm that these concerns will be addressed in the upcoming counter-terrorism strategy? This must be a watershed moment from which we move forward by building a system that avoids future failures such as we have seen in this case. It is my sincere hope that we can work together across this House to make that a reality.

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member makes an important point: we want to introduce the duty of candour as part of the Hillsborough law. She is also right to talk about the challenges of countering terrorism, extremism and these changing patterns of extreme violence. As the Met Commissioner has said, those with a fixation on violence and gore are also consuming different bits of terrorist and extremist material. The ideology may be unclear, but they pose a danger to the public. This inquiry needs to look at all those issues, and, as part of our Prevent work and counter-terrorism work, we need to act at pace in these areas as well.

Florence Eshalomi (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement this afternoon. As many Members have said, our thoughts remain with Bebe, Elsie and Alice. We can all remember where we were that late mid-morning on 29 July. I had just dropped off my two children at their holiday camp at school. When the news broke, I could feel that panic. I almost stopped for a minute to think: are my children

safe? We think about the other children and the trauma that they will be feeling, and the first responders who ran towards that danger knowing that they could be harmed.

The Home Secretary has announced an inquiry, but, sadly, there is also the issue of the nature of the violence that children as young as 15 or 16 are viewing online—the nature of the violence that was used on Elianne Andam when she was tragically stabbed in Croydon on 27 September, and the nature of the violence that Axel Rudakubana used on these three girls. How will the Home Secretary ensure that the institutions which, if we are honest, failed to see those warning signs will not fail in the future? What will the inquiry do differently, so that, as a House, we will not be coming back to recount dangerous tragedies again in the future?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right to describe how every parent and grandparent will have felt on hearing those awful descriptions on that day in July. She is also right to focus on what our young people—our children—are seeing online. If we do not face up to this, the damage that we could be doing to generations down the line is disturbing and troubling. That means that social media companies need to take responsibility. The Online Safety Act 2023 will introduce stronger codes and requirements, but the companies themselves also need to take some responsibility, instead of going backwards, which they are at the moment.

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

Dame Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): I welcome the Home Secretary's statement, and my thoughts are with everybody involved. The list that she set out of the points where the agencies and institutions could have intervened sooner is truly terrifying. What reassurance can she give the House that this is a cross-Government piece of work and that all agencies and institutions will be involved? Furthermore, as and when the inquiry makes recommendations, which it will hopefully do on an interim basis, will she give a commitment that she will look carefully at them and implement them as soon as possible?

Yvette Cooper: We will certainly look at any recommendations that come from this important inquiry. We need to look at what went wrong in this case. This is particularly about the interactions between the different agencies. There were so many agencies involved, but, as a network, they failed to identify the risk and to have sufficient actions in place. Lancashire county council has carried out a rapid initial review, but there still has to be a statutory child safeguarding practice review and a coroner's inquiry. However, our view is that those are not sufficient, because we need a cross-agency examination of all of the things that went wrong in this case. We have to start with the dangers that were posed to those children in Southport in such a devastating way and then see why the system so badly failed to protect them from those dangers. We need that rather than organisations working in their own silos, doing only their bit and then leaving children at risk.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement and for announcing the public inquiry. I want to remember Alice, Bebe and

Elsie, and their families and friends. I also want to remember the other victims of the attack and the first responders, some of whom have given harrowing accounts over the last six months of what they found at the Hart Space in Southport.

Does my right hon. Friend agree that we in this House should recommit to the principle that nothing that we say or do in this place or elsewhere should prejudice criminal proceedings or prevent justice from being secured? Does she agree that to have done so in this case would have been an insult to the memories of Alice, Bebe and Elsie, an insult to their families and friends, and an insult to everyone in the community in Southport who were, and remain, so badly affected by what happened on 29 July last year?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The families and all the people across Southport and the country need the truth. They need answers about what happened and what went so badly wrong in this case. That is why the information is put before the trial and then released after the trial. That is how the British justice system works. Crucially, at the heart of this, people need to see justice. There has to be an account for such a terrible, terrible, barbaric crime. All of us have to make sure that justice is delivered, because when lives have been lost in such a terrible way, justice is the minimum that they deserve.

David Davis (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): I hope the Home Secretary will not take it as a discourtesy if I say to her that it should be the Prime Minister making this statement here today. This morning, he said on television that singleton terrorist attacks are a very new occurrence; they are not. They have been going on for nearly a decade. There have been many in London, including one in the yard of this House of Commons, and one that killed Sir David Amess, our colleague. In that attack on Sir David Amess, the police declared it a terrorist incident the same day. Without three Prevent references, without ricin, and without an al-Qaeda manual, they declared it a terrorist event the same day. So we all wonder why this was not the case here when there was such evidence. This is a clear mistake, is it not?

Yvette Cooper: The decision about the application of the Terrorism Act 2000 is one for the police and, ultimately, the CPS when it lays charges based on the operational information that it has. The prosecution will lay out more information before sentencing that they would have put before the court today had the offender not pleaded guilty initially, and that is for them to decide. But the point the Prime Minister made this morning was that this was clearly a case where someone attempted to terrorise the community. That was clearly their intention—to kill those children and to terrorise more widely. That is why we have to ensure that, even in cases where the police and the prosecution say they have not been able to prove ideology, we still have the right powers, sentencing and ability to respond with swiftness and seriousness to the kinds of cases we are facing. That is why the Prime Minister has said this needs to be reviewed—I referred to the independent reviewer of terrorism legislation looking at those issues—and also why we have this statement to the House and are doing this inquiry.

[Yvette Cooper]

Where I disagree with the right hon. Gentleman is when he said we have had such cases for a long time. We have seen in recent years a big increase in youth violence and extremism on a disturbing scale, and that needs to be part of the inquiry as well.

Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab): I associate myself and my community with the statement from the Home Secretary on this tragic incident. Whether it is the purchasing of knives online or the sharing of horrible videos celebrating violence and death, there is clearly a gap in the ability of the state to hold social media companies and online retailers to account. What more can the Government do, together with the intelligence services, to take robust action and hold to account social media companies that are allowing extremism, violence and horror to be present on their sites?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We are raising with the companies some of the particular dangerous material that this terrible offender accessed online, and the police and prosecution will say more about some of that material later this week.

My hon. Friend is right to highlight the issue around online knife sales. We know that in the case of Ronan Kanda, who was brutally murdered with a ninja sword, that the perpetrator was able to buy that online and pick it up with no age checks at all. In this case, for a 17-year-old to be able to get the knife he used online from Amazon, that is frankly shocking. Commander Stephen Clayman has been doing a review for us of online knife sales and the kinds of checks that should be taking place. We will bring forward new measures to tackle this problem based on that review.

Mr James Cleverly (Braintree) (Con): I am particularly drawn to the line in the immediate learning review where it concludes that “too much weight was placed on the absence of ideology, without considering the vulnerabilities to radicalisation”. Much of the challenge over the summer was because there was an understandable lack of public understanding of the distinction between a terrorist incident and a non-terrorist incident. Had this person done exactly the same thing but been driven by a desire to create a caliphate here in the UK, it would of course have been defined as a terrorist attack. The fact that it was not is of no solace to the families who lost loved ones. Is it not now the time—I appreciate this could be part of the review, but I urge the Home Secretary to ensure it is given particular emphasis in the review—to get rid of this entirely arbitrary distinction of motivation and to focus exclusively on the risks and actions?

Yvette Cooper: The former Home Secretary makes an extremely important point because, from the point of view of the families and the community, the attack was intended to terrorise the community, and their real concern is about the scale of the harm. They saw the loss of children’s lives and the impact on the community.

The law is set out in the Terrorism Act 2000, and there is serious consideration for different agencies about the nature of the response. If there is an ideological attack or motivation, it may be that a counter-extremism response—the kind of support that the Channel programme provides—is targeted at the extremist ideology that

needs to be challenged, tackled and taken down. Alternatively, if the issue is around mental health or an obsession with violence and gore, it may need a different kind of response. But the right hon. Member is right that the threats from the point of view of the community will feel the same. That is why the law needs to be looked at again, but it is also why we need to have this inquiry, which can look at where the gaps are in the way that different state agencies respond, because we have seen those growing gaps—obviously, in the most traumatic of ways in this case.

Chris Murray (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): I welcome the Home Secretary’s statement. In her statement and in the Prime Minister’s speech this morning, they painted a terrifying picture of how terrorism is changing in this country and how the threat we face is evolving, especially with the proliferation of extremely violent online content, which is having an effect on mixed ideologies and ideologies from across the spectrum. Clearly, part of the response will be from the intelligence services. Will the Home Secretary tell us how the intelligence services will be responding to this evolving threat and what the Government are doing to prevent the growth of extremism through extreme online content?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right that we seem to have cases where there is extreme violence, or where obsession grows around extreme violence, and then young people cast around to consume different kinds of terrorist or extremist material, but at its heart it may be an obsession with violence. Different circumstances will require different kinds of responses, but the scale of the growing obsession with violence should be a serious concern to us because it makes us think, “What are we allowing to happen to our kids and teenagers if we see this kind of obsession grow?” That is why we need action. Clearly, the focus of the intelligence and security agencies is on those cases where there is organised ideology and radicalisation, as well as state threats, but we have to deal with the kinds of threats that our society faces much more widely, and that means everyone needs to be part of it.

Stephen Gethins (Arbroath and Broughty Ferry) (SNP): I associate myself with colleagues’ remarks about the murder of those three wee girls and the bravery of the first responders. Most of all, we think about the families left behind. I agree that we have a responsibility to the victims, when talking about these kinds of cases, to ensure that we do so responsibly, while keeping the Government under scrutiny. There is a fast evolving situation regarding technology companies. Will the Home Secretary tell us what areas she is looking at on enforcement? In this diverse, multi-agency case, what interaction has she had with the Scottish Government and the devolved Administrations in the areas where they have responsibility?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right that there are issues around the responsibility of social media companies. Stronger powers will be brought in as part of the Online Safety Act, but we urge the companies to take responsibility now and not to continue to profit from dangerous material that is putting kids at risk.

On the discussions with the Scottish Government, we have broad discussions planned for later this week on some of our shared Home Office responsibilities. The

hon. Member will know that policing and crime are devolved, but that national security issues, where terrorism cases may fall or have an impact, are reserved. On such cases, we would expect to consult the Scottish Government and discuss the way forward.

Paula Barker (Liverpool Wavertree) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for her statement. My thoughts and prayers are with everyone involved. Acts of terror devastate the families of victims who are left to pick up the pieces, having their closest loved ones robbed from them in the cruellest way. As with the Forbury Gardens terrorist attack in 2020, which saw my constituents Gary and Jan Furlong lose their beloved son James, these acts often take place after multiple agency failings. The Forbury Gardens perpetrator had been referred to Prevent four times and was known to mental health services. It will be important to those families in Southport that lessons are learned and acted on in a timely way. Will the Government engage with me and Survivors Against Terror on its calls for a survivors' charter, which would extend rights to survivors and the families of victims?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The Security Minister has met and had regular discussions with survivors of terror. They raise serious concerns about, for example, the way in which survivors of the Manchester Arena attack ended up feeling badly let down, and the additional support needed in such cases. We will continue to discuss the support that is needed with those organisations.

Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): I trust that the Home Secretary agrees that the courage shown by the dance teacher and the member of the public who intervened should be recognised appropriately. What troubles me is that we seem to have a subtext here of saying that if only that particular ticking time-bomb had been successfully referred to Prevent, it could have stopped him doing what he did. Assuming that someone so committed to fanaticism would not respond to Prevent, will the Home Secretary share with the House what measures are in place to keep such terrible events from happening? Do terrorism prevention and investigation measures, for example, apply in a case like that?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member makes an important point. Those referrals were three to four years before the attack, and multiple different agencies had contact with Rudakubana, but there is a huge question about the powers and interventions that were available. Even if the scale of the risk and danger that he posed had been sufficiently identified, what could have been done? That is one of the reasons why the Government are determined to bring in a new power, a youth diversion order, to address some of the difficult cases—particularly those involving teenagers—and see what requirements might be put on young people in such cases. We will bring forward legislation as part of the crime and policing Bill.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): The barbaric murder of those three little girls in Southport is part of a growing problem of youngsters fixated on violence and gore, as the Home Secretary said. That worrying phenomenon has been fuelled by the rapid growth of

websites and social media forums that promote and revel in such violence. Can the Home Secretary confirm that the inquiry into Southport will look into exactly that danger promoted by such websites?

Yvette Cooper: We will certainly ensure that that issue is clearly in the scope of the inquiry, which must consider why so many young people are drawn into an obsession with violence and extremist activity, and what exactly is going wrong and why, so that we can take the action needed across society to keep our children safe.

Lee Anderson (Ashfield) (Reform): The Home Secretary told us that, last year alone, 162 people were referred to Prevent over concerns relating to school massacres—a truly shocking and disturbing figure. How many of those people are currently in detention?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that a referral to Prevent can be for young people who may have expressed an interest in school massacre, as opposed to those who have committed a crime. The point of the Prevent programme is early intervention to take action preventing young people from committing crime. My view is that the powers are not strong enough currently to prevent young people from committing crimes or getting drawn into extremist violence. That is exactly why we need to introduce the youth diversion order—a stronger power for the police to take action in these extremely serious cases.

Mike Tapp (Dover and Deal) (Lab): It is important to note that this attacker is a terrorist. He has been charged under the Terrorism Act 2000 and the Biological Weapons Act 1974. The man is a terrorist. The attack itself has not been labelled terrorism because of the lack of a clear ideological motive—that is a decision for the police and the CPS. Will the Home Office look into how our legal frameworks might be updated to recognise the full horror of acts intended to terrorise?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right. We need the legal framework to be up to date to ensure sufficient scope, powers and sentencing are in place to deal with acts that are intended to terrorise, even where there is no ideology. He is also right to say that this man has been charged under the Terrorism Act and has pleaded guilty to a terrorist offence, and I can confirm that he will be treated as a terrorist offender in prison.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): If the authorities remain silent, bad people write the script. On 16 October 2021, those authorities, and then their political masters, were frank about what had happened the previous day in Southend, and there were no riots. Why is that different from this?

Yvette Cooper: The right hon. Member refers to the attack on Sir David Amess, who I regard as a friend, as I know he does—Sir David was a great loss to this House. The Government did not publish crucial information about, for example, the Prevent referral that had taken place. A lot of information was not provided until the trial. In fact, this Government are going further in providing information after the trial than was provided in that case. I do not think that anyone should attempt to excuse people who threw bricks and rocks at police

[Yvette Cooper]

officers by saying that it was something to do with the information they were provided with and when. They committed crimes; they need to take responsibility for those crimes.

Gregor Poynton (Livingston) (Lab): We have heard from Merseyside police, the CPS and counter-terrorism police about the wide range of violent content that the accused was accessing, including on genocide, and about his social media searches for violent and fatal stabbings. I know that the Home Secretary covered some of this in her statement and in response to previous questions, but what more should the social media and search engine giants be doing, first, to prevent our young people from accessing such content in the first place and, secondly, to take it down quickly from their sites once they are aware of it?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. The thing about the social media companies is that they have incredibly sophisticated technology and resources. They know exactly how to target every single one of us online with things in which we might be interested, and they use their algorithms in all kinds of sophisticated ways. They have the capability to do far more to identify this dangerous content and take action on it. I believe that they should use those capabilities, rather than rowing back from content moderation and reducing the responsible action that they take.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Constituents across Lagan Valley send their thoughts and prayers not just to the families of Elsie, Alice and Bebe, but to the community of Southport. Something that has deeply concerned me for a long time is the radicalisation of young people in particular. As the Home Secretary explicitly stated, there is an online surge of young people becoming radicalised, including those who are interested in and look at content on violence against women and terror-linked activity. How will a lack of ideology be captured so that we can identify potential perpetrators? What laws can we pass in this House not only to stop social media companies profiting, but to ensure that they are aware of such violent and terrorist content on their platforms?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to raise that issue. The director of MI5 has talked about how the security services are seeing far too many cases of very young people being drawn into poisonous online extremism, and 13% of all those investigated for involvement in UK terrorism are now under 18. That is a disturbing fact for us all. The hon. Member is also right to say that we need to consider the complexity. Some young people become radicalised around an ideology early on. Others become obsessed with violence, and still others may switch between different extreme ideas and perspectives, but all of them are at risk of becoming dangerous to communities if they get drawn down that extremist track, and if their ideas get poisoned by things that they see online. That is why the issue is so important, and is a central part of the inquiry.

Josh Simons (Makerfield) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for updating the House, and welcome the uncompromising inquiry that she and the Prime Minister have announced. I would like to ask about social media and the digital information environment. I worked in a technology company for a long time, and I concur with the Home Secretary's comments: the companies that we are talking about know what is circulating online and what is getting virality. After last summer, does she feel that she and the Prime Minister have the information that they need to make decisions in real time in order to secure our online information environment?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend makes an important point. I do not think anyone would suggest that Ministers are in a position to make decisions on individual cases, but what we need is the right kind of framework. Clearly, the Online Safety Act will put new structures and systems in place. The Prime Minister made it clear this morning that we should not shy away from taking any further action needed to address this issue, because fundamentally, if it is impacting the safety of our children, we need to act.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): The Prime Minister's denial in August that Rudakubana was being investigated for offences under the Terrorism Act 2006 did not protect the trial, because we found out the facts anyway when Rudakubana was charged in October. The same disclosure did not cause other trials, such as that of the Parsons Green tube bomber, to fail. I am not talking about the detail of Prevent referrals, which the Home Secretary has mentioned in answers to similar questions, but about the information that was disclosed in October. If a jury knew that before the trial, why could the Prime Minister not have told the country the truth in August?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member will know that investigation is carried out by the police. The Crown Prosecution Service decides what charges to bring, and how and when to bring them, based on the evidence it has gathered. That is the British justice system. Decisions are made by the police and prosecutors, who are rightly independent of Ministers. I strongly believe that this independence, which is part of our British judicial tradition, must continue.

Connor Naismith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): We have heard that the murderer in Southport had a history of violence and a fascination with it, and was just 17 years old at the time of this horrific attack. There are no circumstances in which he should have been able to buy a knife. Does the Home Secretary agree that we have to get to the bottom of how that deadly weapon ended up in his hands, and ensure that teenagers are unable to buy these weapons in the future?

Yvette Cooper: My hon. Friend is right: the perpetrator should never have been able to buy a knife online. It is really disturbing that despite all the cases we have seen in the past, it is still far too easy for young people to get access to knives online. That is why, through the policing and crime Bill, we will take action, including by ensuring that executives of online companies take responsibility for the checks that need to take place.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. Despite the attacker's three referrals to Prevent, five referrals to the local police force and multiple referrals to multiple hubs, we still did not protect Elsie, Alice and Bebe. We have failed them. We must ensure that this never happens again. Does the Home Secretary agree that whoever the perpetrator is, the victims are always terrorised, and that an obsession with ideology may have been an underlying factor in why we missed this perpetrator? Should we not look again at the Shawcross recommendations on ideology obsession?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right that the Prevent learning review identified that in this case, the focus on ideology may have meant that some of the vulnerabilities to radicalisation were missed. We also have to recognise that cases in which there is ideology are different from cases in which there is not, and may require a different kind of response. The assessment of risk, and of the danger that a young person poses, may be the same, but the action that the state takes may need to change, depending on what is driving that danger and risk. For too long, though, some of those mixed-ideology cases—those unclear cases—may have been missed because we have not had sufficient focus on them. That focus is what the inquiry needs.

Dr Ben Spencer (Runnymede and Weybridge) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement, and of course, the victims and all those affected are very much in our thoughts and prayers. Nothing we say should detract from the fact that the perpetrator has sole responsibility for these awful crimes, but it is right to look at what happened beforehand. The Home Secretary has mentioned a few times the involvement of multiple agencies and their warnings. For me, that is one of the most concerning and shocking things. How come so many agencies were aware of the issue and raised concerns? This was not a lone wolf who popped out of nowhere. Who does the Home Secretary think ultimately bears responsibility for managing this perpetrator's risk?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member's question gets to the heart of the problem. He is right that the responsibility for this appalling and barbaric attack lies with the attacker, and he needs to face the consequences. He has committed the most heinous crime. However, we have to ask questions on behalf of the families. There should have been a network of responsible agencies, and the inquiry needs to look at why, ultimately, so many agencies together failed to identify the scale of risk, and to take the action that was needed. Part of the challenge is that it can be too easy for each agency to think that somebody else is addressing a particular bit of the problem. There needs to be a much stronger approach to what happens between agencies. That is what the inquiry must look at.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I think the vast majority of the British people agree with the Government's independent reviewer of terrorism legislation, who has said repeatedly that when these horrific crimes take place, more information needs to be put out sooner to avoid an information vacuum. However, that is in conflict with the need to avoid prejudicing a fair trial. Does the Home Secretary agree that it is incumbent on this House to find a way to overcome or reduce that conflict, so that we get more information sooner?

Yvette Cooper: In the world of social media, there can be all sorts of information online, but as the hon. Member rightly says, we have to make sure that justice is done. We have to make sure that a jury is not prejudiced by information in such a way that a killer can walk free, but also that people can get answers and the crucial information that they need. The Law Commission is reviewing the Contempt of Court Act, which dates back to 1981, but I know the hon. Member recognises the importance of us following the law in the meantime. We need to make sure that justice is done and, now that we have a verdict, that the families can find out what went wrong in this case and get the answers that they so badly need and deserve.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): I congratulate the Home Secretary on her proposals; she has my full support in turning over every stone in looking into this case, and I wholeheartedly agree with all the powers she is bringing forward. However, that is half of the story. She rightly talks about balancing the risk of a criminal walking free, but we have to bear in mind the riots that happened across this country. Will she consider conducting a review that looks into the creation of a framework for how Government talk about these issues in the media, so that the approach is standardised and there is no political point-scoring across this Chamber? At the heart of this issue is the public perception that information was withheld from them. We could then hold a review on the rioting, to make sure that there are no further riots, because there were no riots in October, when this information came out. There is a discrepancy there that needs looking at, and I would be grateful if the Home Secretary took up this matter.

Yvette Cooper: I point out that the violent disorder stopped when people realised that they would face consequences for it, and when there was a clear police and criminal justice system response. There is no excuse for throwing rocks and bricks at the police—the same police officers who had to deal with the most horrendous attack on those little children in Southport. It is really important that the inquiry's focus is on getting the families of those children the answers that they need about what went wrong in this terrible case, not on trying to excuse a bunch of thugs who were throwing rocks and bricks at the police—something for which there is no excuse at all.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): As we reflect on the horror of the murder of these three young girls, we all have many questions, as do the public. Will the inquiry's terms of reference permit an answer to this question: how far was the inaction by the various agencies influenced by fear of disturbing race or community relations? Was that a factor in the inaction? We have heard that there were three ineffective referrals to Prevent, and have heard of 162 other referrals to Prevent. Has the adequacy of the response to those referrals been reviewed?

Yvette Cooper: I have introduced a new Prevent commissioner—Lord David Anderson is beginning work as the interim commissioner right now—because there is no independent review of Prevent decisions or processes. That is a problem, because the decisions that Prevent takes are incredibly important. They need to be effective,

[Yvette Cooper]

and we need to make sure that standards are maintained. That is why we need an independent review. We have independent inspectors of aspects of the work of other public services, such as policing. We need an independent commissioner brought in to review not just this case, but similar cases. On the scope of the inquiry, the Prime Minister made it clear this morning that this inquiry will follow the evidence wherever it takes the inquiry, and no stone can go unturned.

Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con): On what dates were the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary made aware that Axel Rudakubana was in possession of ricin and an al-Qaeda training manual, and will the inquiry cover public communications after the murders?

Yvette Cooper: Ministers were of course updated throughout. The Home Office was advised about ricin in August, and we were advised about the document much later on in October. We made sure that the official Opposition were also briefed. In the end, those decisions and investigations are matters for the police on an operational basis. The tradition in this country is that we have operational independence for policing, and operationally independent decisions made by the CPS.

It is really sad that so many Opposition Members have chosen to ask questions about the timing of the release of information—they know that such issues are governed by the Contempt of Court Act, and that this is about providing justice for the families who lost their loved ones—rather than asking the serious questions about why that terrible, horrific and barbaric act took place. I would just ask the hon. Member, and others deciding what issues they want to focus on, to think very seriously about what the most important issue is here, when so many lives were lost.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): In her statement, the Home Secretary said, “Let there be no doubt: responsibility for this outrage lies squarely with the perpetrator.” That is indubitably true, but I would argue that there is blood on the hands of the myriad very difficult to understand Government agencies and quangos that charge around in ever decreasing circles, blaming everybody else when something goes wrong. Will she commit to reviewing every single dropped or downgraded case on which Prevent failed to act appropriately, to avoid another heartbreaking catastrophe like this one?

Yvette Cooper: We have announced two important things today. The first is the inquiry, which needs to go to the heart of what went wrong in this case—why so many agencies knew about this incredibly dangerous perpetrator who committed this barbaric act. The second

is establishing the new Prevent independent commissioner, who can review different cases and ensure that the right approach has been taken, that risks are being identified and, frankly, that action is being taken. What disturbs me about some of the information—particularly the knife crime issues identified in this case—is that strong enough action was not taken. To keep people safe, we need to ensure that such action is taken.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Home Secretary very much for her statement, her tone and her well-chosen words. I think every one of us in the Chamber is heartbroken for the families and their loss. The trust of local communities was damaged by the information that was released, and I believe a lesson about transparency must be learned. Can the Home Secretary outline how the Government will ensure that trust is rebuilt in the system, that misinformation can be corrected and that such corrections are trusted in the future?

Yvette Cooper: The hon. Member is right to raise the important issue of trust. The police and criminal justice system are rightly independent of Government and of politics, but there needs to be trust in the work they do. This Government have made it part of our mission to restore confidence in policing, which I think has been undermined for far too long, and to stand up for the rule of law. We must defend the different parts of the justice system, which rightly play different roles, otherwise they will not provide justice for people in the future.

Crucially, to ensure that there is trust, we need to get to the truth about what happened in this shocking, terrible case: what went wrong and why a dangerous man was able to commit this terrible crime. Above all, all of us should keep in our minds and in our hearts the three little children, their families and all those who have been affected by this truly appalling attack. We must ensure that we get them the truth and answers, and do everything that we can to prevent such terrible crimes.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement.

BILL PRESENTED

ARMS TRADE (INQUIRY AND SUSPENSION) BILL

Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)

Zarah Sultana presented a Bill to make provision for an inquiry into the end use of arms sold to foreign states to determine whether they have been used in violation of international law; to immediately suspend the sale of arms to foreign states where it cannot be demonstrated that arms sold will not be used in violation of international law; and for connected purposes.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 14 March, and to be printed (Bill 164).

Marine Protected Areas (Bottom Trawling) (England)

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

2.18 pm

Katie White (Leeds North West) (Lab): I beg to move,

That leave be given to bring in a Bill to prohibit the practice of bottom trawling in Marine Protected Areas in England, and for connected purposes.

It is a privilege to speak on a topic that has cross-party support and builds on the excellent work led by my right hon. and hon. Friends the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Ministers to put nature on the road to recovery and address the climate crisis. This Government and this Parliament are the greenest of my lifetime, and I am proud to be a Member for a party with such a distinguished history of leading on environmental protection. This Bill offers an opportunity for a fairer, greener future, and I am grateful for support for the Bill from colleagues across the House.

It is important to remember that protecting our oceans and marine protected areas is not only a Labour legacy, but a Yorkshire one. In 2009, my right hon. Friend the Member for Leeds South (Hilary Benn), the then Environment Secretary, spearheaded the passage of the Marine and Coastal Access Act, a landmark Act that established a network of marine protected areas to safeguard vital marine habitats, species and ecosystems. Fifteen years later, with a new Labour Government in place, we have the opportunity to strengthen protections for these areas even further.

Before I lay out my case to the House, I must address the obvious question: why is the MP for Leeds North West, a landlocked constituency in the heart of west Yorkshire, bringing forward a ten-minute rule Bill to ban bottom trawling in our marine protected areas? It is a fair question; after all, up in Leeds our closest encounters with marine life might be spotting a trout in the River Wharfe or enjoying fish and chips on the drive back from Whitby. Yet the health of our seas is not just an issue for coastal constituencies; it is a national responsibility.

The ecosystems in our waters play a crucial role in regulating the planet's climate, absorbing carbon dioxide, and supporting biodiversity that impacts life far beyond our shores. From sheltered sea lochs to wild open waters, from seaweed beds to deepwater coral, the UK's coasts and seas are extraordinary. They are home to an astonishing variety of wildlife, including dolphins, whales, sharks, seals, puffins and deep-sea coral reefs. They are also vital to our economy and communities, particularly our essential fishing industry, as well as our tourism, shipping and the growing renewable energy sectors.

We are an island nation and we are never more than 70 miles from the sea here in the UK. Whether it is pollution, habitat destruction or the impact of climate change, we Brits are deeply connected to our coastal heritage. But while our seas work hard for us, they face growing pressures, and bottom trawling is one of the most destructive practices of all.

For Members unfamiliar with destructive bottom trawling, it involves dragging heavy nets and metalwork across our seabed, destroying fragile ecosystems and habitats that take decades or even centuries to recover. As a fellow Member so aptly put it to me, it is like

ripping up an orchard to pick an apple. Just one or two trawls over an area can decimate the seabed for up to five years. Alarmingly, this is happening right now across our marine protected areas—zones specifically designated to safeguard and recover biodiversity.

My Bill builds on previous work to ban this destructive practice. Currently, only 5% of the UK's marine protected areas have a ban on it. My argument in support of the Bill is threefold: first, the British public overwhelmingly expects a ban; secondly, our small fishing businesses are suffering without a ban; and thirdly, it is crucial for the ongoing health of ecosystems in marine protected areas and the broader protection of the environment, and the natural world in which we, in Britain, take great pride.

On public support, research from Oceana shows that the measure has significant backing, with eight in 10 UK adults in favour of banning destructive bottom trawling in marine protected areas. What is particularly striking is the level of misunderstanding around the issue. When surveyed, the vast majority of people—around 64%—mistakenly believe such a ban is already in place. Many of the individuals I have spoken to in recent weeks share this misconception and, frankly, it is no surprise: the term “protected” in marine protected areas naturally leads people to assume that harmful activities such as destructive bottom trawling are prohibited. The reality, however, is quite the opposite: these fragile ecosystems remain exposed to one of the most destructive forms of industrial fishing, which devastates habitats and wildlife.

Secondly, on our hard-working British fishermen and women, especially the small-scale fisheries that have been at the heart of our coastal communities for generations, let us be clear: they are not the ones dragging heavy nets across the seabed, destroying delicate ecosystems. The culprits are industrial-scale operations and supertrawlers that prioritise profit over sustainability, leaving our own small-scale fishers to bear the brunt of their actions. This is David versus Goliath—a fight to protect the lifeblood of our coastal communities from the destructive might of industrial fishing giants.

In 2023 just 10 fishing vessels over 20 metres in length were responsible for more than a quarter of the destructive bottom trawling. None of the 10 vessels were from the UK. I will not pretend to be an expert on the fishing industry, but Bally Philp, a fisherman with decades of experience, puts it best: he describes how

“small-scale fishers are under a lot of pressure everywhere, mostly from industrial fisheries”.

He says that one of the things that impacts quite heavily on small-scale fishers is a highly degraded ecosystem, because many small fishers are only viable in a healthy, productive ecosystem. Bally Philp speaks for many in our fisheries who want stronger protections that ensure their livelihoods are not sacrificed for the short-term gains of large industrial operators. Protecting our 178 English marine protected areas from destructive bottom trawling is not only about safeguarding marine life; it is about securing a sustainable future for the communities who depend on our seas for their way of life.

Lastly, and most importantly, we need to protect and restore our marine protected areas for both climate and nature. Bottom trawling is not just destructive and emissions-heavy; it reduces carbon sequestration. Our oceans are unsung climate heroes. A series of recent

[Katie White]

reports from the World Wide Fund for Nature, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds, and Wildlife Trusts has found that the UK's seabeds play a quiet yet crucial role in carbon sequestration, storing up to 13 million tonnes, nearly three times the amount captured by UK forests.

This is not inevitable in England, and we do not need to imagine the positive impact of the Bill. We have already seen the benefits of banning bottom trawling in some of our marine protected areas, such as Lyme bay on England's south coast. In 2008, a partial ban on destructive fishing practices was introduced. This was later expanded to 312 sq km—about 120 square miles—through overlapping conservation efforts. The results have been extraordinary. The seabed has begun to recover, with coral reefs like pink sea fans regrowing, scallop numbers increasing, and species such as black bream returning to the area. Within just a decade, the number of species in the protected zone increased by almost 40%, compared with a 5% decline outside it. Local fishermen, such as Matt Toms, have witnessed these changes at first hand. Since destructive bottom trawling was banned, he has observed a lot more fish in the area, including black bream breeding in the bay once again. This is proof that protecting our marine ecosystems benefits not only the environment but also the communities who rely on it. Lyme bay is living evidence that with the right action, recovery is possible, and this and every other measure should be guided by the science.

Sometimes people fail to act because they cannot see what is going on beneath the ocean. That cannot be said of our national hero Sir David Attenborough and I thank him for his years of service documenting our planet. I am excited to hear that he is premiering a new film that draws attention to the damage we have caused and the opportunities to humanity, in particular fishing

communities, of well managed and protected oceans. I also thank the Blue Marine Foundation, Oceana, WWF and many other activists across the country for their work.

To close, as I have said previously, I came into politics from a background in climate and nature. I proudly campaigned for the Climate Change Act in 2008, a landmark Act brought in by the last Labour Government. It taught me from the outset of my career what could be achieved through a sustained, steadfast commitment to a cause. That Act has succeeded because of its pragmatism and cross-party consensus. For that reason, I am proud of the cross-party nature of this Bill and its co-signatories.

The implementation of this Bill is a matter of common sense: for the small fisheries of this country; for the wildlife in our marine protected areas; and for all of us who depend on a healthy planet. This Bill is about real action on climate and nature, and I hope colleagues will join me in seizing this opportunity.

Question put and agreed to.

Ordered,

That Katie White, Anna Gelderd, Mr Toby Perkins, Ms Polly Billington, Alistair Strathern, Luke Murphy, Sarah Champion, Aphra Brandreth, Mr Andrew Mitchell, Wera Hobhouse and Carla Denyer present the Bill.

Katie White accordingly presented the Bill.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time on Friday 20 June, and to be printed (Bill 165).

ARBITRATION BILL [LORDS]

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 59(2)).

That the Arbitration Bill [Lords] shall no longer stand referred to a Second Reading Committee.—(Martin McCluskey.)

Question agreed to.

Armed Forces Commissioner Bill

Consideration of Bill, not amended in the Public Bill Committee

[Relevant documents: Oral evidence taken before the Defence Committee on 14 January 2025, on the Work of the Service Complaints Ombudsman, HC 626, and correspondence between the Defence Committee and the Secretary of State for Defence, on the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill, reported to the House on 14 November 2024 and 14 January 2025.]

New Clause 1

APPLICABILITY TO PROSPECTIVE RECRUITS

“In this Act, any reference to ‘service personnel’ or ‘persons subject to service law’ includes people going through the recruitment process to join any branch of the armed forces.”—
(Helen Maguire.)

This new clause would allow those currently going through the recruitment process to join the armed forces to use the Armed Forces Commissioner for its intended purposes.

Brought up, and read the First time.

2.30 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): I beg to move, That the clause be read a Second time.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): With this it will be convenient to discuss the following:

New clause 2—*Commissioner’s interaction with Veterans Commissioners*—

“Within one year of the passing of this Act, the Secretary of State must publish details of—

- (a) whether or how the Commissioner will work with the National Veterans Commissioner, the Scottish Veterans Commissioner, the Veterans Commissioner for Wales, the Northern Ireland Veterans Commissioner and the Chairman of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation & Information Recovery;
- (b) whether or how the Commissioner and Secretary of State will ensure that veterans receive appropriate and necessary support.”

This new clause would require the Secretary of State to make clear how the Commissioner will work with the Veterans Commissioners and related bodies.

Amendment 7, in clause 1, page 2, line 2, at end insert—

“(5A) The Commissioner must—

- (a) uphold and give due regard to the principles and commitments of the Armed Forces Covenant when carrying out its functions;
- (b) monitor and report on compliance with the principles and commitments of the Armed Forces Covenant in all areas of its responsibility.”

This amendment would require the Commissioner to uphold and abide by the principles of the Armed Forces Covenant when carrying out its functions.

Amendment 8, page 2, line 2, at end insert—

“(5A) The Commissioner shall operate independently from—

- (a) the Ministry of Defence;
- (b) the Armed Forces, including the chain of command; and

(c) any other government bodies;

and shall be free from any influence of interference in the exercise of the Commissioner’s functions.”

This amendment would require the Commissioner to be independent from the Government, the Armed Forces and any interference in the carrying out of their duties.

Amendment 6, page 2, line 10, at end insert—

“(5) The Secretary of State will, within 6 months of the passing of this Act, publish an intended time frame for—

- (a) the appointment of the Commissioner;
- (b) the abolishing of the office of the Service Complaints Ombudsman;
- (c) the commencement of operations of the office of the Commissioner.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to state when they intend to appoint a Commissioner and get the office of the Commissioner operational.

Amendment 9, in clause 4, page 2, line 35, at end insert—

“(2A) A ‘general service welfare matter’ may include issues relating to the provision of pensions and death in service benefits to serving and former members of the armed forces and their dependants.”

The amendment would enable the Commissioner to include matters relating to pensions and other such benefits, including death in service benefits, in their investigation of service welfare matters.

Amendment 10, page 2, line 35, at end insert—

“(2A) A ‘general service welfare matter’ may include issues relating to the wellbeing of, and provision of support to, the children, families and other dependants of serving and former members of the armed forces, including but not limited to—

- (a) the provision and operation of the Continuity of Education Allowance;
- (b) the provision of Special Educational Needs tuition; and
- (c) the maintenance of service families’ accommodation.”

This amendment would enable the Commissioner to include matters relating to the wellbeing of, and provision of support to, the children, families and other dependants of serving and former members of the armed forces in the Commissioner’s investigation of service welfare matters.

Amendment 1, page 3, line 31, after “means” insert

“kinship carers and the family members of deceased service personnel as well as other”.

This amendment would include kinship carers and the family members of deceased service personnel in the definition of “relevant family members”.

Amendment 2, page 3, line 35, at end insert—

“340IAA Commissioner support for minority groups within service personnel

(1) When investigating general service welfare matters under section 340IA, the Commissioner must consider the specific experiences of minority groups within service personnel, including but not limited to—

- (a) female;
- (b) BAME
- (c) non-UK; and
- (d) LGBT+

service personnel.

(2) The Commissioner may investigate service welfare matters unique to one or more of these groups of service personnel.

(3) The Commissioner must maintain up-to-date evidence on the experiences of these groups of service personnel and develop robust community engagement mechanisms to identify and address issues specific to these groups.

(4) The Commissioner must establish a formal network of representation to enable the views and concerns of these groups of service personnel to be communicated to the Commissioner.

(5) The Commissioner must publish an annual report outlining—

- (a) the issues facing and concerns raised by these groups of service personnel;
- (b) the actions taken by the Commissioner to address identified issues;
- (c) the progress made in improving conditions for these groups of service personnel.”

This amendment would require the Commissioner to take specific action to consider and address welfare issues facing service personnel from minority groups.

Amendment 11, page 5, line 22, at end insert—

- “(aa) the report must include the Commissioner’s view on whether the relevant general service welfare issue has had, or may have, an effect on the retention of armed forces personnel; and”.

This amendment would require a report by the Commissioner on a general service welfare matter to include the Commissioner’s view on whether the issue affects the retention of armed forces personnel.

Amendment 4, page 6, line 2, at end insert—

- “(4A) After section 340O (annual report on system for dealing with service complaints) insert—

‘340OA Annual report on the work of the Commissioner

- (1) The Commissioner must, for each calendar year, prepare a report covering—
 - (a) the actions taken by the Commissioner to promote and improve the welfare of persons subject to service law and relevant family members;
 - (b) the initiatives undertaken by the Commissioner to enhance public awareness of welfare issues faced by persons subject to service law and relevant family members;
 - (c) the resources used by the Commissioner in fulfilling its functions, and any further resources required.
- (2) On receiving a report under this section, the Secretary of State must lay it before Parliament promptly and, in any event, before the end of 30 sitting days beginning with the day on which the report is received.

“Sitting day” means a day on which both Houses of Parliament sit.
- (3) The Secretary of State may exclude from any report laid under this section any material the publication of which the Secretary of State considers—
 - (a) would be against the interests of national security;
 - (b) might jeopardise the safety of any person.
- (4) With three months of the receipt of any report prepared by the Commissioner under this section, the Secretary of State must publish a response to the report which includes an overview of any measures taken or planned to be taken to address any resource issues identified by the Commissioner.”

This amendment would require the Commissioner to publish an annual report on the work it had done to improve the welfare of service personnel and public awareness of welfare issues faced by service personnel and their families.

Amendment 5, in schedule 1, page 8, leave out lines 15 and 16 and insert—

“3 A relevant Parliamentary select committee will hold a pre-appointment hearing with the Secretary of State’s preferred candidate for Commissioner.

3A The select committee may hold a confirmatory vote on the Secretary of State’s preferred candidate for Commissioner.

3B Where a select committee has expressed a negative opinion on the appointment of the Secretary of State’s preferred candidate for Commissioner, the Secretary of State may not proceed with the appointment of that candidate without appearing before the select committee to address the concerns raised by the committee.

3C If the select committee maintains its negative opinion following the further appearance of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of State may not proceed with the appointment of that candidate.

3D Where a select committee has expressed a positive opinion on the appointment of the Secretary of State’s preferred candidate for Commissioner, including after a further appearance before the committee of the Secretary of State, the Secretary of State may recommend the appointment of the candidate to His Majesty.

3E The Commissioner is to be appointed by His Majesty on the recommendation of the Secretary of State.”

This amendment would mean that the Commissioner can only be appointed after appearing before a relevant select committee and obtaining its approval.

Amendment 3, page 10, line 39, at end insert—

- “(3) The Secretary of State must ensure that the financial and practical assistance provided to the Commissioner is appropriate and sufficient to allow the Commissioner to carry out its functions.”

This amendment would require the Secretary of State to provide adequate financial and practical assistance to the Commissioner to enable it to carry out its functions.

Helen Maguire: This is an important Bill, and one that I and my Liberal Democrat colleagues broadly welcome. However, we believe that it must go further. Before turning to the detail of our proposed changes, I want to acknowledge the significance of this legislation and the opportunity it presents to deliver meaningful change for the armed forces community. I thank the Minister and his team for all the hard work they have put into bringing the Bill to the House.

The Armed Forces Commissioner as proposed in the Bill will serve as an independent and vital advocate for service personnel and their families, reporting directly to Parliament. The role is long overdue. For too long, service personnel and their families have felt neglected, overlooked and unsupported. The commissioner’s remit will include addressing a wide range of issues from unacceptable behaviours and substandard housing to equipment concerns. The power to visit defence sites unannounced and commission reports is particularly welcome, as is the consolidation of the Service Complaints Ombudsman’s responsibilities into this more robust role.

The Liberal Democrats welcome those provisions as steps in the right direction, but steps alone are not enough. Delivering a fair deal for the armed forces community is not just morally right; it is a strategic imperative. Recruitment and retention challenges directly impact on national security. We cannot allow systemic neglect to erode the morale, trust and effectiveness of those who defend our nation.

Time and again, reports from reviews such as the Haythornthwaite and Atherton reviews have highlighted the failures of previous Governments, which include failures to provide decent housing and support service families adequately or to tackle issues such as discrimination and sexual harassment. Those are not new revelations; they are systemic problems that require a new approach.

The former Conservative Government failed to deliver for our armed forces. The Liberal Democrats will continue to call for a fair deal including strengthening the armed

forces covenant, ensuring that service accommodation is fit for purpose and delivering for those who put their lives on the line for our country. The Bill is an opportunity to begin addressing those issues comprehensively, and I am proud to propose amendments that would have it deliver for all members of the armed forces community.

New clause 1 seeks to extend the commissioner's remit to include individuals going through the recruitment process. At present, the Bill excludes those individuals, but recruits can face challenges during that initial formative stage. Recruits can be asked to stay on bases overnight, and we cannot ignore that they may encounter issues during such trips. It is essential to understand those issues to retain recruits, as many currently drop out, which we assume is due to the long waits that they are currently experiencing but may stem from issues that we are unaware of. The new clause would ensure that support was available from the very start of their journey into the armed forces, not just after they sign on the dotted line.

Amendment 1 would address another critical omission. The Bill currently leaves the definition of "relevant family members" to the Government, which creates ambiguity and risks exclusion. The amendment would ensure that kinship carers and the family members of deceased service personnel were explicitly included. Those groups face unique challenges, and it is vital that they are not left behind.

The creation of the Armed Forces Commissioner is a positive development, but we need to ensure that the role is truly independent, adequately resourced and held to account for its actions. Several key issues must be addressed to guarantee the commissioner's effectiveness. For the commissioner to function properly, they must have adequate financial and practical support. Without sufficient resources, they will struggle to fulfil their vital responsibilities. Amendment 3 would place a direct duty on the Secretary of State to ensure that the commissioner's office is properly resourced—both financially and practically—to carry out its work effectively. That would ensure that the role would not be hampered by a lack of support.

Additionally, transparency and accountability are essential. If the commissioner is to be a meaningful advocate for service personnel and their families, their work must be open to scrutiny. Amendment 4 would require the commissioner to publish annual reports to Parliament, ensuring that their efforts are transparent and that they can be held accountable for their actions. Such reports would allow Parliament, the public and service personnel to understand the welfare issues faced by service personnel and their families.

To safeguard the commissioner's independence and credibility further, amendment 5 would have their appointment subject to pre-appointment scrutiny by a parliamentary Select Committee. That process would allow Members of Parliament to ensure that the best person for the job is appointed. This person needs to be independent of Government influence and focused on the needs of the armed forces community. Such additional scrutiny would help safeguard the integrity of the role and ensure that it remains focused on the needs of the armed forces community.

Further, the armed forces covenant should be central to the commissioner's work. The covenant is a fundamental framework that guides how we treat our service personnel

and their families, ensuring fairness and respect in all aspects of their lives. Amendment 7 would enshrine the covenant's principles in the commissioner's remit, ensuring that those values remain at the heart of their mission. Given that the covenant is at the heart of how we support our armed forces, it should be explicitly included in the Bill.

It is essential that we do not delay putting the Bill into action. That is why amendment 6 would require the Secretary of State to publish a timeframe for the appointment of the commissioner within six months of the passing of the Act. Our armed forces and their families need this service urgently and cannot wait around for years for action to be taken.

Following the damning findings of the Atherton and Etherton reports, it is clear that minority groups including women, ethnic minorities, LGBT+ personnel and non-UK nationals face systemic challenges within the armed forces. The Atherton report, published in 2021, focused on the experience of women in the armed forces. Four thousand female service personnel and veterans completed a survey to inform the inquiry, and shockingly 62% of respondents had been victims of bullying, discrimination, harassment or sexual assault during their service, sometimes at the hands of senior officers. It is unacceptable that women who serve in the armed forces too often face sexual harassment or misogyny.

That issue has not been adequately addressed, reflecting a lack of moral courage within parts of the armed forces, despite good intentions across the services. Amendment 2 would require the commissioner to take specific action to consider and address issues facing service personnel from minority groups: not only female service personnel but black, Asian and minority ethnic personnel, LGBT+ personnel and those not from the UK. That would be backed by annual reporting to ensure transparency and accountability. That is essential to ensure that all voices are heard and no one in the armed forces community is overlooked.

The Bill must be part of a wider effort to improve the quality of life of service personnel and their families. Housing, for instance, remains a persistent issue. Decent housing is not a privilege but a right, and service families deserve homes that are safe, comfortable and fit for purpose. Just last week in the House, my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton and Wellington (Gideon Amos) tabled an amendment to the Renters' Rights Bill that would have extended the decent homes standard to Ministry of Defence service family accommodation, ensuring that all members of the armed forces would have the living standards they deserve. I was beyond disappointment when the Government voted it down.

The Bill represents progress, but it is not the finished article. Although I do not wish to press new clause 1 to a vote, our proposed changes are about fairness, accountability and doing right by all those who serve and their families. Let us seize this moment to deliver real and lasting change for the armed forces community. They have given so much for us; it is time that we gave back to them.

Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi (Slough) (Lab): I rise primarily to address amendment 5, just referred to by the spokesperson for the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen

[*Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi*]

Maguire), which would directly impact the role of the Defence Committee, which I have the honour and privilege of chairing.

Amendment 5 would enshrine in law an enhanced version of Select Committee pre-appointment scrutiny. That is significant because, in most cases, such scrutiny is a matter of political agreement rather than legislation. The Government have committed to pre-appointment scrutiny by the Defence Committee for the preferred candidate for Armed Forces Commissioner. That mirrors the existing arrangement for the Service Complaints Ombudsman, which is the only defence-related post currently subject to that form of scrutiny. The Defence Committee last conducted such a hearing in December 2024 for the current ombudsman.

It is likely that our scrutiny of the Armed Forces Commissioner candidate will be both our first and final pre-appointment hearing in this Parliament. Let me clarify the purpose of pre-appointment scrutiny. It aims to examine the quality of ministerial decision making and appointments, assure the public that key public appointments are merit-based, demonstrate the candidate's independence of mind and bolster the appointee's legitimacy in their role. It is crucial to understand that this process does not replicate the recruitment process—we cannot assess the candidate pool or suggest alternatives. Our primary task is to evaluate how the preferred candidate performs under public scrutiny.

Mike Martin (Tunbridge Wells) (LD): Does the Chair of the Defence Committee agree that it is a question not merely of scrutiny but of approval? If the Committee, which he so ably chairs, decides that the persons brought before them are not fit for that role, is it not up to the Secretary of State to find somebody else who can obtain the approval of Committee?

Mr Dhesi: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind words. He has made a massive impact on the workings of the Defence Committee, of which he is a member. I will directly address the issue that he raises very shortly—patience is a virtue.

In the Public Bill Committee, the Minister for the Armed Forces stated that our scrutiny should be vigorous and thorough. I assure the House that, given appropriate time and opportunity, it will be exactly that. The Minister also expressed expectations in Committee for our scrutiny to go above and beyond the current process. I seek clarity on that point: how do the Government envisage the Defence Committee exceeding the current process without procedural changes? I would appreciate it if the Minister could elaborate on that. Do the Government have specific proposals to enable us to go above and beyond?

My second question for the Government is about implementation—the subject of amendment 6. Following a pre-appointment hearing, the Defence Committee will recommend either appointing or rejecting the preferred candidate. For this process to be meaningful, the implementation plan must account for the possibility, however remote, of the Secretary of State facing a negative Committee opinion, as the hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Mike Martin) has just alluded to. The Service Complaints Ombudsman has informed us that,

under current legislation, casework processing halts without an ombudsman in post. We must avoid a scenario where rejecting a candidate would so severely impact service personnel, the ombudsman team and the broader transition that approval would become the only viable option. I seek assurances that this consideration is already part of implementation planning, so I hope that the Minister will elaborate on that point.

The ombudsman also raised broader transition concerns in her evidence to the Defence Committee just last week. I trust that the Minister is aware of these issues and is addressing them seriously. Other amendments address the commissioner's independence, which the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell alluded to, minority group experiences in the armed forces and the commissioner's remit. These echo questions that our Committee has raised with the Secretary of State in our published correspondence. I hope that the Government will carefully consider these points, regardless of whether they accept the amendments.

I eagerly await the Minister's responses to my two questions: how does he expect the Defence Committee to go above and beyond the current pre-appointment scrutiny process, and will he assure the House that the implementation plan accommodates the possibility of needing to extend the recruitment process, and will not be put at risk if the Defence Committee recommends against appointing a candidate?

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I stand to speak to amendment 2 tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). As the Member of Parliament for Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe, I am proud to represent a constituency with a deep and enduring military history. It is home to Brecon barracks, the headquarters of the British Army in Wales, and 160th (Welsh) Brigade, alongside the Sennybridge training area, where thousands of British service members train in the Brecon Beacons.

2.45 pm

My constituency is also home to a vibrant Nepalese community made up of former Gurkha soldiers and their families—an integral part of our community's fabric. Gurkhas, renowned across the world for their bravery, professionalism and humility, have called the Brecon area home for over 50 years. They settled here during their distinguished service in the British Army and have since become an invaluable pillar of our local society. In fact, Brecon is now proudly twinned with Dhampus in Nepal, symbolising the bond between our two nations.

However, it is the past treatment of Gurkhas in the UK that compels me to support this amendment. Despite their service to the United Kingdom, the Gurkhas have faced significant discrimination for many decades. Many will remember the Gurkha justice campaign, which gained momentum thanks to the tireless efforts of Dame Joanna Lumley and the support of the Liberal Democrats under Nick Clegg. Through that campaign, a crucial parliamentary vote was won to grant all Gurkha veterans the right to reside in the UK, despite opposition from the Labour Government of the time.

However, it was not only residency rights on which the Gurkhas faced discrimination. They faced inadequate support after leaving active service, receiving less pay

than their British counterparts for the same jobs, and many were deprived of fair pensions. Even today, veterans who served before 1997 continue to struggle for equal recognition and treatment. It is my firm belief that amendment 2—especially the call for the Armed Forces Commissioner to produce annual reports on the challenges faced by specific groups and to establish mechanisms for community engagement—will help ensure that no group ever again has to suffer injustice like the Gurkhas did. I urge all Members to join me in supporting this vital amendment.

Luke Akehurst (North Durham) (Lab): I rise primarily to talk about amendment 2, tabled by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire). It was an honour to serve on the Bill Committee. I would have spoken to the amendment had it been tabled in Committee—I think a timetabling issue meant that it could not be.

There is already a public sector equality duty under the Equality Act 2010 that would apply to the commissioner. When the commissioner undertakes their reports, they will be bound by that duty to have due regard to the different minority groups that form the armed forces and their families. More specific thematic reports about issues faced by minorities in the armed forces ought to be a matter for the commissioner to decide.

As someone with a disability, I am perturbed by the absence of disabled people from the list of minorities that is cited. That is the problem when amendments are tabled with a prescriptive list of different minority groups: some can be missed out, and some can be made to feel that their concerns might be more valued than others. It is not completely incompatible with service in the armed forces to have a disability—clearly, some physical disabilities make service on the frontline difficult, but there are other roles that people legally defined or self-identifying as having a disability might be able to serve in. Indeed, the most famous admiral in the Royal Navy's history was Horatio Nelson, who had two disabilities: he had one arm and one eye. It is unfortunate to have gone for a prescriptive listing, and unnecessary, for the reasons that I set out at the start of my remarks.

I will not detain the House with my take on the other amendments, as I am sure other hon. Members will wish to come in on them. However, my general assessment would be that the amendments that have been tabled are well intentioned but unnecessary, because the Bill already deals with the concerns they raise.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): It is good to see the Armed Forces Commissioner put on a statutory basis, and to see the functions set out and see how the staff, though perhaps not directly recruited, can be provided for the commissioner. All that is good, but it causes me to ask why, if we are making that provision for the serving members of our armed forces, are we not making a parallel statutory provision for our veterans? Why is it right to have a statutory basis for the Armed Forces Commissioner, but not for the various veterans commissioners? Surely, if it is right for serving members, it must equally be right to have a statutory basis setting out the functions and ensuring staff provision for the veterans commissioners. I take the case of the part of the United Kingdom that I know best: in Northern Ireland, we have a part-time, term-appointed veterans commissioner for two days a week, effectively, with two staff seconded from the Northern Ireland Office, who is

charged with looking after all the interests of the very many thousands of veterans that we unsurprisingly have in Northern Ireland.

I ask again, if it is right to have a commissioner on a statutory basis for serving soldiers, why is that not the case for veterans? It would be not only a significant step forward in itself, but a significant nod to how we value our veterans community if we were to give them equality of treatment on this issue. I think that is very important. Without the role being on a statutory basis, a part-time, term-appointed veterans commissioner with seconded staff has his hands tied behind his back, frankly.

In Northern Ireland, because this Government are going to repeal the Northern Ireland Troubles (Legacy and Reconciliation) Act 2023, we are moving back into a phase where we may see many veterans from incidents 50 years ago dragged through our courts. We have a veterans commissioner with no standing to intervene in the multiple judicial reviews that take place on those issues and no standing to take any official line on any of that. If we were to put the veterans commissioner on a statutory basis, with the available funding, there would be a role to be performed—and not just on that specific issue, but perhaps if there was a challenging judicial that touched on veterans' issues. Why should the veterans commissioner not be a notified and intervening party in such proceedings? I think he should.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman share the concern that the staff of the Northern Ireland veterans commissioner are appointed by the Northern Ireland Office, as is the commissioner? Does he agree that the commissioner having the freedom, independence and ability to challenge the Government with force and vigour, and without having to continually look over their shoulder at what may be perceived as oversight from the NIO, would actually strengthen that role?

Jim Allister: I absolutely agree. It is one of the strengths of the Bill that it purports to give independence to the Armed Forces Commissioner, but that means there is all the more need for the veterans commissioner to have the same independence. All the veterans commissioner has is two staff, whom he does not choose—not that there is anything wrong with those staff; they are very good. However, they are not appointed by his office; they are hand-picked by the NIO and seconded to him. If all he has is two staff he has not chosen, it creates the wrong perception, and very often that is enough to do damage to an office.

I therefore take the opportunity of this debate to say that what we are doing for the Armed Forces Commissioner is good, but let us mirror it in what we do for our veterans.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): The relationship between the Armed Forces Commissioner and veterans cropped up several times in Committee, and I commend new clause 2, on this subject, to the hon. and learned Gentleman. He will know that the former Northern Ireland veterans commissioner recently resigned in part because he had concerns about the constraints on his independence to carry out his role, which concerns Members on the Conservative Benches. Does that concern the hon. and learned Gentleman as well?

Jim Allister: It does. When a former Member of this House with Army experience, Mr Danny Kinahan, was appointed veterans commissioner, great expectations were placed on his shoulders. Sadly, as the right hon. Gentleman says, among the reasons proffered for leaving his role, Mr Kinahan stated that he felt his freedom of action was impinged on by the Northern Ireland Office. Be that right or be that wrong, the perception that such an office holder would have those restraints placed on them does untold damage to that office.

As I have in the past, I pay tribute to Mr Kinahan for his service in that role. I also wish well his recently appointed successor, Mr David Johnstone, whom I had the privilege of meeting last week. I trust that as he takes forward the work of representing veterans, he will find himself unrestrained. However, this Government could put all that beyond doubt by putting the veterans commissioner on the same statutory footing as the Armed Forces Commissioner.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): I join the hon. and learned Gentleman in paying tribute to Danny Kinahan; as a Minister who had some dealings with him, I would certainly say he did a very good job indeed. I wish his successor all the very best. Will the hon. and learned Gentleman acknowledge that the previous Government actually went one step further by appointing a Minister for Veterans' Affairs of Cabinet rank—a very experienced individual—which this Government have failed to replicate?

Jim Allister: That is true. However, they failed to take the step I am now advocating of putting the veterans commissioner on a statutory footing. This Government can go one better and do the right thing for veterans, and I trust that they will. I do support new clause 2; I think it is a step in the right direction, but it is not enough. We need to offer our retired servicemen the facilities we are offering our serving servicemen.

Robin Swann: The Ulster Unionist party would support new clause 2. I, too, pay tribute to my predecessor as Ulster Unionist MP for South Antrim, Mr Kinahan, for the work that he did in this place and continued to do for veterans. I also wish David Johnstone well.

The right hon. Member for South West Wiltshire (Dr Murrison) made a point about the position of Veterans Minister. Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that there is an opportunity for the Veterans Minister to be responsible for appointing the veterans commissioner for Northern Ireland, rather than the NIO, and that there may be a segregation of perception with regard to some of the concerns that our veterans community would have?

Jim Allister: That is a fair point. In truth, our veterans community, as they see some of their brethren facing historic investigation, align the genesis and support for that investigation with the NIO. Therefore, it certainly would be better, both in presentation and in reality, if there was that distance between the veterans commissioner and the NIO.

3 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Does the hon. and learned Gentleman agree that it is to

the discredit of the Opposition that they do not even have a shadow Veterans Minister who could bring up the issues he is raising?

Jim Allister: If there is a failing on the Opposition Benches, then all the greater opportunity and need for the Government to make good on that. I trust that they will do that. I am not here to mediate between the two sides of this House!

Mr Francois: For the record, I am the shadow Veterans Minister. I am the shadow Armed Forces Minister and I do a bit of procurement on the side as well. We do take veterans very seriously on the Conservative Benches, but, as I will say later on, if I am lucky enough to catch your eye, Madam Deputy Speaker, I am not sure the Government do.

Jim Allister: I will leave the two sides of the House to sort out their differences. All I am interested in is that the veterans in my community have the best opportunity and the best service. With the best will in the world, yes, we have, and have had, good veterans commissioners, but they cannot do the job so long as their hands are tied behind their backs. Let us unleash them and see a basis on which they can properly perform their functions.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): I would like to put forward my strongest support for the Armed Forces Commissioner Bill. This legislation marks a significant step forward in ensuring that our armed forces personnel receive the care and support they deserve.

As the Member of Parliament for Stafford, I am acutely aware of the challenges faced by many of our service personnel and veterans. In my constituency, about 5.5% of residents are veterans, in addition to just under 1,000 serving personnel. For years, we have needed a national focus on the needs of serving personnel. By establishing an independent voice to investigate welfare matters, we can ensure that serving personnel have a dedicated champion who is able to bring their concerns to the forefront.

I am very pleased that the Bill will address long-standing issues in the current complaints process by transferring powers from the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces to the new commissioner. That will provide serving personnel and their families with a much-needed avenue to address their grievances. That will make a huge difference for some of my constituents. I know that the Government are laser-focused on supporting our serving personnel and their families, and that this is only one step in our plans to change the lives of those who serve and who have served, and of their families.

I want to speak briefly to amendment 2, to which my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) spoke earlier, which specifies that the commissioner must engage with certain groups. I would have thought that to be expected as part of the role, so specifying them, as he rightly pointed out, makes the mistake of sometimes missing groups. I suggest that there is no need to divide the House on this issue, as it would be expected of any commissioner.

The Bill is about much more than policies and procedures. It is about recognising the immense sacrifices made by our service personnel, and providing them with the support they deserve and a healthier culture in which to serve our country. I commend the Government for

taking that step for all regiments across the country—not just those based in Stafford. I urge all Members to support this vital legislation for our serving soldiers and serving personnel. It is only by supporting them that we can support the veterans of the future.

Pam Cox (Colchester) (Lab): It was a pleasure to serve on the Bill Committee and to have the opportunity to hear from representatives of military charities and armed forces families organisations, as well as from the current Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces. I have also had the chance to discuss the Bill and the proposed amendments with representatives of our armed forces community in my constituency of Colchester, which is home to 16 Air Assault Brigade Combat Team and many veterans' organisations. I also raised the Bill with the many people I met on fantastically insightful visits to Army facilities around the country as a member of the armed forces parliamentary scheme—I thoroughly recommend that scheme to other Members—and today, I had the pleasure of meeting e50K, a defence-led community interest company supporting armed forces families navigating the challenges of service and civilian life.

There is a significant opportunity for the Bill to create a positive step change in the relationship between the defence community and the organisations currently in place to support it. My conversations with the various groups suggest that the current situation is that for advocacy, policy and complaints, there are multiple restrictions on what issues can be raised and how they can be raised. There is a need to change the current mindset of concern within the defence community about raising an issue without experiencing repercussions in terms of career progression and the chain of command. Regardless of whether that is the reality, it is the perception of many service families.

The Armed Forces Commissioner will change that by creating a new chance for the defence community to advocate for real change to meet their needs. Crucially, it will do that by reducing barriers and fostering a culture of being listened to, rather than being done to. It can only do that, however, if it is an independent office. My concern about the amendments is that, although they were considered and tabled in good faith, they have the potential to undermine the independence of the commissioner. It is that independence which is so vital.

I am very proud to support the Bill, and of the impact it will have in my constituency of Colchester and across the country for the future of our armed forces community.

Lincoln Jopp (Spelthorne) (Con): I rise to speak primarily in support of amendment 8, but I will also give some broader reflections on the Bill.

We all need to be very clear that the welfare of service personnel is the responsibility of the military chain of command. No other supernumerary bureaucratic organisation can take that responsibility away from the chain of command. Personally, I am concerned that the Bill has the potential to undermine the authority of the chain of command, and I will expand on that theme. However, I also agree with the hon. and gallant Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) that we have seen too many examples of service personnel being poorly treated in their service. If it were not for the fact

that that was the case, arguably we would not have had a need for the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces and, now, for the Armed Forces Commissioner.

Having said that welfare is the responsibility of the chain of command, amendment 8 makes it very clear that ensuring a separation between the authority of that chain of command and the independence of the Armed Forces Commissioner will be critical. As I understand it, the provenance of the Bill was that the Government thought the remit of the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces was too narrow, so they have added in the responsibility for welfare.

Welfare is a very broad word. It means quite a lot to quite a lot of different people. For some people, it means housing. For others, it means education. It can mean myriad things. We know that, because General Rommel commented that the best form of welfare is better training, because better training makes for fewer widows. That is the way Rommel saw welfare. As I am mentioning Germany, the model for the commissioner is the German armed forces commissioner, which is there to ensure that the inalienable rights of the German armed forces are not impinged on by the giving of illegal orders. That is its sole remit, yet it has grown. In 40 years, it has never had a case where it has found that a member of the German armed forces has been given an illegal order, yet that organisation has grown to a staff of over 60, and its main areas of recommendation and concern are to do with equipment.

Jacob Collier (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): The German armed forces commissioner was the inspiration for the Bill, but the Government's proposed commissioner is quite different. The German commissioner sits effectively as a Member of Parliament, and has parliamentary staff. Does the hon. and gallant Gentleman not see the difference between the German legislation and this Bill?

Lincoln Jopp: I do acknowledge that important difference. I think that amendment 8 seeks to enhance and strengthen the independence of the Armed Forces Commissioner from the chain of command, and I commend it to the hon. Gentleman.

The German armed forces commissioner finds herself reporting and making recommendations on matters such as equipment and undermanning—matters that are well beyond the inalienable human rights of German service personnel not to be given an illegal order. My watchword is that, untrammelled, this proposal will grow arms and legs. Not only have we widened it to cover welfare, which, as I have argued, is very broadly interpretable, but we are giving the Armed Forces Commissioner an “access all areas” pass. We have enabled members of armed forces families—wider families—to be in touch with the commissioner, something that the German model does not follow. While I support amendment 8 and the chain of command, I am glad that I have had the opportunity to put my views on record.

Luke Akehurst: The tone of the hon. and gallant Gentleman's remarks suggests that he does not really support the thrust of the Bill, and is extremely sceptical about the potential areas of involvement of the Armed Forces Commissioner per se. Having heard what was said from the Opposition Front Bench in Committee,

[*Luke Akehurst*]

I was under the impression that there was consensus across the House in favour of the thrust of the Bill and that today we would be talking about nuance and detail, so I seek reassurance from the hon. and gallant Gentleman that he does in fact support the need for an Armed Forces Commissioner.

Lincoln Jopp: I think the hon. Member will recall from his time on the Bill Committee that the Front-Bench spokesman, my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), referred to us as fulfilling the role of critical friend.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): Exactly.

Lincoln Jopp: I offer these comments as a critical friend. I think it important for people listening to this debate and referring to our proceedings at a later time to realise that, utterly untrammelled, these measures will generate a bureaucracy all of their own. We do not wish this to be a good idea that we have in peacetime that becomes a massive hindrance as we approach a period of conflict.

Graeme Downie: I congratulate the new Government on introducing the Bill so early in their term. It was a pleasure to serve on the Committee, along with friends on both sides of the House, and to hear from the existing Service Complaints Ombudsman as well as from charities such as Poppy Scotland and the Royal British Legion. I thank the Clerks and Committee staff who helped and supported me, as a new Member serving for the first time on a Committee of that kind. It was particularly positive to hear the strong cross-party consensus in favour of the Bill, which was supported by both the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), and the hon. and gallant Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), although, like my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), I feared that the hon. Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) did not support it. I hope that that is not the case. I should add that I did not expect to be discussing the difference between the powers and political structures of the United States Senate and those of this Parliament with the shadow Minister, but it was very interesting and enjoyable.

I understand the need, in fact the duty, of His Majesty's loyal Opposition to scrutinise legislation properly, but I hope that after today's debate on the amendments, the House will speak with one voice in support of the Bill and there will be no need for Divisions. This Government have already shown their commitment to our armed forces by awarding the largest pay rise in over 20 years, tackling recruitment by removing outdated policies, and boosting retention through £8,000 payments to certain Army personnel and £30,000 to for some aircraft engineers. They are also doing more to support veterans. It was a pleasure to welcome the Veterans Minister to my constituency last week, where he visited Bravehound and Ghost Force K9, organisations run by veterans to support other veterans' mental health through the walking and training of dogs.

3.15 pm

The problems that the Bill seeks to begin to tackle are well known: 14 years of our armed forces being hollowed out and underfunded by the Conservative Government,

and, in Scotland, an SNP Government with seemingly little interest in supporting serving personnel for their own petty political reasons, and failing even to properly recognise the role of the Scottish defence industry in our national economy. It is noticeable that once again, as we debate an issue that will affected armed forces personnel in Scotland, no SNP Members are present. We have a crisis in military morale and recruitment. Under the last Government, only four in 10 personnel reported that they were satisfied with service life, the lowest reported level on record. The impact on family life and personal life was the top factor influencing their decision to leave. Meanwhile, we live in an increasingly unstable world in which it seems more and more likely that our armed forces will be needed to play further roles around the world.

The Bill seeks to build on and expand the role of the Service Complaints Ombudsman. That will allow the new commissioner to continue to respond on, and help with, specific issues, but crucially it will also enable him or her to conduct wider inquiries, and to investigate issues that affect general service welfare, including those affecting families. All that will be critical to the future success of our armed forces. The commissioner must be independent and free from Government interference, and must present a report to Parliament annually. I suspect that Ministers will not look forward to that event, as they will rightly be held to account not only by the commissioner but Members from all parts of the House, and indeed the public.

Let me address some of the amendments, and explain why I believe that the Bill should proceed unamended, following a constructive Committee stage. Amendment 10, proposed by the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), seeks to specify further the role of the commissioner. Although I believe that it is well intentioned, being overly prescriptive in the Bill risks inadvertently compromising the independence of the commissioner, which will be vital to his or her success. In Committee, I raised that issue with Angela Kitching from the Royal British Legion, who felt that the term "general welfare" was sufficiently understood in the military, so I do not believe that we should seek to be more prescriptive than that.

Indeed, amendments 8 and 10, both in the name of the hon. Member for South Suffolk, appear contradictory, with amendment 8 seeking additional measures to cement independence from the Government, while amendment 10 would dilute that independence by adding unnecessary prescription. Moreover, we know that the issues the commissioner will seek to investigate will change and evolve over time, and I do not think it helpful to have that level of prescription in the Bill evermore, or until it is amended by primary legislation.

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making an excellent point about both independence and the need for flexibility. Does he agree that the recently discovered serious problems with service housing might have been addressed better and sooner if there had been an independent figure whom service families as well as serving members of armed forces could approach?

Graeme Downie: My hon. Friend is entirely right. Housing issues are critical to ensuring that we recruit and retain the personnel we will require for the success that we want our armed forces to have.

Dr Murrison: Given the support that the hon. Gentleman and the hon. Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda) have expressed for improvements in service housing, which must be one of the principal issues affecting the welfare of serving members of armed forces, what is the hon. Gentleman's objection to amendment 10? Given what he has said, I should have thought that he would be fully supportive of it.

Graeme Downie: I agree that housing is one of the issues that the commissioner will want to consider, and I hope that they will, in Scotland and throughout the United Kingdom, but I do not think it helpful to be prescriptive. We must ensure that the commissioner is fully independent and can determine their own priorities, and we should not seek to place requirements on them. Otherwise, Parliament will be dictating to them what they should do. I believe that they—and their staff, appointed through the appointments process—will be more than capable of doing that for themselves.

Amendment 6, tabled by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell, seeks to impose a timescale for the implementation of the Bill. I am sure that the Minister, like other Members, wants to see the commissioner begin their new and expanded role as quickly as possible, but it is important that this be done fully and correctly. In Committee, I asked Mariette Hughes, the Service Complaints Ombudsman, how staff would cope with the additional powers that are being transferred. It was positive to hear that staff were excited about the new powers and believed them to be necessary; that is a sign that the legislation is both needed and framed correctly. On timescales, Mariette Hughes said that

“there needs to be a significant scoping period to determine how many staff will be required and what the budget will look like.”—*[Official Report, Armed Forces Commissioner Public Bill Committee, 10 December 2024; c. 6, Q6.]*

Amendment 10 seeks to rush that process, and risks losing the good will within the ombudsman's team. I come back to the importance of independence, and my belief that there must be a culture of independence from the beginning, without artificial deadlines or criteria being imposed. I know the Minister wants to move as quickly as possible with this legislation while ensuring its effectiveness, and I ask him to comment on the timescale, but I do not believe that the amendment is required.

I turn to an issue that I raised on Second Reading and again in Committee, and which is mentioned in new clause 2: relationships with veterans commissioners and the devolved Administrations. Given that I was the only Scottish Member on the Public Bill Committee, ensuring that this legislation is effective for my constituents is one of my key concerns. When I asked Mariette Hughes about this issue in Committee, she was incredibly practical and clearly focused on the need to solve problems with the devolved Administrations, rather than taking a heavy-handed approach. In my view, her approach is correct. She said that she would work

“with the devolved Administrations...sit round the table and talk about whose job it is to take this forward, because we can all agree that this is what needs to happen for people.”—*[Official Report, Armed Forces Commissioner Public Bill Committee, 10 December 2024; c. 6, Q7.]*

In Committee, I asked the Minister about housing, which has been discussed. I was reassured by his response that

“if the commissioner was looking at housing in a Scottish context, you would expect them to make recommendations to the Scottish Government.”—*[Official Report, Armed Forces Commissioner Public Bill Committee, 10 December 2024; c. 68, Q108.]*

That is the kind of constructive scrutiny that I would like to see, and I feel that new clause 2 is heavy-handed in its dealing with the devolved Administrations. An annual report will be presented to this House; I am sure that MSP colleagues of all political parties, as well as Scottish MPs, will be quick to hold a Scottish Government of any political stripe to account when recommendations are made to them.

New clause 2 does not take account of the fact that the power to tackle issues such as housing lies not with veterans commissioners, or even with the Scottish Government, but with local councils, which are even closer to communities. I know that the shadow Minister, the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, abhors central control from a distant place, so I am sure that he will agree that seeking to control housing policy in Fife or Moray from London is not appropriate. I urge Members to reject new clause 2.

As I said, the fact that the Government brought forward this legislation so early on and the other positive steps that have been taken to support our armed forces and veterans show the commitment of the Labour party and this Government to supporting both. I hope that we can maintain the positive tone of discussions on the Bill to date, and that we can speak with one voice this evening and pass this legislation without amendment.

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): May I say how delighted I am to see the introduction of a commissioner for our armed forces and veterans? It is badly needed, and I am sure that the commissioner will be appreciated and will make vast improvements to the welfare of our people.

I thank the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), for tabling new clause 1, because we have volunteers in the Territorial Army who are highly respected and valued, yet they get rejected when they apply to the Army. They do not feel that they are given any explanation of why they are not accepted by the armed forces, and new clause 1 would address that. It is really bad for morale when people do not get told exactly why they have not been accepted. I truly welcome this Bill.

Jacob Collier: I rise to lend my full support to this Bill, and I will shortly speak to the amendments in the name of the Opposition. The Bill represents a long-overdue step towards supporting the welfare and rights of service personnel and their families. I have a brother in our armed forces, and I am grateful to have a Government who recognise the value of being challenged to deliver more for our service personnel and for military families like mine. The introduction of the Armed Forces Commissioner is an opportunity to provide independent and robust oversight to ensure that we in this place, and all parts of Government, do right by all who serve.

Our nation and its armed forces are inseparable. In Burton and Uttoxeter, we have so many military families like mine; we feel immense pride in the service of our loved ones. At a moment's notice, they stand ready to protect our nation and all that we hold dear. Regardless of whether it is a soldier posted overseas, a sailor

[Jacob Collier]

patrolling distant waters or a pilot protecting our skies, their wellbeing, and that of their families, should be at the heart of any Government policy. This Bill achieves precisely that by establishing an independent Armed Forces Commissioner who can investigate, advocate and hold the system to account. The commissioner will not just respond to complaints, but proactively examine the issues affecting service life, from housing and healthcare to the transition to civilian life and the schooling of service children. The role will deliver real improvements, and it will challenge this Parliament and this Government, so I hope that those on the Front Bench are fully prepared for that.

I am mindful of amendments 9 and 10. Although their intentions may be laudable, I think they miss the point. Amendment 9 proposes that the commissioner's remit explicitly include pensions and death-in-service benefits for serving and former members of the armed forces. That might seem fair at first glance, but I am firmly of the view that the amendment is unnecessary and risks undermining the effectiveness of the commissioner's work. As defined by the Bill, the commissioner's role is already expansive, covering the full spectrum of welfare concerns for service personnel and their families.

Amendment 9 risks narrowing the commissioner's focus, and could lead to a disproportionate allocation of time and resources to one area at the expense of other pressing welfare concerns. The commissioner must have the freedom to determine their priorities, based on the evidence that they receive from service personnel, veterans and their families. The commissioner's work should not be restrained by this Parliament prescribing specific areas of focus, no matter how good its intentions. Let us trust that the Bill gives the commissioner the independence that they require to do the job effectively. To prescribe excessively is to risk diluting the authority and focus of this legislation, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) said. He was bang on the money, if the House pardons the pun.

Similarly, amendment 10 seeks to explicitly include issues affecting children, family and dependants. Although I fully recognise the importance of supporting the families of our service personnel, this amendment raises several concerns. The commissioner's role is already designed to allow them to advocate comprehensively for the welfare of service families. There is no doubt that issues such as education allowances, special needs tuition and housing fall squarely within that remit. The commissioner must have the flexibility to address the full spectrum of welfare issues, and must not be bound by a rigid checklist dictated by this House. We must trust that the commissioner will engage with service families effectively, without Parliament micromanaging their work. I am sure that all of us in this House have topics that we would want the commissioner to focus on, but the point is that it is not up to us.

This Bill represents progress, and a move towards ensuring that our military personnel and their families feel heard, valued and supported. It sends a clear message that their voice matters, that their welfare matters and that their service to our country is not taken for granted. We on these Benches have consistently supported measures that champion the rights and wellbeing of all those who

serve. The Armed Forces Commissioner Bill aligns with those values, and I urge colleagues to wholeheartedly support it tonight.

Phil Brickell (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Bill. I came into politics to improve people's lives, and I believe that the introduction of an Armed Forces Commissioner will do just that by providing a voice to members of our armed forces community who have been ignored for far too long. As the Prime Minister said during the King's Speech debate last year, this is not just a "name or a role"; it is a way in which we can show our respect for those who have committed their lives to the ultimate service. Indeed, my own father served as a gunner in the Royal Artillery, taking him to Northern Ireland, Germany, Cyprus and Canada, so I have some idea of the sacrifice made by our servicemen and women and their families. This is yet another instance of this Government delivering on their promises. We made a manifesto commitment to strengthen support for our armed forces personnel and the families who support them by establishing an independent Armed Forces Commissioner, and here we are now, getting on with it.

3.30 pm

The simple fact is that the current system is broken after 14 years of the Conservatives regrettably burying their heads in the sand. No one should have to live in damp housing or use food banks to get by, least of all the families of our brave armed forces. We know that, sadly, only four in 10 service personnel say that they are satisfied with service life in general. We will all be conscious of the shocking reports of the experiences of female personnel in particular over recent years. These are totally unacceptable, so I was reassured to see the former Member for Wrexham, who chaired a Defence Committee inquiry into women in the armed forces, express her support for the Bill.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Amendment 2, tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), would ensure that the commissioner published annual reports to outline what was being done to support minority groups in the armed forces. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the amendment would ensure that the commissioner was an important tool in helping to achieve the target of women accounting for 30% of armed forces personnel recruited by 2030?

Phil Brickell: I thank the hon. Member for her contribution, but I will not be supporting that amendment. I hope that we will be able to pass the Bill unamended, and I will defer to the Minister to address that question directly.

I echo the sentiments of my hon. Friend the Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme Downie) about the independence of the commissioner, and particularly his comments on amendment 6. We live in a dangerous world, so when it comes to the men and women who are tasked with keeping us safe, we must ensure that we return the favour by making sure that they are treated with respect. We should not delude ourselves by seeing the Armed Forces Commissioner as a silver bullet. I welcome this Government's commitment to a new

strengthened armed forces covenant, which would enshrine in law the respect due to members and former members of our military.

As many Members know, the military estate's houses, barracks and other facilities are in an appalling condition and, frankly, unfit to house many of our servicemen and women and their families. I welcome measures from the Government to conduct a medium to long-term review, but I would simply urge Ministers not to kick the can down the road on an issue that has persisted for far, far too long. Financial wellbeing, gaps in medical discharge processes, mental health support failures—there is a lot to do, but the initial signs are good.

As secretary of the all-party parliamentary group on Germany and someone with a number of family members in Germany, I would like to note that this position has been modelled on its long-established and successful German counterpart, as the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) rightly mentioned. It is refreshing to see a Government seeking to improve life in the UK by drawing inspiration from the successful policies of our closest allies in Europe. I sincerely hope that we can pass the Bill today to provide the support our military personnel and their families so urgently deserve.

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): The Armed Forces Commissioner Bill stands as a critical piece of legislation that will establish an independent champion for our servicemen and women, as well as their families. The Bill fulfils a manifesto commitment and represents a significant step forward in renewing our nation's contract with those who serve us, so it is positive to see its continued and rapid progression into law. Today, our Opposition colleagues have tabled a number of amendments, and I want to speak to several of them in turn. On new clause 1, the Government are implementing measures to address our current challenges with recruitment and retention. Expanding the commissioner's scope to include all applicants could overwhelm the office and detract from its core mission of supporting current service personnel and their families.

The previous Conservative Government hollowed out and underfunded our armed forces. Morale in the military is at a record low, and we are facing a recruitment and retention crisis. Many of those who want to join our armed forces wait far too long, and the Government are committed to fixing this through measures such as the new 10-30 provision, under which applicants will be given a provisional offer to join the armed forces within 10 days of applying, and a provisional start date within 30 days.

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. Member describes morale as being at an all-time low. Last week, along with a number of colleagues from the Defence Committee, we both had the opportunity to visit RAF Lossiemouth, where we saw a range of service personnel at the top of their game. I am intrigued to know whether he would characterise their morale as being at an all-time low, or whether he thinks the election of a Labour Government in July has had the rapid effect he describes.

Mr Bailey: The hon. and gallant Member is correct that we visited RAF Lossiemouth last week, where we saw people at the top of their game, doing what servicepeople do, which is coping, doing their job and

putting a brave face on things. However, the continuous attitude survey shows the stress behind those things. The service they are, to some degree, enduring could be made better. Although servicepeople put a good face on their morale when we see them, that does not mean our services are in the buoyant state they could be.

Luke Akehurst: Does my hon. and gallant Friend agree that an easy way to measure morale is through retention rates? We are not recruiting and retaining armed forces personnel to the degree we would wish. Part of the motivation for introducing this Bill to address general service welfare issues—I am making sure that I use the correct language about what the Armed Forces Commissioner role covers—is to have an operational impact by making it easier to recruit people to the armed forces. And once we train them at great expense, we must retain them for the longest possible period of viable service.

Mr Bailey: I agree entirely with my hon. Friend. We do not expect service personnel to stand up and openly tell us their problems, as that is part of what makes them resilient. The important thing about having an Armed Forces Commissioner is that they can see through that. The gallant Members of this House will be able to see through those things, and it would be wrong to politicise what people present of themselves during our visits, rather than what we would like them to make known, for political gain.

The truth, as my hon. Friend makes perfectly clear, is that we are not doing a very good job of recruiting and retaining personnel. The objection to new clause 1 is that it is important to focus on the specific needs that will enable us to have better recruitment and retention, because that is where we are failing. Perhaps that is why the hon. and gallant Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) is now in this House, rather than continuing his illustrious career.

The Government have also introduced a new cyber pathway to bring the best and brightest into our armed forces and to rebuild our defences for the future, particularly given the grey zone threats from Russia about which the Select Committee heard evidence this morning. This is also positive, but with 150,000 applicants attempting to join the military at any one time, if all those individuals were brought under the scope of the commissioner, as would happen if the new clause were enacted, that would vastly increase the commissioner's workload and, ultimately, impact their efficiency and effectiveness. In proposing the new clause, Conservative Members are attempting to address a genuine problem, but I have concerns that, in practice, it could mean that service personnel and their families would not get the attention they rightly need.

On new clause 2, while the Armed Forces Commissioner's role is focused on serving personnel, the Government are implementing a broader strategy of support for the entire armed forces community, including veterans, through various initiatives and legal protections. All veterans, including those sitting on the Opposition Benches, make an important contribution to our communities and our armed forces. However, the Armed Forces Commissioner's remit is purposefully defined narrowly to focus on issues currently impacting service personnel and their families. That allows the commissioner to effectively address

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

immediate concerns facing those in uniform, including some of those that most concern me and most seriously affect retention for women and people from ethnic minorities, such as bullying and harassment.

The Bill is just one step in Labour's plans to renew the nation's contract with those who serve and have served, and their families. Our Government are committed to strengthening support for the entire armed forces community, recognising that the issue of veteran support is distinct from those issues addressed by the Bill. The Government are working to fully incorporate the armed forces covenant into law, ensuring fairness and respect to veterans and their families. Recent initiatives include a £75 million LGBT financial recognition scheme, acknowledging the historic wrongs experienced by our LGBT veterans; making the veterans card an accepted form of voter ID, crucial to mobile service members, as I know from my own experience; and committing £3.5 million for veteran homelessness support, including wraparound services for at-risk veterans.

While the Armed Forces Commissioner will primarily deal with those affected by service law, they will have the discretion to invite opinion from a broader range of stakeholders, including veterans, when conducting investigations. I would expect the commissioner to regularly use that power, as it is a critical part of their role, as Conservative Members have said. I hope Conservative Members recognise that flexibility is important in the Bill, as it will allow the commissioner to gather comprehensive insight in the exercise of their duties, but does not limit their independence or freedom to lead by narrowing their focus.

On amendment 7, while focused on serving personnel, the role of the Armed Forces Commissioner complements the broader armed forces covenant and existing legislation to support the entire military community. The armed forces covenant recognises the unique obligations and sacrifices made by those who have served in the armed forces, whether regular or reserve, as well as veterans and their families. Our Government are fully committed to the covenant and our election manifesto pledge was to put the covenant fully into law.

The Armed Forces Commissioner's role focuses primarily on members of the serving community and their families, but they will undoubtedly consider covenant issues related to active service members and their families as part of general service welfare matters, as outlined in the Bill. That aligns with the commissioner's functions to promote the welfare of service persons and their families, and to improve public understanding of the issues.

It is important to note that the Bill is not standalone legislation. Instead, it amends part of the Armed Forces Act 2006, which already includes part 16A addressing the armed forces covenant. Therefore, amendment 7 is not necessary. By integrating the commissioner's role into the existing framework, we ensure a comprehensive approach to supporting both current and former members of the armed forces, reinforcing our commitment to the entire military community.

Amendment 8 would require the commissioner to be independent from the Government and the armed forces and from interference when carrying out their duties. In response, the Bill provides greater independence and scrutiny for those upholding the welfare of armed forces personnel. I welcome that role, which will be subject to

a full public appointment process and scrutiny by the Defence Committee, as mentioned earlier by its Chair, my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi).

The commissioner will be established as a corporation sole and will thus be independent of the Ministry of Defence, which is clearly important to give them the ability to hold people to account effectively. The commissioner will have discretion over what they investigate and the proactive power to launch investigations. Those provisions mean that the commissioner will stay focused on general service welfare matters and will be expected to have regular meetings with the chain of command. However, I fully agree that independence for the chain of command is vital.

3.45 pm

As a member of the Defence Committee, I had the opportunity to question the Service Complaints Ombudsman on a point that many members of the armed forces have raised with me since, around the independence of the current complaints process from the chain of command. Will the Minister provide clarification on how the commissioner will close that gap and the gaps that allow for abuses by commanding officers?

I want to emphasise how important a shift the new powers and independence of the commissioner will be. That will mark a significant improvement on the current ombudsman's limited scope. The commissioner will retain the independence to make arrangements for their office. They will also be able to decide how to spend their money and which issues they choose to investigate. Currently, the Service Complaints Ombudsman has only the power to investigate formal service complaints, as she stressed last week. However, the current defence guidance encourages informal complaint resolutions at the lowest level. In my view, that emphasis can be inappropriate when dealing with complaints such as harassment and discrimination. Abusers can survive an informal resolution and move on to continue their abuse elsewhere.

Lincoln Jopp: The hon. and gallant Member referred to the armed forces complaints ombudsman giving evidence to the Defence Committee last week. Her report from 2023 detailed that three complaints were made against the ombudsman organisation itself. Was he as dismayed as I was that she was not able to recall the details of the one complaint of those three that was upheld?

Mr Bailey: The ombudsman who came to speak to us the other day gave a clear account of the challenges and issues that she faced and elucidated on a number of challenges around addressing the specificity of any individual complaints that she had been made aware of, due to the distance between the complaint and her appearance before the Committee. I think it is worth reviewing the entirety of her evidence because, for me, it did nothing more than emphasise the need for the Bill to be passed as drafted and to take note of my challenges to the amendment.

On the wider status of the service complaints system, efforts to enhance consistency and accessibility are ongoing. I take this moment to thank the ombudsman, Mariette Hughes, and her team for their work to improve the

service complaints system. It was clear from her responses to our questions last week that she was conscious of the need to continue improving the system throughout the transition to a new commissioner.

I am sure the Ministry will continue its work to implement the recommendations of the ombudsman's office, particularly in ensuring that there is a single entry point for complaints and a consistent approach in the recording of all the grievances across defence, as laid down in successive annual reports.

On amendment 6, the Government are committed to swiftly establishing the Armed Forces Commissioner through a rigorous appointment process, ensuring that the role is filled by a highly qualified and security-cleared individual who can advocate effectively for the armed forces community. Although the Bill does not detail a specific implementation timetable, which colleagues will know is typical of primary legislation, this is a priority for the Government. I believe that colleagues from all parts of the House will recognise that the appointment process must be done correctly. The appointment will be subject to a full public appointments process, regulated and overseen by the Commissioner for Public Appointments. This process will include necessary vetting and security clearances, building trust among armed forces personnel that the appointment—*[Interruption.]* The implementation timeline will also account for the passing of the secondary legislation and a smooth transition from the current Service Complaints Ombudsman to the new Armed Forces Commissioner—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Does the hon. Member require a moment?

Mr Bailey: No.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Are you happy to continue?

Mr Bailey: Yes.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Wonderful.

Mr Bailey: In conclusion, Madam Deputy Speaker, the creation of an Armed Forces Commissioner will provide a powerful voice for service personnel and their families, ensuring that their concerns are heard and addressed at the highest levels. As we move forward with the Bill, we must remain vigilant in our efforts to improve service life, address systemic issues and uphold the highest standards of behaviour within our military. The success of the new role demands, and depends on, our continued support and scrutiny. I look forward to seeing the positive impact that this Bill will have on the lives of those who serve our nation.

Madam Deputy Speaker: A substantial contribution there. I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Francois: On Second Reading, we began by announcing that, with regard to the Bill, our aim was to be a critical friend, and that remains our aim today, although I feel that, at one point, we may become very critical. May I begin, however, in a bipartisan spirit by pointing out that, even though we are here today to debate the extremely important matter of the welfare of our armed forces, so far at least, as pointed out by the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar (Graeme

Downie), the SNP has not made a single contribution to this discussion—and neither for the record has Reform. And in both cases, that is a shame.

We debated this Bill in Committee in December, and following that I should like to speak to amendments 8 to 11, plus new clause 2, in my name and the name of my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), who is in his place. First, though, let me commend the Chair of the Defence Committee for his speech. For the record, he is having a good run at the moment. He has had three Select Committee reports, on which he has been allowed to make statements, and the Committee has only been up and running for a few weeks, so that is a very fast start.

I shall be relatively brief in my remarks on amendment 8, because we covered this issue in some detail in Committee. Moreover, my hon. and gallant Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp), as a former commanding officer of the Scots Guards, made some incisive points about the amendment, not least in relation to the interaction between the proposed Armed Forces Commissioner and the chain of command. That point was also touched on by the hon. and gallant Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey), before he was inexplicably distracted.

Suffice it to say for now, it was mentioned numerous times across all parts of the Committee that, in addition to demonstrating their independence, the Armed Forces Commissioner would have to work hard in this new role to win the trust of armed forces personnel and their families. Indeed, during the public evidence session, General Sir Andrew Gregory, the controller of SSAFA, made the very constructive suggestion that the commissioner would need to undertake a lot of visits to armed forces locations to meet both personnel and their families as part of that trust-building process. When I was an MOD Minister, I tried to make a lot of visits, too, so I can well understand the merits of the general's suggestion. According to the Government's timetable, the new Armed Forces Commissioner is likely to be up and running sometime in 2026. I hope that whoever takes up the post will be minded to listen to General Gregory's sage advice.

Turning to amendment 9, we raised pensions and death-in-service benefits in Committee. As I shall go on to explain, we were determined to raise this issue on Report, not least because it is both important and unresolved. I would like to look at one aspect of military pensions and then at death-in-service benefits specifically. It is interesting that we lack some important statistics about military veterans who have left the armed forces and then draw their service pension. For instance, we have an armed forces continuous attitude survey, or AFCAS, which is an annual exercise to tell us the attitudes of armed forces personnel on everything from housing repairs to overseas deployments. Similarly, we have a reserves continuous attitude survey, or RESCAS, to ask questions about the opinions of our much-valued reserves, and we also have a families continuous attitude survey, or FAMCAS, to seek the views of service families. However, there is no official veterans continuous attitude survey—no VETCAS, as it were—to tell us the opinions of veterans. However, a number of veterans charities gather data in this area outside the direct responsibility of the Ministry of Defence.

[Mr Francois]

I recently tabled a written parliamentary question to MOD Ministers about their estimate of the number of veterans who would be affected by the recent decision to seriously restrict winter fuel allowance availability. The response that came back from the Department around a fortnight ago was, in essence, that it did not have the data. I humbly suggest that someone needs to try to collate that data as soon as possible, because I am not sure the public would be pleased to learn that many veterans—although we cannot say precisely how many—could lose their winter fuel allowance as a result of the Chancellor's Budget.

Indeed, the Royal British Legion, which knows a thing or two about veterans, has expressed concern that the Government have

“not identified how this policy change will impact older veterans”.

A RBL spokesman recently said:

“A large number of older people have served in the UK Armed Forces, many of whom face additional heating costs due to caring responsibilities or disability”—

Graeme Downie: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: In a moment—please do not interrupt the Royal British Legion. It says:

“The Government needs to understand the impact of their policy on veterans in order to better support those affected.”

Graeme Downie: I am very much enjoying the right hon. Member's remarks from the Dispatch Box, as I always do, but he is discussing an issue that is definitely not within the scope of the Bill. Perhaps it would be better to move on to the areas where—hopefully—we have cross-party consensus.

Mr Francois: First, that is a matter for the Chair. Secondly, I presume that, if the amendment were not in order, it would not have been selected.

This is not Treasury questions, so I do not propose to reprise the whole debate about the winter fuel allowance; I will save hon. Members from that agony. Nevertheless, I hope the Minister has taken the point on board. Perhaps when he winds up, he could say something—anything—about how many veterans the Government think are likely to be affected by the restriction of winter fuel allowance and whether he thinks that that is the right thing to do, not least in the spirit of the armed forces covenant.

I turn to the specific matter of death-in-service benefits—a topic that, as the hon. Member for Dunfermline and Dollar will remember, we raised in Committee last month. As ably pointed out by the Forces Pension Society, which I hope the House will accept is very much the gold-standard organisation on any matter relating to armed forces pensions—the clue is in the name—a problem has arisen because of the Government's proposed changes to inheritance tax as announced by the Chancellor in her Budget of 30 October. In essence, if a member of the armed forces who is in a long-term relationship—and perhaps even has children—but is not married dies while in service, which does not necessarily mean in active operations, the death-in-service benefit

that they would normally be entitled to might, under the Government's proposed changes, become liable for inheritance tax.

4 pm

As I did in Committee, let me take an example of how that might affect a senior non-commissioned officer. An individual at OR 9 rank equivalent, a senior warrant officer at the top of the non-commissioned officer rank structure, has a partner to whom they are unmarried, and on death leaves an estate worth £400,000 and death-in-service benefits of £248,292—four times their £62,000 salary. They would pay 40% inheritance tax on the non-pensioned assets, resulting in an IHT liability of £30,000, but after April 2027, and if the death-in-service benefits are included in the estate, that will increase the estate's value to £648,292, and the IHT liability will increase accordingly to £129,316. That represents a staggering increase of 330%.

In a briefing it prepared on this issue, the Forces Pension Society explained that worrisome problem in the following terms:

“At a time of extreme vulnerability, these lump sums need to be paid promptly, as they currently are. If death in service benefits become subject to IHT there will be a delay to the benefit being paid both while the estate is assessed for IHT and while the amount of IHT attributable to the DIS [death in service] benefit is assessed and the scheme administrator (Veterans UK) pays the tax charge.”

The Forces Pension Society then elucidates:

“Many who would not previously have been caught with an IHT liability will find themselves in a very bureaucratic process that will slow down the already lengthy process of sorting out the financial affairs of an individual at what is a very difficult time.”

I should say in fairness that the Forces Pension Society has suggested that the Government have made an error, and would not knowingly implement a policy that runs so contrary to the spirit of the armed forces covenant.

Luke Akehurst: Will the right hon. Member give way?

Mr Francois: When I have finished this point, yes.

The Forces Pension Society points out that the system is recoverable because the changes are subject to a consultation and are not currently due to come in until April 2027. Nevertheless, this is still a potentially worrying situation, especially for armed forces families in which parents are in a committed relationship with multiple children but have not, for whatever reason, decided to marry.

We were prepared to give the Minister the benefit of the doubt about that in Committee. Indeed, without wishing to be uncharitable, when I raised it he seemed slightly taken aback by the problem. I say that because my suspicion is that when the Treasury came up with this, the Ministry of Defence was blissfully unaware of it. I therefore suggest that MOD Ministers may not be directly at fault, but it is nevertheless their personnel and families who may be affected. Towards the conclusion of the Committee, I strongly suggested to the Armed Forces Minister that he should take this away for discussions with the Treasury, as there will be a consultation exercise on the changes before they come into force in the 2026-27 financial year, with the opportunity to change the policy and avert the problem.

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

Mr Francois: In a moment.

Indeed, the Forces Pension Society response to the consultation, which I have here, calls on the Government to do just that. However, having given the Minister what I believe was fair notice in Committee, I raised the topic again with him at the last Defence questions on 6 January—although, in fairness, that was the day the Commons returned from Christmas recess. When I asked him what the Government had done about it, unfortunately he did not deliver a particularly convincing reply.

I give way to the hon. Gentleman.

Mr Bailey: I thank the right hon. Member for giving way. He is citing a specific example that the Armed Forces Commissioner would have to oversee. That is not relevant to the discussion about the Bill or the amendments. Will he bring up any of the other myriad exceptional circumstances of pain and suffering for our service personnel that your leadership, under 14 years of the previous Government—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. “Your leadership” refers to me, and it is up to the Chair to determine what is in scope. For the benefit of other colleagues, it is up to the speaker to accept or decline an intervention. Do you have more to say, Mr Bailey, or shall I return to the shadow Minister?

Mr Bailey: No thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Francois: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Luke Akehurst: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Francois: Just a second—I am just going to reply to this one. Forgive me, but if my remarks were not in order, we would have been told so by now. Maybe one day, after many years of distinguished service, the hon. Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey) will become a Deputy Speaker of this House, but not today.

I will continue, and then I will take the other intervention. We really need to do something about this issue. As the Forces Pension Society has pointed out, it would be totally contrary to the principles of the armed forces covenant—including the principle that armed forces personnel and their families should suffer no disadvantage as a result of their service to the Crown—if this were to go unanswered, and unmarried service widows and their families were to be punished in this way.

I thank the hon. Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) for being patient.

Luke Akehurst: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. He has raised some interesting specific policy issues that are clearly of concern to large numbers of people receiving armed forces pensions, but the Bill makes it clear—and Ministers have been very clear throughout its consideration—that the independent commissioner will decide for themselves what is a general service welfare matter, and therefore whether they want to look into the issues raised by amendments 9 and 10. Will the right hon. Gentleman explain the apparent contradiction between Opposition Members insisting in amendment 8 that they want reassurance about the

independence of the commissioner, and their wanting to predetermine the very specific topics that the commissioner would investigate through amendments 9 and 10?

Mr Francois: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. As we are on Report, we are trying to amend the Bill where we think it could be improved. Just because we have the Bill as originally produced on First Reading does not mean that it cannot be improved. If I may humbly say so, that is what Report is about.

This subject is pressing—I say this particularly to the hon. Member for North Durham—as the consultation on it closes tomorrow. The Veterans Minister replied to me on this subject—hey presto!—just this morning. I quote from his letter:

“I would seek to reassure the Right Honourable Gentleman that an existing exemption in Inheritance Tax legislation means that active members who die as a result of their service, are exempt from Inheritance Tax provisions.”

However, that only applies to those killed while on active service. It does not apply to those who are still in the service of the Crown but die of natural causes, so I am afraid that the Veterans Minister’s reply is smoke and mirrors, as it deliberately ducks the issue of those who die of natural causes while still in service with living dependants. The Government have already upset farmers and business owners through their proposed inheritance tax changes; they surely do not want to upset service families as well.

I say to the Minister that if, at what is now the third time of asking, we do not receive a satisfactory reply this afternoon, we will be strongly minded to press amendment 9 to a Division in order to hold Ministers to account and try to achieve positive change. With the consultation closing tomorrow, I will listen very carefully to what the Minister says about this issue in his response, but having given him two previous bites at the cherry, I am afraid that we may be likely to divide the House if we do not receive a satisfactory reply on behalf of those service families who may be affected.

As you can see, Madam Deputy Speaker, amendment 10 covers three topics: the

“operation of the Continuity of Education Allowance”,

or CEA as it is known;

“the provision of Special Educational Needs tuition”

for the children of armed forces personnel; and

“the maintenance of service families’ accommodation.”

I will take those topics in reverse order.

On service families’ accommodation, I welcomed in Committee the recent announcement that the Government intend to, in effect, buy back service family accommodation from Annington Homes. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge) also welcomes these proposals because—as Ministers, to be fair to them, have already acknowledged on the Floor of the House—while in government, he spent a great deal of time working on the scheme. He is understandably very pleased to see those efforts come to fruition, albeit under a Government of a different colour, as indeed am I. We should give credit where it is due.

Service housing was mentioned multiple times in Committee, and there seems to be little doubt but that it qualifies as a general service welfare matter. However,

[Mr Francois]

I have included the topic in this amendment to facilitate a brief discussion on the management and maintenance of service housing post Annington, as it were, and in the timeframe during which the new Armed Forces Commissioner is likely to be in operation. The fact that the MOD will in effect recover the freehold of its properties and be the landlord opens up exciting opportunities to change the maintenance of service family accommodation and, indeed, of single living accommodation as well.

The Minister will be aware that, when I was a Minister, I was commissioned by a former Prime Minister to write two reports: one was on armed forces recruitment, subsequently entitled “Filling the Ranks” and delivered in 2017; and as a result of the first report, a second one was on retention, entitled “Stick or Twist?” and delivered in February 2020—barely a month before the nation went into lockdown because of covid. I know that some Defence Ministers have kindly taken the time and trouble to look at those reports, so I shall not attempt to repeat their contents here, except to make one specific point on the management of SFA.

Having looked at the matter in detail, my team concluded very strongly that there must be a better way of managing service housing than the current Future Defence Infrastructure Services contract. Our alternative, which I believe now has new resonance as the homes are transferred from Annington back to the MOD, would be to form a dedicated forces housing association, the fundamental purpose of which would be

“to provide high quality, well maintained accommodation for service personnel and their families at an affordable cost.”

I think the Minister has kindly read this report, as has the Veterans Minister, who has responsibility for it, and I hope he will take that on board.

We debated special educational needs in some detail in Committee, so I do not propose to repeat all of that again, but I refer the Minister to a recent Public Accounts Committee report that was published last week on the topic.

The continuity of education allowance is a very important issue, particularly as it affects retention. The VAT increase of 20% will affect around 4,200 children of service personnel, but the MOD is increasing the CEA cap only by 12.5% for senior school students and 16.6% for junior school students, leaving their parents to make up the difference from their post-tax income. This has already come into effect from 1 January, or about three weeks ago. A joint briefing note from the Independent Schools Council and the Boarding Schools’ Association points out that the VAT will cover both tuition fees and boarding accommodation at independent boarding schools. In the worst cases, the VAT will have an adverse impact on military families using CEA, who could see their contributions increase by over 50% for senior school pupils. The Treasury’s VAT consultation said that it would “monitor closely the impact of these policy changes on affected military and diplomatic families, with the upcoming Spending Review being the right time to consider any changes to this scheme.”

The spending review—[*Interruption.*] Madam Deputy Speaker, I believe we have until 6 o’clock. The spending review will not report until this summer, but military

families are having to pay the increased costs now, and I have a whole range of quotes that I could read into the record.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. Mr Francois, please do not read out all the quotes, but come to your conclusion.

Mr Francois: I will not read them out, but the point, in terms of retention, is that this is not just an officer’s benefit. It is a very important benefit for senior non-commissioned officers. If the costs become unsustainable, there is a risk that they will leave the armed forces, and that someone whom it may have cost the Crown over £1 million to train will leave, which would very much be a false economy.

4.15 pm

Finally, on our new clause 2, we had a considerable debate in Committee about the relationship between the Armed Forces Commissioner and the various veterans commissioners, a point touched on by our friends from Northern Ireland, and I place on record my admiration for the previous Northern Ireland veterans commissioner, Mr Danny Kinahan, an ex-serviceman who was widely respected across the sectarian and political divide in Northern Ireland. It is a great shame that he resigned.

Carla Lockhart (Upper Bann) (DUP): Northern Ireland has possibly more veterans per head of population than any other constituent part of the United Kingdom. Thousands served in the Ulster Defence Regiment and the Royal Irish Regiment alongside the British Army regiments during their tours in Northern Ireland. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in commending the new veterans commissioner, Mr David Johnstone, who has also served with distinction, and does he agree with the call of the hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) today that this should be a fully funded and full-time post in Northern Ireland, given the needs of veterans in Northern Ireland?

Mr Francois: I wish the new veterans commissioner in Northern Ireland all the best, but suffice it to say that he has a hard act to follow.

In conclusion, we hope that we have been a critical friend to the Bill. We have pressed the Government on death-in-service benefits, and on the continuity of education allowance and its implications for retention, and if we do not receive what I yet hope may be satisfactory answers from the Minister, we might be minded to press the amendments on those issues to a Division.

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I thank all Members who have spoken in this debate, and all who served on the Public Bill Committee. The Bill is a landmark step towards fulfilling this Government’s commitment to renewing the nation’s contract with those who serve by strengthening support for our armed forces, and their families, who stand behind them. Our forces face a crisis in recruitment, retention and morale that this Government inherited after 14 years of a Conservative Government; only four in 10 of our service personnel report being satisfied with service life. We need this Bill to establish a champion who can shine a light on the general service welfare matters most affecting

our people, so that we in this House can understand those issues and hold this Government and future Governments to account.

I will turn to each of the amendments proposed. New clause 1 in the name of the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), seeks to bring those going through the recruitment process into the commissioner's remit. We inherited a retention and recruitment crisis. That is why the Secretary of State laid out a number of policies to improve our recruitment policy early doors. One of them is the 10-30 policy, so ably explained by my hon. Friend the Member for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey): the policy that a provisional offer will be made within 10 days of an application to the armed forces, and a provisional start date will be given within 30 days. That is a substantial step forward for those joining our armed forces. Some 84% of those who seek to join the armed forces drop out of the process because it takes too long. That is an utter scandal that this Government are determined to address. That is why the 10-30 policy was put in place, and why the Defence Secretary, the Minister for Veterans and People and I have focused on improving our retention and recruitment policies. It is also why I have to resist the hon. Lady's amendments—because the focus of this Bill is on those who serve and their families. They have been neglected for far too long. That is why this Bill is relentlessly and unapologetically focused on providing an independent champion for them.

I understand why the hon. Lady seeks to include recruits in the scope of the Bill. That would mean 150,000 candidates every single year being added to the workforce on which the commissioner is focused. Our job as a Government is to make it easier to convert more of those applicants into military personnel, and the new lateral entry into cyber work announced by the Defence Secretary is a good example of that, but the commissioner's focus should remain on those who serve and their families.

New clause 2, on veterans, tabled by the shadow Defence Secretary, the hon. Member for South Suffolk (James Cartlidge), is about ensuring decent engagement with veterans commissioners across the country, and with the chief commissioner of the Independent Commission for Reconciliation and Information Recovery. The manifesto commitment on which the Bill delivers is clear: it is a commitment to addressing the gap in support for military personnel. The commissioner is to highlight the issues affecting personnel today, not matters from the past.

I understand why the hon. Member tabled the new clause, and with the Government's new role of Minister for Veterans and People, we have made clear our intention of improving the support that we offer veterans, but the commissioner's role is to support service personnel and their families. It is also the role of the commissioner to decide independently which general service welfare matters they should investigate. That freedom and independence are vital to the role, so it is important to keep the commissioner's freedom to decide whom to engage with. However, I reassure the hon. Member that I would expect that once the commissioner was established, their terms of reference would be established for engagement with a variety of organisations from the charitable and military charity sectors, including bodies that represent veterans, and veterans commissioners across the UK.

I therefore think that the effect of what he seeks will be provided in our implementation of the Bill, so the new clause is unnecessary.

Amendment 7, on the covenant, is also well intentioned. It is important to realise that this is not a stand-alone Bill; it amends the Armed Forces Act 2006, part 16A of which deals with the covenant. The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell has sought to make the covenant apply to the Armed Forces Commissioner, but I reassure her that as this Bill will insert provisions relating to the Armed Forces Commissioner into the Armed Forces Act, they will already grip in that way. I further reassure her that later this Parliament, the Government will bring forward proposals in the Armed Forces Bill to deliver on our manifesto commitment of putting the armed forces covenant fully into law. I therefore feel that the amendment is unnecessary, but I understand and entirely appreciate why she wanted to bring it forward. I hope that all of us can lend our support to the further implementation of the armed forces covenant, so that it grips not just local but central Government.

On amendment 8, which is on independence, I hope that there is no doubt that the intention that the commissioner will act as an independent champion for our armed forces and hold this and future Governments to account is clear in the legislation, and from commitments that the Defence Secretary and I have made at the Dispatch Box. I therefore generally welcome the principle of the amendment, which we discussed in detail in Committee. The Bill already has a number of provisions to ensure that the commissioner can work and conduct their inquiries separately from Government. Those provisions include measures giving them discretion over the matters they investigate, their reporting powers, their power of entry to defence sites to carry out their functions—without notice, in some circumstances—and an obligation on the Secretary of State to co-operate with the commissioner. Many of those functions will be transferred from the Service Complaints Ombudsman. The ombudsman has highlighted in her evidence that she already feels a strong degree of independence from the Ministry of Defence on decision making. That matters, and I have echoed that in the Bill.

There are important circumstances where it is critical that the commissioner cannot act purely on their own initiative—I refer to the Secretary of State restricting access to sites when there is a valid national security or safety reason to do so. A legal power for the commissioner to act without influence or interference would make that impossible. Certainly in previous conversations, the Opposition have been keen to ensure a suitable qualification to the power to access secret and very sensitive sites, and the amendment would actually go against the argument that they have made elsewhere, so I hope that they will not press the amendment.

I thank the House for its views on amendments 5 and 6 from the Liberal Democrats on the appointment of the commissioner. It is our intention that the commissioner will be in place in 2026. The reason why we have had not only Second Reading and a full Committee stage but Report so soon into this new Government is that we want the commissioner put in place as soon as possible. Our intention to have the operation up and running in 2026 remains in place.

Let me briefly refer to the questions from my hon. Friend the Member for Slough (Mr Dhesi) on the work of the House of Commons Defence Committee.

[Luke Pollard]

We expect robust scrutiny of any candidate that the Secretary of State puts forward for this role. We expect the relationship that the commissioner has with the Defence Committee to be above and beyond other relationships, because when the commissioner publishes a report, under the Bill, it will not be sent to the Ministry of Defence to decide what to do with it—except in the case of a national security scrub, and I am certain that every Member in this House will understand why that is. It will be sent to Parliament, including to the Defence Committee. In that respect, the relationship between the commissioner and the Defence Committee will be more enhanced than perhaps the relationship between the Service Complaints Ombudsman and the Committee.

On the robust decisions that the commissioner will make, my hon. Friend may be aware that on page 9 of the Bill, paragraph 7 of schedule 1 includes a power for the Secretary of State to appoint people to interim roles if the full appointment process has not been completed. Given the powers afforded to the Service Complaints Ombudsman, the ability of that organisation to function is greatly restricted if there is a vacancy in that office. We have learned from that, and provided a power to ensure that the work of the Armed Forces Commissioner could continue in the absence of a permanent post holder. I hope that will satisfy my hon. Friend. I am eager for the commissioner to be established, and for their office to be operational as soon as practically possible.

On amendment 3 on funding, the Bill has been designed to ensure that the commissioner has the tools, funding and support that they need, now and in future. The Secretary of State has an obligation in the Bill to give the commissioner any reasonable assistance that they request to conduct their work effectively. Should the commissioner feel that their funding—estimated to be in the region of £5 million a year—is insufficient, they can raise this in their annual report, which is one of the mechanisms for providing additional scrutiny to Parliament.

On the family definition mentioned by the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell, she will be aware that we have committed to setting out the definition of family members in secondary legislation, so that it can be updated if necessary. Families come in all shapes and sizes, and when trying to define “family”, it is important that we consult and get views from a wide range of people. We want to make sure that the definition in the legislation is as accurate as possible, and includes bereaved family members of service personnel, so that they can still access the commissioner. I hope that gives her reassurance.

On the inclusion of minority groups, speaking as someone who represents one of the minority communities that the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell mentioned, let me be clear that we want the commissioner to engage with a whole range of different communities in our armed forces family. It is important that they do. As we heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), a non-exhaustive list that left out people with disabilities would be a concern, because I think the hon. Lady’s intention is to focus on minorities. We would expect the commissioner to be able to make a decision themselves in order to deliver that engagement.

Helen Maguire: I know the Minister will have read amendment 2 in detail, and is aware that it includes the words “including but not limited to”, and therefore includes individuals with disabilities and others. That is what the hon. Members for North Durham (Luke Akehurst), and for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), were concerned about.

Luke Pollard: That highlights the danger of a list. In future amendments that the hon. Lady tables, I would expect her to veer away from lists to avoid that problem.

Briefly, on the inheritance tax that the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) mentioned, the Minister for Veterans and People has replied to him, as I said he would in Defence questions on 6 January. Provisions in the Inheritance Tax Act 1984 will continue to ensure that attributable deaths of active members are exempt from inheritance tax. As the right hon. Gentleman knows, that is a matter for the Treasury, and it would be wrong of me to pre-empt the result of the genuine consultation being conducted by Treasury colleagues. He may need to wait until the Treasury has had a chance to consider the matter. I expect, nonetheless, that he will push his amendment to a vote, because there is a certain level of politics that I appreciate he has to play. It is certainly true that our armed forces deserve better than they have experienced over the past 14 years. Hollowed out and underfunded services, servicemen and women living in accommodation that, frankly, is not good enough, and morale falling every single year of the past 14 years—these are the areas that this Government seek to change.

The landmark Armed Forces Commissioner Bill will deliver a better service for our armed forces and, importantly, their families. We have a lot of work to undo the damage, but I hope the message goes out loud and clear from this House that the creation of an independent Armed Forces Commissioner—a champion for those serving in our military and for their families—is a good thing that enjoys cross-party support. I urge all colleagues to support the Bill.

Helen Maguire: I am happy with the reassurance received from the Government, and I beg to ask leave to withdraw the clause.

Clause, by leave, withdrawn.

Clause 4

COMMISSIONER’S FUNCTIONS IN RELATION TO GENERAL SERVICE WELFARE

Amendment proposed: 9, page 2, line 35, at end insert—

“(2A) A ‘general service welfare matter’ may include issues relating to the provision of pensions and death in service benefits to serving and former members of the armed forces and their dependants.”—
(*Mr Francois.*)

The amendment would enable the Commissioner to include matters relating to pensions and other such benefits, including death in service benefits, in their investigation of service welfare matters.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 192, Noes 338.

Division No. 87]**[4.30 pm****AYES**

Adam, Shockat
 Allister, Jim
 Amos, Gideon
 Anderson, Lee
 Anderson, Stuart (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Andrew, rh Stuart
 Aquarone, Steff
 Argar, rh Edward
 Atkins, rh Victoria
 Bacon, Gareth
 Baldwin, Dame Harriett
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bennett, Alison
 Berry, Siân
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Blackman, Kirsty
 Bool, Sarah
 Bowie, Andrew
 Bradley, rh Dame Karen
 Brandreth, Aphra
 Brewer, Alex
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cane, Charlotte
 Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
 Cartlidge, James
 Chadwick, David
 Chamberlain, Wendy
 Chambers, Dr Danny
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Chowns, Ellie
 Cleverly, rh Mr James
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Coghlan, Chris
 Collins, Victoria
 Cooper, Daisy
 Cooper, John
 Costa, Alberto
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey
 Cross, Harriet
 Dance, Adam
 Darling, Steve
 Davies, Ann
 Davies, Gareth
 Davies, Mims
 Davis, rh David
 Dean, Bobby
 Denyer, Carla
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Dillon, Mr Lee
 Doogan, Dave
 Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
 Dyke, Sarah
 Easton, Alex
 Eastwood, Sorcha
 Evans, Dr Luke
 Farron, Tim
 Flynn, rh Stephen
 Foord, Richard
 Forster, Mr Will
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Franklin, Zöe
 Fuller, Richard
 Gale, rh Sir Roger
 Garnier, Mark
 Gethins, Stephen
 Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine*)
 Gilmour, Rachel
 Glen, rh John
 Glover, Olly
 Goldman, Marie
 Gordon, Tom
 Grant, Helen
 Green, Sarah
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harding, Monica
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hayes, rh Sir John
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hoare, Simon
 Hobhouse, Wera
 Holden, rh Mr Richard
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Hudson, Dr Neil
 Jardine, Christine
 Jarvis, Liz
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard
 Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jones, Clive
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Kearns, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Khan, Ayoub
 Kohler, Mr Paul
 Kruger, Danny
 Lake, Ben
 Lam, Katie
 Lamont, John
 Leadbitter, Graham
 Lewis, rh Sir Julian
 Lockhart, Carla
 Logan, Seamus
 Lowe, Rupert
 MacCleary, James
 MacDonald, Mr Angus
 Maguire, Ben
 Maguire, Helen
 Mak, Alan
 Malthouse, rh Kit
 Martin, Mike
 Mathew, Brian
 Mayhew, Jerome
 Maynard, Charlie
 McVey, rh Esther
 Medi, Linos
 Miller, Calum
 Milne, John
 Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew
 Mohamed, Iqbal
 Mohindra, Mr Gagan
 Moore, Robbie
 Morgan, Helen
 Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster*)
 Morrissey, Joy
 Morton, rh Wendy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran

Mundell, rh David
 Munt, Tessa
 Murray, Susan
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 O'Brien, Neil
 O'Hara, Brendan
 Olney, Sarah
 Perteghella, Manuela
 Philp, rh Chris
 Pinkerton, Dr Al
 Pritchard, rh Mark
 Raja, Shivani (*Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra*)
 Ramsay, Adrian
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Reynolds, Mr Joshua
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Roome, Ian
 Rosindell, Andrew
 Sabine, Anna
 Savage, Dr Roz
 Saville Roberts, rh Liz
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
 Simmonds, David
 Slade, Vikki
 Smart, Lisa
 Smith, Greg
 Smith, rh Sir Julian
 Smith, Rebecca
 Sollom, Ian
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stephenson, Blake
 Stone, Jamie
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swann, Robin
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Taylor, Luke
 Thomas, Bradley
 Thomas, Cameron
 Timothy, Nick
 Tugendhat, rh Tom
 Vickers, Martin
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James
 Wilkinson, Max
 Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
 Wilson, Munira
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike
 Wrigley, Martin
 Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rebecca Paul and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy*)
 Abbott, Jack
 Abrahams, Debbie
 Ahmed, Dr Zubir
 Akehurst, Luke
 Alaba, Mr Bayo
 Aldridge, Dan
 Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
 Alexander, rh Heidi
 Al-Hassan, Sadik
 Ali, Tahir
 Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
 Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Anderson, Callum
 Anderson, Fleur
 Antoniazzi, Tonia
 Arthur, Dr Scott
 Asato, Jess
 Asser, James
 Athwal, Jas
 Atkinson, Catherine
 Atkinson, Lewis
 Bailey, Mr Calvin
 Bailey, Olivia
 Baines, David
 Baker, Richard
 Ballinger, Alex
 Bance, Antonia
 Barker, Paula
 Barron, Lee
 Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
 Baxter, Johanna
 Beales, Danny
 Beavers, Lorraine
 Begum, Apsana
 Bell, Torsten
 Benn, rh Hilary
 Betts, Mr Clive
 Billington, Ms Polly
 Bishop, Matt
 Blake, Rachel
 Bloore, Chris
 Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Bonavia, Kevin
 Botterill, Jade
 Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
 Brash, Mr Jonathan
 Brickell, Phil
 Bryant, Chris
 Buckley, Julia
 Burgon, Richard
 Burke, Maureen
 Burton-Sampson, David
 Byrne, Ian
 Byrne, rh Liam
 Cadbury, Ruth
 Caliskan, Nesil
 Campbell, rh Sir Alan
 Campbell, Irene
 Campbell, Juliet
 Campbell-Savours, Markus
 Carling, Sam
 Carns, Al
 Champion, Sarah
 Charalambous, Bambos
 Charters, Mr Luke
 Clark, Feryal
 Coleman, Ben
 Collier, Jacob
 Collinge, Lizzi
 Collins, Tom
 Conlon, Liam

Coombes, Sarah
 Cooper, Andrew
 Cooper, Dr Beccy
 Costigan, Deirdre
 Cox, Pam
 Craft, Jen
 Creagh, Mary
 Creasy, Ms Stella
 Crichton, Torcuil
 Curtis, Chris
 Dakin, Sir Nicholas
 Dalton, Ashley
 Darlington, Emily
 Davies, Jonathan
 Davies, Paul
 Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth
 Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lowell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisman
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke

Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie
 Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogam, Michelle
 Sowards, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gerald Jones and
 Kate Dearden

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: 10, page 2, line 35, at end insert—

“(2A) A ‘general service welfare matter’ may include issues relating to the wellbeing of, and provision of support to, the children, families and other dependants of serving and former members of the armed forces, including but not limited to—

- (a) the provision and operation of the Continuity of Education Allowance;
- (b) the provision of Special Educational Needs tuition; and
- (c) the maintenance of service families’ accommodation.”

—(Mr Francois.)

This amendment would enable the Commissioner to include matters relating to the wellbeing of, and provision of support to, the children, families and other dependants of serving and former members of the armed forces in the Commissioner’s investigation of service welfare matters.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 191, Noes 338.

Division No. 88]

[4.44 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat	Davis, rh David
Allister, Jim	Dean, Bobby
Amos, Gideon	Denyer, Carla
Anderson, Lee	Dewhurst, Charlie
Anderson, Stuart (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	Dillon, Mr Lee
Andrew, rh Stuart	Doogan, Dave
Aquarone, Steff	Dowden, rh Sir Oliver
Argar, rh Edward	Dyke, Sarah
Babarinde, Josh	Easton, Alex
Bacon, Gareth	Eastwood, Sorcha
Baldwin, Dame Harriett	Evans, Dr Luke
Bedford, Mr Peter	Farron, Tim
Bennett, Alison	Flynn, rh Stephen
Berry, Siân	Foord, Richard
Bhatti, Saqib	Forster, Mr Will
Blackman, Bob	Fortune, Peter
Blackman, Kirsty	Fox, Sir Ashley
Bool, Sarah	Francois, rh Mr Mark
Bowie, Andrew	Franklin, Zöe
Bradley, rh Dame Karen	Fuller, Richard
Brandreth, Aphra	Gale, rh Sir Roger
Brewer, Alex	Garnier, Mark
Burghart, Alex	Gethins, Stephen
Campbell, Mr Gregory	Gibson, Sarah (<i>Proxy vote cast by Anna Sabine</i>)
Cane, Charlotte	Gilmour, Rachel
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair	Glen, rh John
Cartlidge, James	Glover, Oly
Chadwick, David	Goldman, Marie
Chamberlain, Wendy	Gordon, Tom
Chambers, Dr Danny	Grant, Helen
Chope, Sir Christopher	Green, Sarah
Chowns, Ellie	Griffith, Andrew
Cleverly, rh Mr James	Griffiths, Alison
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey	Harding, Monica
Cocking, Lewis	Harris, Rebecca
Coghlan, Chris	Hayes, rh Sir John
Collins, Victoria	Hinds, rh Damian
Cooper, Daisy	Hoare, Simon
Cooper, John	Hobhouse, Wera
Costa, Alberto	Holden, rh Mr Richard
Coutinho, rh Claire (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Hollinrake, Kevin
Cox, rh Sir Geoffrey	Huddleston, Nigel
Cross, Harriet	Hudson, Dr Neil
Dance, Adam	Jardine, Christine
Darling, Steve	Jarvis, Liz
Davies, Ann	Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Davies, Gareth	Johnson, Dr Caroline
Davies, Mims	Jones, Clive
	Jopp, Lincoln

Kearns, Alicia (<i>Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey</i>)	Ramsay, Adrian
Khan, Ayoub	Rankin, Jack
Kohler, Mr Paul	Reed, David
Kruger, Danny	Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Lake, Ben	Robertson, Joe
Lam, Katie	Robinson, rh Gavin
Lamont, John	Roome, Ian
Leadbitter, Graham	Rosindell, Andrew
Lewis, rh Sir Julian	Sabine, Anna
Lockhart, Carla	Savage, Dr Roz
Logan, Seamus	Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Lowe, Rupert	Shannon, Jim
MacCleary, James	Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
MacDonald, Mr Angus	Shelbrooke, rh Sir Alec
Maguire, Ben	Simmonds, David
Maguire, Helen	Slade, Vikki
Mak, Alan	Smart, Lisa
Malthouse, rh Kit	Smith, Greg
Martin, Mike	Smith, rh Sir Julian
Mathew, Brian	Smith, Rebecca
Mayhew, Jerome	Sollom, Ian
Maynard, Charlie	Spencer, Dr Ben
McVey, rh Esther	Spencer, Patrick
Medi, Llinos	Stafford, Gregory
Miller, Calum	Stephenson, Blake
Milne, John	Stone, Jamie
Mitchell, rh Mr Andrew	Stride, rh Mel
Mohamed, Iqbal	Stuart, rh Graham
Mohindra, Mr Gagan	Swann, Robin
Moore, Robbie	Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Morgan, Helen	Taylor, Luke
Morrison, Mr Tom (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Forster</i>)	Thomas, Bradley
Morrissey, Joy	Thomas, Cameron
Morton, rh Wendy	Tice, Richard
Mullan, Dr Kieran	Timothy, Nick
Mundell, rh David	Tugendhat, rh Tom
Munt, Tessa	Vickers, Martin
Murray, Susan	Whately, Helen
Murrison, rh Dr Andrew	Wild, James
Obese-Jecty, Ben	Wilkinson, Max
O’Brien, Neil	Williamson, rh Sir Gavin
O’Hara, Brendan	Wilson, Munira
Olney, Sarah	Wilson, rh Sammy
Perteghella, Manuela	Wood, Mike
Philp, rh Chris	Wrigley, Martin
Pinkerton, Dr Al	Young, Claire
Pritchard, rh Mark	
Raja, Shivani (<i>Proxy vote cast by Mr Mohindra</i>)	

Tellers for the Ayes:
Rebecca Paul and
Mr Andrew Snowden

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Ady</i>)	Antoniazzi, Tonia
Abbott, Jack	Arthur, Dr Scott
Abrahams, Debbie	Asato, Jess
Ahmed, Dr Zubir	Asser, James
Akehurst, Luke	Athwal, Jas
Alaba, Mr Bayo	Atkinson, Catherine
Aldridge, Dan	Atkinson, Lewis
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Bailey, Mr Calvin
Alexander, rh Heidi	Bailey, Olivia
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Baines, David
Ali, Tahir	Baker, Richard
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Ballinger, Alex
Amesbury, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Bance, Antonia
Anderson, Callum	Barker, Paula
Anderson, Fleur	Barron, Lee
	Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
	Baxter, Johanna
	Beales, Danny

Beavers, Lorraine	Esterson, Bill	Lewin, Andrew	Quigley, Mr Richard
Begum, Apsana	Evans, Chris	Lewis, Clive	Qureshi, Yasmin
Bell, Torsten	Fahnbulleh, Miatta	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Race, Steve
Benn, rh Hilary	Farnsworth, Linsey	MacAlister, Josh	Ranger, Andrew
Betts, Mr Clive	Ferguson, Patricia	Macdonald, Alice	Reader, Mike
Billington, Ms Polly	Fleet, Natalie	MacNae, Andy	Reed, rh Steve
Bishop, Matt	Foody, Emma	Madders, Justin	Reeves, Ellie
Blake, Rachel	Fookes, Catherine	Martin, Amanda	Reid, Joani
Bloore, Chris	Foster, Mr Paul	Maskell, Rachael	Rhodes, Martin
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Foxcroft, Vicky	Mather, Keir	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Bonavia, Kevin	Francis, Daniel	Mayer, Alex	Richards, Jake
Botterill, Jade	Frith, Mr James	McAllister, Douglas	Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Furniss, Gill	McCarthy, Kerry	Rigby, Lucy
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Gardiner, Barry	McCluskey, Martin	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Brickell, Phil	Gardner, Dr Allison	McDonald, Andy	Robertson, Dave
Bryant, Chris	Gelder, Anna	McDonald, Chris	Rodda, Matt
Buckley, Julia	German, Gill	McDonnell, rh John	Rushworth, Sam
Burgon, Richard	Gilbert, Tracy	McDougall, Blair	Russell, Mrs Sarah
Burke, Maureen	Gill, Preet Kaur	McEvoy, Lola	Rutland, Tom
Burton-Sampson, David	Gittins, Becky	McGovern, Alison	Sackman, Sarah
Byrne, Ian	Glindon, Mary	McIntyre, Alex	Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Byrne, rh Liam	Goldsborough, Ben	McKenna, Kevin	Scrogham, Michelle
Cadbury, Ruth	Gosling, Jodie	McKinnell, Catherine	Sewards, Mr Mark
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Grady, John	McMahon, Jim	Shah, Naz
Campbell, Irene	Griffith, Dame Nia	McMorris, Anna	Shanker, Baggy
Campbell, Juliet	Gwynne, Andrew	McNally, Frank	Shanks, Michael
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Hack, Amanda	McNeill, Kirsty	Siddiq, Tulip
Carling, Sam	Haigh, rh Louise	Midgley, Anneliese	Simons, Josh
Carns, Al	Hall, Sarah	Minns, Ms Julie	Slaughter, Andy
Champion, Sarah	Hamilton, Paulette	Mishra, Navendu	Slinger, John
Charalambous, Bambos	Harris, Carolyn	Mohamed, Abtisam	Smith, Cat
Charters, Mr Luke	Hatton, Lloyd	Moon, Perran	Smith, David
Clark, Feryal	Hayes, Helen	Morden, Jessica	Smith, Jeff
Coleman, Ben	Hayes, Tom	Morgan, Stephen	Smith, Nick
Collier, Jacob	Hazelgrove, Claire	Morris, Grahame	Smith, Sarah
Collinge, Lizzi	Hillier, Dame Meg	Morris, Joe	Smyth, Karin
Collins, Tom	Hinchliff, Chris	Mullane, Margaret	Sobel, Alex
Conlon, Liam	Hinder, Jonathan	Murphy, Luke	Stainbank, Euan
Coombes, Sarah	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Murray, Chris	Stevens, rh Jo
Cooper, Andrew	Hopkins, Rachel	Murray, Katrina	Stevenson, Kenneth
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Hughes, Claire	Myer, Luke	Stewart, Elaine
Costigan, Deirdre	Hume, Alison	Naish, James	Stone, Will
Cox, Pam	Huq, Dr Rupa	Naismith, Connor	Strathern, Alistair
Craft, Jen	Hurley, Patrick	Nandy, rh Lisa	Strickland, Alan
Creagh, Mary	Hussain, Imran	Narayan, Kanishka	Stringer, Graham
Creasy, Ms Stella	Ingham, Leigh	Newbury, Josh	Sullivan, Kirsteen
Crichton, Torcuil	Irons, Natasha	Niblett, Samantha	Sullivan, Dr Lauren
Curtis, Chris	Jameson, Sally	Nichols, Charlotte	Sultana, Zarah
Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Jermy, Terry	Onn, Melanie	Swallow, Peter
Dalton, Ashley	Jogee, Adam	Onwurah, Chi	Tami, rh Mark
Darlington, Emily	Jones, Lillian	Opher, Dr Simon	Tapp, Mike
Davies, Jonathan	Jones, Ruth	Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena	Taylor, David
Davies, Paul	Josan, Gurinder Singh	Osamor, Kate	Taylor, Rachel
Davies, Shaun	Joseph, Sojan	Osborne, Kate	Thomas, Fred (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)
Dean, Josh	Juss, Warinder	Osborne, Tristan	Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Kane, Chris	Owatemi, Taiwo	Thompson, Adam
Dickson, Jim	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Owen, Sarah	Tidball, Dr Marie
Dixon, Anna	Khan, Afzal	Paffey, Darren	Timms, rh Sir Stephen
Dixon, Samantha	Khan, Naushabah	Pakes, Andrew	Toale, Jessica
Dollimore, Helena	Kinnock, Stephen	Patrick, Matthew	Trickett, Jon
Doughty, Stephen	Kirkham, Jayne	Payne, Michael	Turley, Anna
Dowd, Peter	Kitchen, Gen	Pearce, Jon	Turmaine, Matt
Downie, Graeme	Kumar, Gen	Pennycook, Matthew	Turner, Karl
Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Kumar, Sonia	Perkins, Mr Toby	Turner, Laurence
Eagle, Dame Angela	Kumaran, Uma	Pinto-Duschinsky, David	Twigg, Derek
Edwards, Lauren	Kyrke-Smith, Laura	Pitcher, Lee	Twist, Liz
Edwards, Sarah	Lamb, Peter	Platt, Jo	Uppal, Harpreet
Ellis, Maya	Lavery, Ian	Pollard, Luke	Vaughan, Tony
Elmore, Chris	Law, Noah	Powell, Joe	Vaz, rh Valerie
Entwistle, Kirith	Leadbeater, Kim	Powell, rh Lucy	Vince, Chris
Eshalomi, Florence	Leishman, Brian	Poynton, Gregor	Wakeford, Christian
	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Prinsley, Peter	

Walker, Imogen
Ward, Melanie
Waugh, Paul
Webb, Chris
Welsh, Michelle
Western, Andrew
Western, Matt
Wheeler, Michael
Whitby, John
White, Jo
White, Katie

Williams, David
Witherden, Steve
Woodcock, Sean
Wrighting, Rosie
Yang, Yuan
Yasin, Mohammad
Yemm, Steve
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
Gerald Jones and
Kate Dearden

Question accordingly negated.

Amendment proposed: 2, page 3, line 35, at end insert—

“340IAA Commissioner support for minority groups within service personnel

(1) When investigating general service welfare matters under section 340IA, the Commissioner must consider the specific experiences of minority groups within service personnel, including but not limited to—

- (a) female;
- (b) BAME
- (c) non-UK; and
- (d) LGBT+

service personnel.

(2) The Commissioner may investigate service welfare matters unique to one or more of these groups of service personnel.

(3) The Commissioner must maintain up-to-date evidence on the experiences of these groups of service personnel and develop robust community engagement mechanisms to identify and address issues specific to these groups.

(4) The Commissioner must establish a formal network of representation to enable the views and concerns of these groups of service personnel to be communicated to the Commissioner.

(5) The Commissioner must publish an annual report outlining—

- (a) the issues facing and concerns raised by these groups of service personnel;
- (b) the actions taken by the Commissioner to address identified issues;
- (c) the progress made in improving conditions for these groups of service personnel.”—(*Helen Maguire.*)

This amendment would require the Commissioner to take specific action to consider and address welfare issues facing service personnel from minority groups.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 76, Noes 349.

Division No. 89]

[4.58 pm

AYES

Adam, Shockat
Aqarone, Steff
Babarinde, Josh
Bennett, Alison
Berry, Siân
Brewer, Alex
Cane, Charlotte
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Chadwick, David
Chamberlain, Wendy
Chambers, Dr Danny
Chowns, Ellie
Coghlan, Chris
Collins, Victoria
Cooper, Daisy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Dance, Adam

Darling, Steve
Davies, Ann
Denyer, Carla
Dillon, Mr Lee
Dyke, Sarah
Eastwood, Sorcha
Farron, Tim
Foord, Richard
Forster, Mr Will
Franklin, Zöe
Gibson, Sarah (*Proxy vote*
cast by Anna Sabine)
Gilmour, Rachel
Glover, Olly
Goldman, Marie
Gordon, Tom
Green, Sarah

Harding, Monica
Hobhouse, Wera
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Liz
Jones, Clive
Khan, Ayoub
Kohler, Mr Paul
Lake, Ben
MacCleary, James
MacDonald, Mr Angus
Maguire, Ben
Maguire, Helen
Martin, Mike
Mathew, Brian
Medi, Llinos
Miller, Calum
Milne, John
Mohamed, Iqbal
Morgan, Helen
Morrison, Mr Tom (*Proxy vote*
cast by Mr Forster)
Munt, Tessa
Murray, Susan

Olney, Sarah
Perteghella, Manuela
Pinkerton, Dr Al
Ramsay, Adrian
Reynolds, Mr Joshua
Roome, Ian
Sabine, Anna
Savage, Dr Roz
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Slade, Vikki
Smart, Lisa
Sollom, Ian
Stone, Jamie
Swann, Robin
Taylor, Luke
Thomas, Cameron
Wilkinson, Max
Wilson, Munira
Wrigley, Martin
Young, Claire

Tellers for the Ayes:
Charlie Maynard and
Bobby Dean

NOES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (*Proxy vote*
cast by Bell Ribeiro-
Ady)
Abbott, Jack
Abrahams, Debbie
Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Akehurst, Luke
Alaba, Mr Bayo
Aldridge, Dan
Alexander, rh Mr Douglas
Alexander, rh Heidi
Al-Hassan, Sadik
Ali, Tahir
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Allister, Jim
Amesbury, Mike (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Anderson, Callum
Anderson, Fleur
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Arthur, Dr Scott
Asato, Jess
Asser, James
Athwal, Jas
Atkinson, Catherine
Atkinson, Lewis
Bailey, Mr Calvin
Bailey, Olivia
Baines, David
Baker, Richard
Ballinger, Alex
Bance, Antonia
Barker, Paula
Barron, Lee
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex
Baxter, Johanna
Beales, Danny
Beavers, Lorraine
Begum, Apsana
Bell, Torsten
Benn, rh Hilary
Betts, Mr Clive
Billington, Ms Polly
Bishop, Matt
Blake, Rachel
Bloore, Chris
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (*Proxy vote*
cast by Chris Elmore)
Bonavia, Kevin
Botterill, Jade
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena
Brash, Mr Jonathan
Brickell, Phil
Bryant, Chris
Buckley, Julia
Burgon, Richard
Burke, Maureen
Burton-Sampson, David
Byrne, Ian
Byrne, rh Liam
Cadbury, Ruth
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Campbell, Irene
Campbell, Juliet
Campbell-Savours, Markus
Carling, Sam
Carns, Al
Champion, Sarah
Charalambous, Bambos
Charters, Mr Luke
Clark, Feryal
Coleman, Ben
Collier, Jacob
Collinge, Lizzi
Collins, Tom
Conlon, Liam
Coombes, Sarah
Cooper, Andrew
Cooper, Dr Becca
Costigan, Deirdre
Cox, Pam
Craft, Jen
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Ms Stella
Crichton, Torcuil
Curtis, Chris
Dakin, Sir Nicholas
Dalton, Ashley
Darlington, Emily
Davies, Jonathan
Davies, Paul

Davies, Shaun
 Dean, Josh
 Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
 Dickson, Jim
 Dixon, Anna
 Dixon, Samantha
 Dollimore, Helena
 Doughty, Stephen
 Dowd, Peter
 Downie, Graeme
 Duncan-Jordan, Neil
 Eagle, Dame Angela
 Easton, Alex
 Edwards, Lauren
 Edwards, Sarah
 Ellis, Maya
 Elmore, Chris
 Entwistle, Kirith
 Eshalomi, Florence
 Esterson, Bill
 Evans, Chris
 Fahnbulleh, Miatta
 Farnsworth, Linsey
 Ferguson, Patricia
 Fleet, Natalie
 Foody, Emma
 Fookes, Catherine
 Foster, Mr Paul
 Foxcroft, Vicky
 Francis, Daniel
 Frith, Mr James
 Furniss, Gill
 Gardiner, Barry
 Gardner, Dr Allison
 Gelderd, Anna
 German, Gill
 Gilbert, Tracy
 Gill, Preet Kaur
 Gittins, Becky
 Glindon, Mary
 Goldsborough, Ben
 Gosling, Jodie
 Grady, John
 Griffith, Dame Nia
 Gwynne, Andrew
 Hack, Amanda
 Haigh, rh Louise
 Hall, Sarah
 Hamilton, Paulette
 Hardy, Emma
 Harris, Carolyn
 Hatton, Lloyd
 Hayes, Helen
 Hayes, Tom
 Hazelgrove, Claire
 Hillier, Dame Meg
 Hinchliff, Chris
 Hinder, Jonathan
 Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
 Hopkins, Rachel
 Hughes, Claire
 Hume, Alison
 Huq, Dr Rupa
 Hurley, Patrick
 Hussain, Imran
 Ingham, Leigh
 Irons, Natasha
 Jameson, Sally
 Jermy, Terry
 Jogee, Adam
 Jones, Lillian
 Jones, Ruth

Josan, Gurinder Singh
 Joseph, Sojan
 Juss, Warinder
 Kane, Chris
 Kaur, Satvir (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Kendall, rh Liz
 Khan, Afzal
 Khan, Naushabah
 Kinnock, Stephen
 Kirkham, Jayne
 Kitchen, Gen
 Kumar, Sonia
 Kumaran, Uma
 Kyrke-Smith, Laura
 Lamb, Peter
 Lammy, rh Mr David
 Lavery, Ian
 Law, Noah
 Leadbeater, Kim
 Leishman, Brian
 Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma
 Lewin, Andrew
 Lewis, Clive
 Lockhart, Carla
 Long Bailey, Rebecca
 MacAlister, Josh
 Macdonald, Alice
 MacNae, Andy
 Madders, Justin
 Martin, Amanda
 Maskell, Rachael
 Mather, Keir
 Mayer, Alex
 McAllister, Douglas
 McCarthy, Kerry
 McCluskey, Martin
 McDonald, Andy
 McDonald, Chris
 McDonnell, rh John
 McDougall, Blair
 McEvoy, Lola
 McGovern, Alison
 McIntyre, Alex
 McKenna, Kevin
 McKinnell, Catherine
 McMahan, Jim
 McMorris, Anna
 McNally, Frank
 McNeill, Kirsty
 Midgley, Anneliese
 Minns, Ms Julie
 Mishra, Navendu
 Mohamed, Abtisam
 Moon, Perran
 Morden, Jessica
 Morgan, Stephen
 Morris, Grahame
 Morris, Joe
 Mullane, Margaret
 Murphy, Luke
 Murray, Chris
 Murray, Katrina
 Myer, Luke
 Naish, James
 Naismith, Connor
 Nandy, rh Lisa
 Narayan, Kanishka
 Newbury, Josh
 Niblett, Samantha
 Nichols, Charlotte
 Onn, Melanie

Onwurah, Chi
 Opher, Dr Simon
 Oppong-Asare, Ms Abena
 Osamor, Kate
 Osborne, Kate
 Osborne, Tristan
 Owatemi, Taiwo
 Owen, Sarah
 Paffey, Darren
 Pakes, Andrew
 Patrick, Matthew
 Payne, Michael
 Pearce, Jon
 Pennycook, Matthew
 Perkins, Mr Toby
 Pinto-Duschinsky, David
 Pitcher, Lee
 Platt, Jo
 Pollard, Luke
 Powell, Joe
 Powell, rh Lucy
 Poynton, Gregor
 Prinsley, Peter
 Quigley, Mr Richard
 Qureshi, Yasmin
 Race, Steve
 Ranger, Andrew
 Reader, Mike
 Reed, rh Steve
 Reeves, Ellie
 Reid, Joani
 Rhodes, Martin
 Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
 Richards, Jake
 Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
 Rigby, Lucy
 Rimmer, Ms Marie
 Robertson, Dave
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Rodda, Matt
 Rushworth, Sam
 Russell, Mrs Sarah
 Rutland, Tom
 Sackman, Sarah
 Sandher, Dr Jeevun
 Scrogam, Michelle
 Seward, Mr Mark
 Shah, Naz
 Shanker, Baggy
 Shanks, Michael
 Shannon, Jim
 Siddiq, Tulip
 Simons, Josh
 Slaughter, Andy
 Slinger, John
 Smith, Cat
 Smith, David
 Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth

Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Stringer, Graham
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Laurence
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Taylor, Rachel
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Turley, Anna
 Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Karl
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Wilson, rh Sammy
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Noes:
 Gerald Jones and
 Kate Dearden

Question accordingly negated.

Third Reading

5.10 pm

Luke Pollard: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

It is a privilege to open the Third Reading debate and to reach this next milestone in establishing the Armed Forces Commissioner. The first duty of any Government

is to keep our nation safe. At the heart of that security are the dedicated men and women of our armed forces, and the families who support them. It was a priority for this Government to move quickly and introduce the Bill in our first Session. I am grateful to all Members across the parties for their co-operation in getting the Bill this far in the short space of a few months.

I thank everyone who has played a role in getting the Bill to this stage, particularly the parliamentary staff who have worked on the Bill, and the officials in the Ministry of Defence who have moved at pace to deliver it.

It can be an all-too-rare occasion for this House to find itself in agreement, so I am grateful to Members on all sides, including those in the official Opposition, for their support for the Bill and for the role of the new Armed Forces Commissioner. I thank the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) and the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), alongside all members of the Bill Committee, for their constructive scrutiny throughout. This is testament to the pride that is felt in all parts of the House in our exceptional armed forces and our shared recognition of the service and sacrifices that they and their families make to keep us all safe.

I also thank the witnesses who gave evidence to the Committee, including the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces, Mariette Hughes, who has provided invaluable feedback, drawing on her time in office, and showed such enthusiastic support for what the Bill is trying to achieve. I must thank her and her team for all their hard work in rescuing much of the service complaints system and getting it in the good shape that it is in today.

I say thank you to the Royal British Legion, Help for Heroes, SSAFA, Cobseo, the Defence Medical Welfare Service, the Army Benevolent Fund, the Royal Marines Charity, the RAF Benevolent Fund and the Army Families Federation, not only for their valuable and thought-provoking participation at Committee stage, but also for their tireless work representing our service personnel and their families. Their views will be crucial to ensuring that the commissioner is a success.

I think it is clear from the evidence that we have heard and from the views shared in this House that an independent Armed Forces Commissioner is the champion that we need to improve service life and to represent our serving personnel and their families.

At a time of increasing instability and heightened tensions, we are asking more of our serving personnel, but they have been badly let down and we are facing a crisis in recruitment, a crisis in retention and a crisis in morale. For the past two years, more people have been leaving our armed forces than joining, and morale hit a record low under the previous Government. Our forces and their families have been failed for far too long. That is why this Government are determined to renew the nation's contract with those who serve, and the establishment of the Armed Forces Commissioner is a major step forward.

I previously mentioned to the House that the Bill was inspired by the long-established German Parliamentary Commissioner for the Armed Forces. I pay tribute to Dr Eva Högl, who is a superb example of how we can champion and provide a voice to our armed forces. Our proposed Armed Forces Commissioner, like the German commissioner, will have the power to consider the full

breadth of welfare issues that may impact service life. They will be a direct point of contact for our forces and their families.

The Bill before us grants the commissioner the necessary access to personnel, information and defence sites to be able to proactively launch investigations, shine a spotlight on issues facing service personnel and their families, and make recommendations to Parliament. They will be able to investigate individual concerns and launch wide-ranging thematic investigations. The Bill also provides for the commissioner to absorb the existing powers of the Service Complaints Ombudsman for the Armed Forces. As we heard from the current ombudsman in Committee, her remit is too narrow and does not allow her to explore the “So what?” behind the complaints she oversees. The new powers will allow the commissioner to do just that, situating the service complaints system in a wider landscape of service welfare and providing that coherent, independent view of those issues facing our serving personnel and their families.

At this time of increasing threat, it has never been more important to raise awareness of the service and sacrifices made by our armed forces and the issues facing the families who stand beside them. We have discussed on the Floor of the House today, and in Committee last month, how critical it is for the commissioner to be independent and impartial, with the discretion to decide what welfare issues they investigate. I hope there is no doubt that our intention is that the commissioner will act as an independent champion for the armed forces and hold this Government and future Governments to account. They will challenge Ministers, strengthen parliamentary oversight and raise awareness of the issues facing our forces.

Several hon. Members from across the House have spoken about the Bill's application to veterans. I am grateful for those questions and particularly for the contributions of those who have served our armed forces. I would like to reiterate that the Bill is deliberately tightly drawn to focus on those who are currently serving and their families. Looking at the continuous attitude surveys, that is where the crisis we are facing in recruitment, retention and morale is. There are specific issues that need to be addressed for those people who serve in uniform today and their families. The role of the Armed Forces Commissioner as an independent champion for our forces is significant and long overdue.

The issues facing our veterans population are distinct and, as the Secretary of State set out on Second Reading, we are certain that a more effective way of improving support for veterans will be to fully implement the armed forces covenant in law—work that is already in train, led by the Minister for Veterans and People, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Selly Oak (Al Carns).

In conclusion, we must renew the whole nation's contract with those who serve. The Armed Forces Commissioner is a major step in commencing that important work. This is landmark legislation to establish an independent Armed Forces Commissioner with the mission to improve service life. I therefore commend the Bill to the House.

5.17 pm

James Cartlidge: I congratulate and thank all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to the passage of the Bill and served on the Bill Committee.

[James Cartlidge]

As I said on Second Reading, we recognise that the Government have a clear mandate for this piece of legislation, which has the worthy goal of improving day-to-day service life in our armed forces. We strongly share that goal and want the Bill to succeed, but, as my hon. Friend the Member for Spelthorne (Lincoln Jopp) said, we also have performed the role of a critical friend of the Bill and have raised a number of specific issues. The shadow Veterans and Armed Forces Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois), raised important points, which we have put forward in amendments. In fact, both relate to tax measures that have come forward under this tax-raising Government on death in service and continuity of education allowance, known as CEA.

The key thing I would say on death in service, in response to what the Minister said on Report, is that of course we understand that a consultation is happening on inheritance tax, which expires tomorrow. What we want to know is that the Ministry of Defence has communicated to the Treasury that it opposes the measure and hopes that it will not be imposed on those who serve in our armed forces, because it would be a disproportionate and significant increase in inheritance tax. As my right hon. Friend put it in a moving speech about the impact it would have, I am sure none of us in the Chamber would want to see that, so we hope that the Minister has written to the Treasury and that it listens to his advice and cancels the proposal.

There is a very simple reason why we moved amendment 10 on the continuity of education allowance. We want the Department to continue monitoring the impact of the new tax on those who serve in the military and choose to send their children to independent schools, not least because of the stability that those schools provide in a life that is subject to the opposite, particularly for those who are deployed abroad. The allowance gives them stability through access to schools at which their children can board, and of course most of that capacity is in the independent sector, which is now subject to a huge 20% tax imposition. We want that monitored by the Armed Forces Commissioner. If anyone doubts the reason for that, our office has received many emails from serving personnel—people in the Army, Navy and Air Force today—who are extremely concerned about the impact on them, and are having to weigh up their future. I will read an extract from one email that I received from the wife of an Army officer with two children in boarding school—one in junior school, and one in senior school. She says:

“With the sudden introduction of VAT on school fees—something that was not foreseen when we made our decision—we will face an additional £14,500 per year in costs. This is simply not sustainable for our family, and my husband is now considering leaving the Army as a result.”

This is not a minor matter. If we are worried about retention, surely the last thing any of us wants is for people like that to consider leaving. We are disappointed that the amendment was defeated, but the parliamentary arithmetic speaks for itself.

Finally, on accommodation, which is an incredibly important issue, I remind the House of what I said on Second Reading. I said that, in my time as Minister for Defence Procurement with responsibility for the defence estate,

“I wanted to see us potentially buying back the defence estate in England and Wales from Annington, so that we could plan a full rebuild and regeneration of the estate”.—[*Official Report*, 18 November 2024; Vol. 757, c. 78.]

I am delighted that since I said that, the Government have concluded that deal. I started the negotiations on the deal when I was a Minister, following the successful legal challenges initiated by the preceding Minister for Defence Procurement, Jeremy Quin, and the deal was brought forward with huge effort in the Department—particularly, I must say, from the Defence Infrastructure Organisation. DIO has come in for criticism in some reports—in response to the winter problems that we had two years ago, for example—but my experience was that its leadership was as passionate as I was about getting that deal through, and we are now in a far better position.

Why does that matter? Well, there are many welfare issues that the commissioner will have to think about, but as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), said, accommodation will surely feature prominently, and we now have the means to address that issue strategically, rather than through year-to-year sticking-plasters. I assure the House and Ministers that, given my role in driving that deal forward, I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford, who shares my passion for housing and armed forces accommodation, will seek to contribute to the plan to move forward to a better defence estate. In the meantime, we look forward to continuing to engage on these matters as the Armed Forces Commissioner becomes a reality.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Environmental Protection

5.22 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Mary Creagh): I beg to move,

That the draft Deposit Scheme for Drinks Containers (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 25 November 2024, be approved.

It is a red-letter day, is it not, Madam Deputy Speaker? Back in 2017, the Environmental Audit Committee, which I chaired, reported on the UK's appalling record on recycling plastic bottles, and recommended the introduction by Government of a deposit return scheme. I have the report and the then Government's response with me. Previous Governments promised that such a scheme would be put in place, yet here we are. The Conservatives recycled Ministers at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs up to seven times, but they did little to reduce the millions of empty plastic containers littering our high streets, washing up on our beaches and polluting our rivers.

We have known for decades that the “take, make, throw” model causes harm. It leads to littering, landfill and incineration. Keep Britain Tidy estimates that two waste streams, plastic bottles and drinks cans, make up 55% of all litter across the UK. When it comes to addressing waste, this Government will not waste time. We are turning back the plastic tide and moving to a circular economy that keeps valuable resources in use for longer.

Dr Andrew Murrison (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The Minister will know that incinerators are now the dirtiest way in which we generate electricity—dirtier than coal. Further to her Department's advice note dated 30 December, what will she do to place a moratorium on the construction of new waste burners, thus bringing us in line with more enlightened Administrations—in this respect at least—in Wales and Scotland?

Mary Creagh: The right hon. Gentleman is right that we made an announcement on that issue. We will bring forward further guidance and work with local authorities as they examine what is before them, so there will be more to say on this at a later date.

Returning to the issue of getting money back on bottles and cans, deposit return schemes and other such schemes are a well-established method of keeping resources in use for longer. Many of us generation X MPs will remember using these schemes in our school days. Over 50 countries run money-back bottle schemes, creating an incentive to return drinks containers for reuse or recycling. Germany had a 98% return rate—the highest in Europe—in its deposit return scheme last year. I met the Irish Minister Ossian Smyth just last week; Ireland's deposit return scheme was introduced only in February 2024, and it is already achieving a 90% return rate. The UK is way behind, with collection rates ranging from 71% to 76% for plastic bottles and metal cans. We can, must and will do better.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for introducing the issue. Could she kindly outline the discussions that she and the Government have had directly

with Northern Ireland? I do not want to be a Job's comforter, but we have asked some questions, and it does not seem that anybody in Northern Ireland can tell us what the connections and discussions have been.

Mary Creagh: I am very happy to say that we discussed the fact that when this scheme comes in, there will be a scheme in Northern Ireland, and one in the south. However, the currencies are obviously different, so we will have to get the scheme up and running before we look at whether there is scope for interoperability. That is basically where we are with Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: I am not trying to be awkward—it is never my form—but can the Minister say which Minister or Department her Government have spoken to about this system, and how we in Northern Ireland can have input into this process, other than just from this place?

Mary Creagh: As I say, I was talking last week to Ossian Smyth, who is the outgoing Minister in the Republic of Ireland. We have been in discussion with officials over the past several years; the previous Government, members of which are in the Chamber today, have been in discussion with officials at the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs, and I met the Minister for a general introduction before Christmas.

Jim Shannon *rose*—

Mary Creagh: I will make some progress, and I will perhaps come back to the hon. Gentleman later.

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, and commend the excellent work that she did on this subject as Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee. I think another Select Committee then looked at this subject in 2022, and the Government at that stage said that they would implement a deposit return scheme. Does my hon. Friend accept that over 200,000 people responded to the consultation that was then run, and 84% of respondents said that they agreed with implementing such a scheme?

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that point. This move has overwhelming support from the general public, who are sick to death and fed up of seeing their streets and rivers blighted by litter. Slovakia implemented a scheme in 2022, and that country now has a 92% return rate; it is right up there with countries that have had schemes for decades. We know that we can do the same in the UK; just look at how behaviour has changed since the introduction of charges for carrier bags in shops. That led to a rapid change in people's habits. Imagine where we would be if the previous Government had focused on recycling plastic bottles, rather than smuggling champagne bottles in suitcases into Downing Street.

The deposit return scheme is one of the three strands of our packaging reforms, along with extended producer responsibility for packaging and the simpler recycling programme for England. We estimate that, together, the packaging reforms will support 21,000 new green jobs in our nations and regions, and stimulate more than £10 billion of investment in recycling capability over the next decade. CPRE, the countryside charity, estimates that the deposit return scheme will deliver 4,000 of

[Mary Creagh]

those new jobs. It is also estimated that the reforms will save over 46 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalent by 2035, valued at more than £10 billion in carbon benefits.

The deposit return scheme will end the epidemic of litter on our streets and restore pride in our communities. It will improve the countryside, preserve our wildlife and protect our beaches and marine environment. I have spoken to several fantastic organisations that were part of the huge campaign that my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) mentioned, including the Marine Conservation Society, the Aylesbury Wombles and, in my constituency, Destination Ball Hill. There are so many people spending so many volunteer hours dealing with this pollution problem, and doing their best to keep their area looking nice.

The brilliant charity Keep Britain Tidy estimates that littered drinks bottles and cans along our roadsides are killing millions of our native mammals every year. If we drive along the M1 motorway, we see buzzards and birds of prey circling, and that is because our national highways have become nature corridors. They are a very important habitat for RES—rare and endangered species—and much-loved small mammals such as shrews, bank voles and wood mice, but we are finding more and more of them becoming trapped in plastic bottles carelessly discarded along our highways. We must act to protect these precious creatures. We want less Mr Toad and more Moley.

Peter Swallow (Bracknell) (Lab): I warmly welcome the deposit return scheme; it would have been fantastic if it had been delivered many years ago, as had been promised. On the wider issue of litter affecting our constituencies, will the Minister say more about how this measure fits in with the work the Government are doing to, for want of a better phrase, get tough on litter and tough on the causes of litter?

Mary Creagh: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and we are looking at what further reforms we can bring in to tackle the rogue waste collectors. The carriers, brokers and dealers regime is not fit for purpose. I have asked officials to look at what we can do to strengthen that, and to avoid the sort of casual criminality we saw just yesterday in the constituency of Lichfield, where waste from a construction site was abandoned in the middle of a country lane, literally trapping nine households in their houses; they were unable to leave. I understand that the Environment Agency has been in touch, and the council is working to clear that blockage. It is clear that, with this Government, the era of talking is over and the era of action is upon us, and there will be nowhere for these waste criminals to hide.

The deposit return scheme is about having a more resource-resilient economy, and not being reliant on materials brought in from overseas. The scheme under the statutory instrument that we are discussing is consistent with the “polluter pays” principle. Giving money back for bottles and cans provides an incentive for people to do the right thing. It places obligations on drinks producers, not consumers, to ensure that containers are collected and recycled. We have set an ambitious target of collecting 90% of in-scope containers by the third year of the

scheme. I am confident that the public are with us. We know people hate litter in their parks, in their countryside and on their streets. As with plastic bag charges, once this is the norm, people will just get on with it. Small changes for individuals will deliver huge national benefits.

I will now turn to the details of this instrument. Laid in draft before the House on 25 November 2024, this instrument establishes in England and Northern Ireland, and I can tell the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) that Minister Muir is the responsible Minister in Northern Ireland—

Jim Shannon: I know it is Minister Muir. I respect the hon. Lady greatly, but what discussions has Minister Muir had with the Department, because I understand there have been none? Ministers from down south are not responsible for Northern Ireland, we in Northern Ireland are and the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs Minister is. Can the hon. Lady gee up her civil servants and tell us what is happening?

Mary Creagh: I can assure the hon. Gentleman that my excellent officials, led by the estimable Clare Delaney, have been shepherding this through. They will have had extensive conversations with officials. I met with the Minister on the taskforce on woodland creation before Christmas as well, so we are in regular contact and I will make a point of discussing this with him—but I am sure the hon. Gentleman will make a point of discussing this with him as well.

Claire Hanna (Belfast South and Mid Down) (SDLP): As I am sure the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) would attest, Keep Northern Ireland Beautiful estimates that we have 420 million plastic bottles and 90 million cans in Northern Ireland so we have a lot of work to do on reduction. The scheme is working really well in the Republic and I am an avid user of it when I am down south, but while it is a big draw into supermarkets, particularly the multiples, are there any provisions in place to help smaller retailers put the infrastructure in place so that they get a piece of the action as well?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have been engaging extensively with the Association of Convenience Stores because it is imperative that they do not miss out or else we will end up with a scheme run by large retailers for large retailers. It is in the design of the scheme that the deposit management organisation which this instrument sets up must have representatives from large and small retailers on its board to ensure that the full voice is heard. In fact I am about to tell my hon. Friend and the House about the details of this.

A person who is supplied with drink in a container that is in scope of this instrument pays a deposit which can be redeemed when it is returned for recycling. The design is informed by well-established international examples and extensive industry engagement over many years—about seven years. Industry partners have shared their experiences delivering these schemes across the world and the scheme will be centrally managed by an industry-led, not-for-profit organisation: the deposit management organisation.

The instrument applies to England and Northern Ireland. My officials have worked closely with the Scottish Government, who are amending their existing legislation

so that we can launch compatible schemes simultaneously across England, Northern Ireland and Scotland in 2027. The Welsh Government have withdrawn from the four-nation DRS approach; however, we are keen to remain in close working partnership with them as they make decisions regarding a DRS in Wales. We are keen to keep the door open, to provide as much interoperability across the UK as possible.

I acknowledge the work of the Secondary Legislation Scrutiny Committee, which draws this instrument to the special attention of the House on the grounds that it is politically or legally important and gives rise to issues of public policy likely to be of interest to the House.

The instrument sets out the scope of the scheme and places obligations on drinks producers, importers and retailers. Producers of drinks in plastic and metal containers will be obligated to label products and charge a deposit when supplying the drink into England and Northern Ireland. They must also pay the deposit to the deposit management organisation along with the producer fees to fund the scheme.

Retailers across England and Northern Ireland will be obligated to participate in the scheme by charging a deposit on plastic and metal drinks containers, taking the containers back and refunding the deposit. They are also required to pass the collected containers to the deposit management organisation for recycling and to display information to consumers so that they understand how the scheme works. Those obligations on producers and retailers across England and Northern Ireland will start from launch in October 2027. To administer the scheme, the instrument requires the appointment of a deposit management organisation. The instrument allows for certain provisions to come into force on the day after it is made that are necessary for the appointment of the deposit management organisation and the establishment of the administrative arrangements.

Barry Gardiner: The Minister has been most generous in giving way to Members. She mentioned that the scheme will apply to plastic and metal drinks containers. What discussions has she had, or what information have her officials gathered, about the potential for manufacturers to switch their containers to glass and the impact that might have on use of resource and climate change?

Mary Creagh: There has been talk of that, and I met with the glass industry recently, but so far we have seen no evidence of manufacturers switching. Manufacturers must be part of the deposit management organisation, so they will pay under either EPR—extended producer responsibility for packaging—or DRS. Glass has been excluded from scope on the basis of extensive consultation.

The DMO will be appointed in April 2025. It will be obligated to: meet collection targets; pay return point operators for collecting containers; recycle the collected containers; and pay national enforcement authorities. The instrument provides powers for the deposit management organisation to set deposit levels, prescribe labelling, interact with other schemes, set producer fees, calculate handling fees for return points and exempt some retailers from hosting a return point.

Under the “polluter pays” principle, it is the responsibility of businesses to bear the costs of managing the packaging they place on the market. Through specific return point

exemptions based on store size, proximity to another return point and suitable premises grounds, this instrument will also protect small businesses across England and Northern Ireland, which we recognise are vital to our high streets and communities.

Further information has come to light since the question asked by the hon. Member for Strangford. I am in contact with Minister Muir as we progress, but Northern Ireland has given DEFRA responsibility for delivering the scheme, so this statutory instrument has Northern Ireland’s consent. I hope that answers his question.

Finally, the instrument makes provision for monitoring and enforcement activities by the Environment Agency and by local authority trading standards officers to ensure obligated businesses and the deposit management organisation are compliant. This deposit return scheme will improve recycling rates and provide better quality material for recycling. *[Interruption.]* Was I asked to give way? I do give way.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am sorry; I was being quiet and shy, which I am well known for in this place. The Minister rightly points out that some of the responsibility will now fall to trading standards and local authorities. Can she give an undertaking to the House that, with that new responsibility, there may be some element of new burden funding so that local authorities are properly resourced to undertake the enforcement of this vital protection?

Mary Creagh: Local authorities have been given new burdens funding to prepare for the simpler recycling reforms, but I will take my hon. Friend’s question back and endeavour to get an answer to him, hopefully by the end of this debate. Who knows, it could come sooner.

The DRS will improve recycling rates, and by giving people money back on their bottles we transform their plastic and metal drinks containers from a waste stream to a resource stream. That will make a positive difference to every single street where we live. Nobody wants to see plastic and cans littering our beaches, rivers and seas, our roads and our parks. With this scheme, we will have less litter, less landfill and less harm to our precious wildlife, which is under such pressure, and we really will begin to turn back the plastic tide.

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

5.44 pm

Andrew Griffith (Arundel and South Downs) (Con): I am grateful to the Minister for setting out the Government’s position. Let me place on record the substantial achievements of the last Conservative Government on recycling. This Government do not like the facts, but let me give them some. In 2010, 25,000 tonnes of waste were sent to landfill. By 2022, the last year for which figures are available, that was just 13,000 tonnes—a reduction of almost half. The Conservatives introduced new, straightforward and simpler—Labour will welcome simpler—guidance on recycling by creating standardised rules on what can be recycled to deliver that substantial achievement.

Some love to talk, while others quietly act and get on with the job. In my constituency in 2023, Conservative-run West Sussex county council delivered a recycling rate of 53%. For the same period, the Green and Labour-led

[Andrew Griffith]

Brighton and Hove council, just next door, delivered a rate of only 30%. Who would have thought that socialists would struggle to clean up their own mess? Thanks to Conservatives, local authorities are now required to collect a consistent set of recyclable waste and to ensure frequent collections, underpinning a new recycling economy. Let us be clear: Labour-run local authorities deliver the lowest levels of recycling in this country, so the Government could fix this problem without coming to this place to pass legislation.

Barry Gardiner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Griffith: Communities in Conservative-controlled local authorities are three times less likely to be subjected to fly-tipping than in Labour-run areas. The Conservatives have a proud record of recycling, and the hon. Member clearly wishes to applaud that, so I give way.

Barry Gardiner: I applaud any movement in the right direction. The hon. Gentleman compares local authorities, but does he accept that many Labour local authorities have high-rise and tenement buildings, where collection is infinitely more difficult than in leafy suburbs with individual detached houses?

Andrew Griffith: The hon. Gentleman knows of what he speaks, and of course I accept that there is wonderful variation across our whole country. That is precisely why I chose two neighbouring authorities. What could be easier than collecting from dense urban areas, compared with the challenges and costs of having to collect waste across far-flung rural communities such as those I represent? Perhaps later we will hear the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) explain exactly why that council, which drove itself into the ground, has such a poor record on recycling.

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green) rose—

Andrew Griffith: Fantastic, we do not have to wait.

Carla Denyer: As the MP for Bristol Central, I cannot speak directly on behalf of councillors for Brighton and Hove, other than to point out that my understanding is that their hands were tied by a deal that was agreed by the previous Labour administration

Andrew Griffith: I hate to intrude on socialist grief, so let me move on.

Business leaders make decisions only when they have considered the context of all external factors, so it is important—I hope the Government agree—that we consider the statutory instrument in the context of the current headwinds faced by British business.

Right now, businesses across the land are working through the tough choices they will have to make to keep their businesses viable in the face of this Government's job-killing, investment-crushing, growth-destroying Budget, because of choices this Government have made. It was this Government who chose to place enormous burdens on business with their new tax on jobs. It was this Government who chose to halve business rates relief for retail and hospitality. It is this Government who are choosing to push through their Employment Rights Bill,

which will increase unemployment, as we saw today, and prevent young people from ever getting their first chance of a job. Business confidence has been knocked down and jobs are at risk, and it is no surprise when we consider that not a single person sat around the Cabinet table has real experience of running a business.

No sectors have been hit harder than retail and hospitality. The British Retail Consortium has said how Labour's Budget will increase inflation, slow pay growth, cause shop closures—the very shops that will have to participate in this scheme—and reduce jobs. The CBI has said that retail businesses have gone into “crisis containment”. The Institute of Directors found that economic confidence has fallen for a fourth month running—does anyone know what those four months have in common? The number of businesses closing has increased by 64% since the Budget. That is the shocking reality and the context in which the Government seek to bring forward today's statutory instrument, putting more burdens and more cost on business.

Dr Murrison: Does my hon. Friend agree that if the Government were really serious about reduce, reuse, recycle, they would put a moratorium on the construction of new waste incinerators, as we put in our manifesto in July? If we now had a Conservative Government, there would be no more waste incinerators, including in Westbury, in my constituency, which would be matching what the Welsh and Scots have already done.

Andrew Griffith: My right hon. Friend makes a very important point—I hope the Government are listening. That measure would not cost the economy anything, unlike this measure, which, according to the Government's own impact assessment, will cost the economy. In fact, it will represent a £288 million net cost imposed on business every year, which is a £2.7 billion indirect cost over the 10-year appraisal period. It will be another unsustainable cost heaped on business, and an unwelcome addition to the growing headwinds on enterprise that this Government have created.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that this measure will create not only headwinds for business, but significant headwinds for the local authorities that use the recyclable and resaleable material from doorstep recycling to subsidise the cost of expanding recycling services to all our residents? By extracting that valuable material from doorstep recycling, we risk pushing up the council tax needed to subsidise recycling services for all.

Andrew Griffith: I agree with my hon. Friend, who makes a very important point. At its heart, it is a failure to identify the real harm that would justify the imposition of real costs on business at this enormously difficult time.

The scheme will also have an impact on consumers, because it is ultimately consumers who will bear the burden. It is a highly regressive cost burden that will disproportionately hit those on the lowest income. Research by the Association of Convenience Stores found that a disproportionate amount of people with long-term disabilities or aged over 65 supported the existing model of household collections, which is broadly working well, instead of the deposit return scheme.

Barry Gardiner: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Griffith: I give way to the hon. Gentleman, who will hopefully speak about the aggressive nature of these proposals.

Barry Gardiner: I am slightly puzzled. In the Conservative Government's response to the previous Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee report, they committed to putting these measures in place by 2025. Why have the Conservatives changed their minds so dramatically? Given that it appears that the hon. Gentleman would reject these measures, how does he propose to achieve the target set under section 1 of the Environment Act 2021, which his Government brought forward and for which I commend them, which is supposed to reduce the number of kilograms of residual waste per capita by half, from 577 kg to 287 kg?

Andrew Griffith: When the facts change, we change our minds. The Conservative party is under new leadership and we will be unafraid to speak up for those in the economy who create the growth we so desperately need. If the hon. Member would like me to do so, I would be very happy once again to go through the impact of Labour's Budget on business—that growth-destroying, jobs-killing, economy-sapping Budget. I would be very happy to go through that all night long, but I will make some progress.

The cost of this measure is highly regressive and the Conservatives are not alone in voicing concerns. Industry bodies, including the Association of Convenience Stores, UK Hospitality and the British Soft Drinks Association, have raised objections to the cost of the scheme and its implementation. But it is not just business: the Scottish Government have also raised substantial concerns. More tellingly, the Minister's Labour colleagues in Wales have announced that they will pursue their own separate scheme. How astonishing—nice to see two Labour-led Governments working so very well together! I was not entirely clear what the situation was in respect of Northern Ireland, notwithstanding the Minister's attempt to clarify that, but she certainly conceded in her remarks from the Dispatch Box that the schemes will not be interoperable on day one. Well, 16 million people live within 50 miles of the border. For businesses, it is unconscionable that they are compelled to deliver multiple schemes in multiple areas without any guarantee or clarity about interoperability.

I read in the weekend papers that all Ministers received a note instructing them to cease anti-growth measures. The Minister and her colleagues will have an abundance of anti-growth measures to pick from. In fact, I cannot think of a single measure or policy that this Government have so far put forward that is at all pro-growth. In respect of this particular measure, it seems as if her Department did not read that memo, or if they did, they simply did not understand what it meant. The country needs a Government who focus on doing their key functions well rather than rolling out more red tape, however well intentioned.

As the official Opposition, it is our responsibility to speak up for businesses and our constituents when the Government get it wrong. The Conservative party is under new management and we are unafraid to champion those who take risks, generate wealth and create the prosperity to pay for the public services that those on

the Labour Benches are so keen on funding so well. The United Kingdom has a strong and proud record on recycling and the environment, building on work undertaken by the previous Conservative Government, but circumstances have changed or have been changed by this Government, and when the facts change, so too must our policies. Businesses are currently being subjected to a barrage of anti-growth measures and policies, destroying investment, jobs and growth. This policy is, I am afraid, the wrong scheme at the wrong time. For that reason, those on the Conservative Benches will be opposing today's statutory instrument.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Members will have seen that the debate is oversubscribed, so I am going to impose an immediate four-minute time limit, with the exception of Front Benchers.

5.58 pm

Barry Gardiner (Brent West) (Lab): I commend the previous Government for much of the work they did. I commend the fact that they put in place the Environment Act 2021. I do so because it is really important that we adopt a bipartisan approach to these matters. When we are talking about the environment and climate change, yes in this Chamber we can have some political point scoring occasionally, but it is much more important that we create the bipartisan platform that means successive Governments can build and work from it.

I commend the Minister for introducing the measure so quickly. It is long overdue, and it will make an appreciable difference. I would love to know by exactly how many kilograms of residual waste per capita it will reduce our output, but given that each of us is producing 577 kg of residual waste every year, which is over half a tonne—and some of that is toxic waste—it is very important that we get on with this job. Just a month ago we saw a report from the Office for Environmental Protection which showed very clearly that we are not on track to meet the targets set in the Environment Act 2021 by 2042. Although I commend the Government for the action that they are taking now and the urgency with which they have got on with this measure, I want to quote what the report said under the heading "Progress in the reporting period", which was 2023-24:

"The scale and pace of actions does not align with the challenge. While flagship waste management policies have been developed, their introduction has been delayed and they largely focus on end-of-pipe action. There is a lack of action focused on circular economy."

I am delighted that the Minister is introducing this measure and I commend the Government for doing so, but we need even more, and we need it more quickly.

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

6.1 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): We Liberal Democrats welcome this initiative from the Government, although in our manifesto we went further and committed ourselves to introducing a deposit return scheme for food and drink bottles and containers.

[Wera Hobhouse]

We agree with the Government that a scheme of this kind will foster a nature-positive economy, tackle plastic pollution, and boost recycling efforts across Britain. Such schemes are a proven strategy worldwide to increase recycling while minimising waste and littering: they support our environmental goals while also providing an income stream that will protect our public funds. However, I have some concerns about the scheme's implementation.

The Environment Agency is currently underfunded and struggling to meet its regulatory obligations, particularly in respect of water quality, so we must ensure that this statutory instrument comes with appropriate support and additional funding for the agency to handle this new responsibility effectively. The scheme should also be as convenient as possible for people, whether they are "on the go" or at home, and—as has already been mentioned—small businesses need support in order to transition smoothly into the new system. We must ensure that the introduction of a deposit return scheme does not add to their financial burden. We should be seeking to work with small grocery businesses and convenience retailers to help them to introduce the scheme in an affordable way.

I urge the Government to operate a joint scheme throughout the United Kingdom. The Food & Drink Federation has called for a joined-up scheme across the UK, and only this morning I attended a roundtable event on the future of recycling where it was agreed that different schemes in different parts of the UK would make it extremely difficult for those in the industry. They operate throughout the UK, and it would not be viable for them to sell different products in the devolved nations; moreover, they have no control over which parts of the UK their products would be sold or deposited in. A can of soft drink purchased in Bristol should be deposited in the same way as one purchased in Cardiff. A single UK scheme, aligned in scope, fees, processes and labelling, is essential to minimise costs and prevent confusion—and, in that context, it is important that we learn the lessons of the Scottish deposit return scheme.

We must also consider the important role that local authorities will play in making the scheme work successfully, and ensure that they are properly supported. That too has been mentioned during the debate.

Many local authorities collect from the kerbside in bins or boxes, where recycling is co-mingled and then sent on to another company, which sorts and separates the recycled materials. The cost to local authorities for this service depends on whether items can be recycled for a profit by such companies: if they can make a profit from the items that people recycle, councils will be charged less. Some councils now worry that dry and mixed recycling will become less valuable if cans are included in the deposit return scheme, which will lead to higher costs for local authorities, whose resources are already stretched. So far, DEFRA has committed to work to understand the impact of the DRS on local authorities, and I hope that it will be fully considered.

The Liberal Democrats welcome the introduction of the deposit return scheme. We have some reservations about its implementation, but it is a positive step towards a more sustainable and green future.

6.5 pm

Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): I am very proud that Beaton Clark manufactures glass right in the heart of my constituency and has done so for 270 years; it employs 200 people directly and a further 2,000 in the supply chain. Glass can be recycled almost infinitely. Currently, almost 74% of glass is recycled, and 80% of that comes from kerbside collections. I recently met representatives of Beaton Clark and British Glass, and they all expressed grave concerns about the impact of this Government's current policies on the glass sector. DEFRA's latest figures show that the number of glass containers placed on the market in 2024 was 23% lower than earlier estimates.

With increased pressure from imported glass, the outlook for UK manufacturers is indeed grim. UK glass manufacturers are already under severe pressure. The failure to introduce tariffs on imported glass, predominantly from Turkey, has left the industry facing punishing competition from overseas producers, who have significantly lower energy costs and no carbon charges. Although the move towards a circular economy as part of environmental improvements is laudable, it will ultimately be futile if the outcome is dependent on foreign imports, with no environmental impact mitigations in place. Can the Minister confirm whether imported glass will face the same EPR, and who will be liable to pay it?

Mary Creagh: My hon. Friend raised this issue with me prior to the debate. I have checked with my officials, and I am happy to confirm that the person who places the product—regardless of whether it is made in the UK or purchased from abroad—on the market will be responsible for paying the EPR fees on glass bottles.

Sarah Champion: I rise happier than when I sat down. I thank the Minister for clarifying that.

The sector has legitimate concerns that the DRS will lead to poor environmental outcomes, with less recycled glass going back for remelt, as it will likely be crushed in the process, thus rendering it unsuitable for its purpose. The DRS could also cause storage and safety issues for both consumers and retailers, especially smaller shops. The Republic of Ireland did not include glass in its scheme. It is important to point out that the DRS is not a reuse scheme; it is a collection scheme. Many people reminisce about the UK's old deposit scheme, but that was a deposit refill scheme, which is completely different from the proposed DRS.

Wales has achieved a 90% glass collection rate from kerbside collections without the need for DRS, and is ranked second in the world for recycling. Following the Welsh Government's recent announcement that they will withdraw from the four-nations DRS and re-examine its scope, it seems to me and many others that the scheme will be ineffective across the UK. Will the Minister tell us what consideration has been given to the Welsh blueprint for collection, which would be the simplest way to improve recycling rates? Given that local authorities receive money from the extended producer responsibility, it is a shame that the Government are not encouraging them to use it to improve collection quality.

The glass sector supports the principle behind the extended producer responsibility, but it sees the excessively high EPR fees on glass packaging as punishment for

speaking out. The arrangement in Germany is often cited, including by DEFRA, as a good example of an EPR scheme, yet its glass fee is more than 10 times lower than the UK's, at €28 per tonne. According to the indicative figures recently announced by DEFRA, the fee will be £240 per tonne in the UK.

In my discussions with the Minister last Monday, she confirmed that the final EPR figures were unlikely to be finalised until June. How is a business meant to budget on that basis? I urge her to take a serious look at the indicative figures to see if they can be reduced dramatically; otherwise, we will lose the most recyclable sector. Currently, per unit, glass is facing significantly higher fees than less recyclable, less circular materials. That goes against everything that other Government policies are trying to achieve, and I ask the Minister if they are really confident that the EPR policy and other waste policies will lead to more recyclable packaging in the UK.

Further, the delay to the DRS means that there is a two-and-a-half-year period when glass beverage containers will be paying EPR fees while competing beverage containers will not, due to being in the DRS. Put bluntly, this Government are driving businesses towards less recyclable packaging such as plastic in those two and a half years. It was never intended that EPR would be in place before the DRS, and this leaves glass at a huge competitive disadvantage in the beverage market, which makes up 80% of the glass market. Given the history and the uncertainty that still exists around the DRS, it is vital that all materials pay EPR fees until the DRS is fully functional, to create a level playing field for all beverage packaging. There is a backstop for 2028, but can I ask the Minister to clarify whether the backstop fees will be backdated to April this year when EPR launches?

6.11 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): The Welsh food and drink sector is one of the flourishing parts of the Welsh economy, and it is home to nearly 230,000 much-needed jobs in Wales. Many of those businesses are located in my constituency, and I am fortunate that many of them also come to the Royal Welsh Show in Builth Wells every July to show their wares in the food hall. Many of those businesses are great examples of rural entrepreneurship. They create jobs in places that seriously need them.

I welcome the deposit return scheme, as do the Liberal Democrats, but we are listening to the concerns of people in the industry, particularly in areas such as mine, who have great reservations about the impact on the Welsh food and drink sector of having a scheme that does not work across all four nations. I therefore call on the Government to work closely with the Welsh Government to ensure that we do not have a situation whereby extra costs are imposed on Welsh businesses to sell into England and the rest of the United Kingdom, and likewise that we do not have a situation in a couple of years' time in which big manufacturers will not manufacture things for the Welsh market because the extra costs are too heavy to bear.

I again welcome the introduction of a deposit return scheme and lament the fact that the Conservatives never did this when they had plenty of opportunity.

6.12 pm

Deirdre Costigan (Ealing Southall) (Lab): As chair of the Tidy Britain all-party parliamentary group, I want to thank you for allowing me to speak in this debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. The APPG and Keep Britain Tidy have worked on this issue for years, including under the chairship of my hon. Friend the Member for Spen Valley (Kim Leadbeater). It is exciting to finally see change being delivered in today's regulations, and I congratulate the Minister on her speedy and no-nonsense approach to making this happen.

I frequently visit local schools and when I ask the children what they would like to see changed in Ealing Southall, they always say they want less litter on the streets. Adults complain about litter all the time, of course, but I had not realised how much children were disturbed by it. Litter makes places feel unloved and it makes the people who live in those places feel unloved too. It makes it embarrassing to ask friends around to your house, and it is a daily reminder that your street and your family just do not matter.

Over the last 14 years, the amount of litter on our streets has gone up by a third: a tsunami of litter created by the previous Conservative Government, who slashed the funding for local councils to the bone. Councils such as my own in Ealing were left having to spend about two thirds of their budget on adult and children's social care, with very little left for anything else. They had to make impossible decisions: spend money on potholes or libraries; on playgrounds or parking; on street sweepers or youth workers. They were left to rely on local volunteer litter pickers such as LAGER Can in Ealing, who do an amazing job, but they cannot do it alone.

It is great that this new Labour Government have increased funding for local councils, and I am confident that the Chancellor's spending review in the spring will allow councils to plan services better, but let us be honest that picking up litter after people is a total waste of money. That money could be much better spent on more playgrounds or youth clubs. The real solution is to stop the litter in the first place.

What if people were rewarded for recycling their litter instead of dropping it on the street? What if they got money back? That is exactly what this Labour Government are doing today. We are making recycling pay. These new rules mean that shops across the country will be fitted out with reverse vending machines that give people money back for their used plastic bottles and cans. I have tried out the machine in the shop beside my mum's house in Ireland, and it is simple and easy to use. People feed in their empties, and they get a voucher for their money back.

Since being introduced in Ireland in February last year, reverse vending machines have already increased recycling and reduced litter on the streets. Right now, bins in streets, parks and beaches across the UK are chock-full of empty plastic bottles and cans. Think what a difference it would make if all those bottles and cans went back to the shop instead. We would end the problem of overflowing bins on the high street forever.

In Ealing, a massive 41% of all reported fly-tips are black sack fly-tips containing household waste such as empty plastic bottles and cans, so making recycling pay would also reduce fly-tipping.

[Deirdre Costigan]

The previous Government knew that this made sense as long ago as 2017, but they dithered, delayed and fought among themselves. Today, we have seen a total U-turn, with Conservative Members fighting against their own policy. Again, they prove that they are on the side of the vested interests, the polluters and the litter bugs.

Two schools in my constituency came to see me this week, and they said that this makes sense and will reduce litter on the streets. Even the children know that this is the right thing to do.

Today we are ending the Conservative record of dither and delay, and their deplorable refusal to do anything about so many communities that feel neglected and uncared for. The only way to get rid of litter on our streets is to stop people dropping it in the first place. This new plan to make recycling pay will help clean up our streets and parks, our rivers and beaches, and put money back in people's pockets.

6.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): None of us is against the idea of recycling and reusing, and it is important that we have a plan of action to do that. However, in the light of the questions I have asked about what is happening back home, my concern is that we do not know exactly what Northern Ireland's input into the process will be. It seems that there is none.

The idea of a deposit return scheme is not new. When I was a child, which was not yesterday, the Maine man brought fizzy drinks to our door. My parents were extremely displeased if we children smashed the bottles, in which case the money would not come back for their recycling—we understood that we would be in trouble. That scheme worked, and it is the kind of scheme we would like to see. We need to reuse bottles, and we can do that only with co-operation and buy-in from the general public.

My local church and others have raised funds to run their Campaigner clans and missionary projects by asking their congregations and kids to bring in drinks cans. They industriously Hoover the roads to collect the cans, which they crush and bring to the Bryson recycling scheme in Belfast for cash. The money raised is sent to the missionaries in Swaziland and is used for Campaigner clan equipment. Though the scheme ran for a set period, the church has continued to do it.

There are many such schemes in Northern Ireland. The Minister knows that I am fond of her, and I am not here to cast any aspersions or cause any hassle, but we understand that 12 billion plastic bottles and 14 billion drinks cans are sold in the United Kingdom each year. We need to consider something different. I thank the civil servants. I am not giving them a hard time, but I want to know the answers to my questions. We need to understand the differences between the Republic of Ireland scheme and the one being proposed here. To use a biblical term, how can oil and water mix, and the water be good enough to drink and the oil good enough to put in a car? My point is that if there are two completely different schemes, with different goals, in the Republic of Ireland and Northern Ireland, we need to ensure that the matter is looked at in a sensible way.

Our colleagues who are Members of the Legislative Assembly do not know about the scheme either, so we have a very vague system before us.

I know that we are all committed to trying to do something better and different. We take our bottles to the bottle bank every week, and the council collects them; and we recycle our plastics and paper through the blue bin system, and we wholeheartedly support that; but there is something very wrong about the Minister bringing forward a scheme that the MLAs in Northern Ireland do not know anything about. I understand that the Minister said that the Northern Ireland Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs has given DEFRA authority to carry out the scheme, but which Member of the Legislative Assembly gave the go-ahead? Those are my questions. We understand the reasons for the scheme in principle, but it is vague and generalised, and there has not been proper input from the Northern Ireland Assembly.

6.20 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading Central) (Lab): It is always a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I wholeheartedly support the Minister and the Government on this important matter. I want to highlight a few brief points in the time I have available, and underline the points made by many other Members about the importance of tackling litter, tidying up, making communities seem loved and helping local residents, as well as the important complementary point about protecting wildlife. Bottles and other packaging are a menace to small mammals, fish and other wildlife, and an eyesore in rivers and on the coast. That needs to be tackled, so I wholeheartedly welcome the measures.

I will cover three points: I will discuss an aspect of the difficult work under way to tackle the problem of litter, highlight the growing scale of the challenge of litter, and underline the importance of behaviour change, which is rightly at the heart of the Government's policy. May I, like other Members, say a few words of thanks to the wonderful volunteers and organisations in my area that carry out admirable work to deal with litter? Much of that work is completely unpaid and unrewarded in any financial way, but it gives people a huge sense of wellbeing, and they have the support and understanding of their communities for tackling litter.

Keep Caversham Tidy is a local group set up by a group of friends during the pandemic. Since then, it has flourished, and I had the pleasure of going out to help the group. Its work illustrates the practical problems that local authorities and voluntary groups face. When we were clearing up in Christchurch Meadows in Caversham, near the River Thames in Reading, we could see a lot of deeply embedded waste, including drinks cans and bottles, buried behind park benches and logs in the large park. That litter could have caused damage to wildlife, and it was an eyesore and a menace to residents using the park. There was also a risk of it getting into the River Thames, and once waste is in a river, it can travel out to sea and cause untold damage there.

Good work is undertaken by many local groups in the Reading area, particularly by Katesgrove Community Association, which has dealt with two fly-tipped piles of rubbish in the last couple of days, despite the cold

weather. The work of those volunteers supports the enormous amount of work undertaken by landowners and local authorities. That work is unrelenting. Our council takes the issue extremely seriously. It has driven up the recycling rate to well over 50% and introduced food waste recycling, along with other measures. It will shortly introduce doorstep glass recycling, although some glass will not be covered by the scheme. However, the council struggles enormously because of a whole series of practical problems; I will come to that later. It even has a lorry that drives round Reading constantly picking up fly-tipped waste that is reported. That is the scale of the problem that it is trying to tackle.

To give an illustration, I was recently talking to residents in Waldeck Street, near Whitley Street council estate in Reading, and we could see piles of fly-tipped rubbish, including household waste, bottles and other forms of packaging. There is a link, as was highlighted earlier, between fly-tipping and drinks cartons and containers. The Minister is on the right path in giving people an incentive to recycle, so that waste does not get into the illegal waste stream, including through fly-tipping. The evidence from around the world is really clear. I remember the tail end of the scheme that the hon. Member for Strangford describes; there was an incentive in the UK to return bottles as recently as the 1980s or '90s. Let us go back to that.

6.25 pm

Carla Denyer (Bristol Central) (Green): I and the Green party welcome this scheme; however, I am disappointed to see a deposit return scheme that does not include glass. Implementing a deposit return scheme that includes glass is really not unprecedented; it is absolutely possible. In fact, there are around 50 schemes around the world, 46 of which include glass. The remaining four do not, but that is only because there is a separate glass scheme. While I welcome the progress, which I am sure will help, will the Government look at this again, and work closely with the Welsh Government to see how glass can be included?

On a tangentially related note, I want to quickly respond to the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith), who appears to have stepped out of the Chamber. Since my response to him earlier, a resident of Brighton and Hove has been in touch—the hon. Member may regret having raised this—to explain that the 25-year private finance initiative deal that Brighton and Hove council was locked into, which heavily restricted the range of products that could be recycled, was originally brought in by a Labour Administration, but was later extended by a Conservative one.

6.26 pm

James Naish (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I wholeheartedly welcome the Government's commitment to introducing a deposit return scheme. The policy is long overdue and will help us to tackle the rising tide of waste and pollution that has blighted our countryside and our environment for too long.

It is a source of great pride to represent Rushcliffe in this House. The borough of Rushcliffe boasts the highest recycling rate in Nottinghamshire, but we know that we can, and must, go further. My constituents care deeply

about the environment, and they rightly expect this Government to show ambition and leadership in addressing the waste crisis. The Conservatives first promised a deposit return scheme around 2018—more than six years ago—yet there is nothing to show for it. Their failure has sadly meant that countless plastic bottles, cans and other types of packaging have continued to pollute our streets, rivers and seas.

I was fortunate enough to work and spend time in Ireland for 18 months prior to the general election, so I have seen at first hand the deposit return scheme there. In the first few months after implementation, the number of units recycled per month grew from around 2 million to more than 100 million; 630 million containers were recycled in the first 10 months of operation. I hope that we could achieve similar rates of uptake in the UK.

By bringing forward a deposit return scheme that works by 2027, not just for the environment but for businesses, consumers and local authorities, this Labour Government will finally deliver what the country needs. We must, as we promised in our manifesto, empower individuals to play their part in a circular economy. For that reason, I welcome the Government's recent announcement about tighter rules on incinerators. I have written to the Secretary of State about a proposal for an incinerator at Ratcliffe-on-Soar power station in my constituency. The proposal is nearing the end of its planning permission. For many years, local campaign groups have called out their concerns about that project, and I look forward to the Secretary of State's reply to my letter in due course.

The benefits of this scheme are clear. It will collect, recycle and reuse valuable materials that would otherwise end up as waste. It will preserve our countryside, protect wildlife and restore pride in our local communities. Significantly, it will drive economic growth, creating 21,000 green jobs and unlocking more than £10 billion of investment in recycling infrastructure over the next decade. The consequences of inaction—litter-strewn streets, polluted waterways and increased fly-tipping—are all too visible. The deposit return scheme represents a common-sense solution that not only cleans up our environment, but fosters a culture of sustainability and personal responsibility.

With this policy, we are not only cleaning up our environment, but charting a course towards a cleaner, greener and more sustainable future. I wholeheartedly support this scheme, and urge all Members to do the same.

6.30 pm

Richard Foord (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): Growing up, it was second nature for us to rinse out our milk bottles and put them out for the milkman to collect the next day. It was a very simple system, and it worked. Then came the rise of single-use plastics, and for a while we convinced ourselves that recycling was enough. We felt that as long as we put our plastic bottles in the right bin, they would be dealt with responsibly, but that view completely changed when we discovered what was really happening to some of our exported waste. Britain was the largest exporter of waste to Turkey last year; in 2023, it exported more than 140,000 tonnes. We have also learned that so-called energy from waste plants are producing harmful emissions, much of them from burning

[Richard Foord]

plastic waste that could have been reused. I have seen in my east Devon constituency the effect of plastic not making it into the recycling bins at all.

The UK goes through an estimated 14 billion plastic bottles every year. They wash up on beautiful beaches in Sidmouth, Seaton and Beer. In 2019, volunteers collecting waste along Devon's beaches found 12,000 pieces of plastic in one day. Groups such as Sidmouth Plastic Warriors do fantastic work as volunteers to clean up, but they should not have to. Last year, children from Sidmouth primary school created a message-in-a-bottle exhibit, which highlighted the problem of plastic waste in Devon's seas. Their messages were eye-opening. One child wrote:

"I want to swim in the sea with fish, not rubbish."

Another specifically directed her message to MPs, saying:

"Whatever you're doing it's not enough."

Another simply wrote, "Deeds, not words". Their words were a powerful reminder, for me at least, that although we must lead, we can also follow the example of other countries. While serving in Germany with the British Army, we found that returning empties to the supermarket was just part of the weekly shop. It became a habit, like taking a reusable bag to the supermarket. When I came back to the UK, I was struck by the difference. In Germany, one rarely sees plastic bottles on the ground. Here, they are in our verges, in our hedgerows and in our waterways.

A deposit return scheme will help. By charging a small deposit when a bottle or can is bought and refunding it when the bottle is returned, we are creating an incentive to reuse. However, the decision to exclude glass bottles means that we could miss an opportunity. Glass is one of the most polluting forms of litter. It is dangerous to livestock in the countryside, and to wildlife. In Wales and Scotland, different schemes are being considered, but having varying regulatory regimes in our four nations could bring additional costs and challenges. The hon. Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner) asked whether producers might shift from plastic to glass if that meant not incurring costs associated with the introduction of the deposit return scheme, which was an excellent question. If there was that unintended consequence, we could see heavier goods being transported around the country, and increased carbon emissions.

Overall, we need a deposit return scheme. Devon's landscape and coastline need it. This time for half measures is over. We need real action, including on glass, across the whole country.

6.34 pm

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): I welcome the Minister's commitment to bringing forward the deposit return scheme. In my constituency, we have a dedicated community of volunteer litter pickers who work tirelessly to ensure that our environment is free from litter. However, their job is never-ending.

A member of the Castle Donington Litter Wombles visited me recently to highlight the litter issue on the lay-bys of the A453 between Donington services and East Midlands Gateway. In her correspondence to me, she said,

"Wombles have litter picked these lay-bys numerous times—and we have picked over 1000 bags from these locations since 2021, but it's just a thankless task and is extremely disheartening to see them full of litter again within a matter of days."

Everyone in the Chamber will have a group of dedicated volunteers litter picking in their communities, and we owe a great deal of thanks to them. We need to act to help them reduce the level of litter locally, but we face a growing environmental crisis and there must be an end in sight.

Keep Britain Tidy has found that small plastic bottles and non-alcoholic cans make up 43% of all litter. Single-use plastic is polluting our communities. A lot of that plastic never reaches the recycling plant; it is dropped on the floor, put in the wrong bin or tossed out the window on the motorway. The Conservative Government promised a deposit return scheme for recycling bottles and consistently delayed its introduction, but when this Labour Government say we are committed to cleaning up our streets, parks, rivers and oceans, we mean it. The deposit return scheme will provide an incentive for people to keep our streets clean and will make us all conscious of the plastic we use.

When Germany implemented a scheme—gosh, a couple decades ago—it reported a 98% return rate, showing the potential we have here. Meanwhile, in this country, a National Highways survey last year found that 63% of people had seen somebody discarding litter out the window on the side of an A-road or motorway. That has a devastating impact on our wildlife: the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals has received more than 10,000 reports of animals found injured, trapped or dead in discarded litter over the past three years.

Highways and busy roads are far too dangerous for our volunteers to venture on to, and they should not have to. Keeping our environment clean is a collective responsibility. We have to start at the source, and I am pleased that we have a Government who are finally taking action and delivering on our environmental commitments. Introducing the deposit return scheme will kick-start an economy-wide transformation in our relationship with the resources we use and on tackling waste, but it would be useful if the Minister outlined how convenience stores in rural constituencies such as mine will play their part and how they will ensure that all retailers can get involved in the scheme.

I am grateful to have a Government who recognise the need to encourage people to recycle, reduce their waste and make more sustainable choices, which will go a long way towards protecting and preserving our planet for this generation and those to come.

6.37 pm

Alistair Strathern (Hitchin) (Lab): I welcome the regulations, which are as important as they are long overdue. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for the zeal she has brought to her role in ensuring that after several years of dither and delay, we finally have a Bill to bring this important measure forward.

For far too long, we as a society have not grappled with the blights of plastic pollution and litter. With over 75% of the litter across our high streets made up of the type of drink bottles we are talking about, the measure will be an important way of tackling issues that we know our communities care about. Fantastic local groups

such as Plastic Free Hitchin and Shefford, litter picking associations and other community groups in my constituency play their part, doing everything they can to keep my community and the countryside clear of litter. We owe it to them to ensure that as a Government we do our bit, too.

Back in 2018, the previous Government confirmed that they were looking at the idea of such a measure, so it is a matter of great regret that we have waited so many years for one and that the Opposition have provided little support for it today. That lost time should not just be cause for embarrassment, as we have seen so many other countries stealing a run on the measure and introducing a scheme that has been shown to work in jurisdiction after jurisdiction. That failure is literally littered all across our countryside. The paths that make my community so special and our rivers, lakes, oceans and beaches that we are all so proud of as a country are littered with plastic pollution that could have been tackled had the measure been brought forward earlier.

We know that where similar schemes have been introduced across the world there have been real benefits. There have been dramatic increases in returns—90% and above is quite typical for such plastic return schemes, but the current rate for our kerbside collection scheme is just 70%. We can ensure that we are doing more to improve circularity and the collection of virgin plastic so that we have the high-quality supply stream for recyclability that the industry is crying out for—that is why the Food & Drink Federation supports the measure. And we can ensure that we tackle littering, to address the issues that are blighting too many of our communities.

Given the need to act at pace, which was so lacking under the previous Government, I absolutely understand why we are focusing on important quick wins. However, it would be remiss of me not to address a wider recycling issue in my community that I have raised several times with the Minister: metal recycling. Five times in the last year, people in Hitchin have woken up to plumes of smoke and possible contamination in the air, as time and again local metal recycling plants have caught fire, often triggered by lithium-ion batteries making their way into the waste source. By working together—and trying to knock heads together—between councils, the Environment Agency and other authorities with a remit, we are looking to make progress, but there is clearly also a case for national action to ensure that the Environment Agency has the powers it needs to address that problem at source, and that we have wider measures on the recycling of lithium-ion batteries to reduce the risk of their ending up as contaminants in metal recycling in the first place. I will continue to press the Minister on that, but I know from my conversations with her that she is alive to the risks in that space. I hope that, over the course of this Parliament, we can deliver real change on that, too.

In the meantime, I am incredibly proud to support this important measure. Ensuring that we learn from the successes and challenges facing other jurisdictions will be important, as will ensuring that we have the right level of deposits, the right infrastructure in place, and the right support for smaller retailers to take part in the scheme.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend for his excellent speech. He makes a valid point about the importance of the measures not only for the

environment but for business and retailers. Does he agree that this legislation, which is, as he points out, absolutely overdue, will benefit not only the environment and our wombles—we also have some in Harlow—but business, too?

Alistair Strathern: Absolutely. It will be important to establish close collaboration to ensure that the scheme is as effective as possible. There is a reason the Food & Drink Federation supports the measures: without them, it will not have the supply of high-quality recycled plastics needed to hit the targets that it is so keen to hit and is often already committed to. Without the legislation, those targets become almost impossible.

I will conclude my remarks by building on those of my hon. Friend the Member for Brent West (Barry Gardiner), who highlighted the historical importance of good cross-party consensus and the importance of climate and nature issues. For a long time, this measure had cross-party support, and it is deeply regrettable that that does not seem to be the case today. I take some heart from the Conservatives' lack of enthusiasm to leap in and speak bombastically about their newfound opposition to the measures, which I hope is a sign that there may be space in the coming months to work more collaboratively to ensure that we support the measures to be as effective as possible.

I am incredibly grateful to the Minister for lending me her ear on the important issue of metal recycling in Hitchin, and for the leadership that she has shown on this legislation, which will make a real difference for my community and those across the country. It is about time that we lead on making it a reality.

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

6.42 pm

Mary Creagh: What a tour de force this has been across the House, apart from the tumbleweed silence of the official Opposition. Where are the former DEFRA Ministers, having been muscled out of this debate? Where is the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore), who, as late as April 2024, was speaking enthusiastically about how he was moving ahead with implementing a deposit return scheme for single-use drinks containers by October 2027? They are missing in action—the long-term view muscled out for a short-term hit of political opposition. I am old enough to remember when the hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Andrew Griffith) was a Minister. Presumably he signed off on the write-round on the Environment Act 2021, which introduced the enabling legislation for many of the reforms that we are bringing in. Amnesia seems to be a rather convenient illness among the Conservative Front Benchers.

Let me answer some of the points raised in the debate. My hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin (Alistair Strathern) asked about metals. I hope that we will not have to wait for a whole Parliament before we make progress on tackling the issues in the metals and tyres recycling business. As he is aware, we have also banned single-use vapes to tackle the battery fires they cause. I will work with other Ministers across Government to consider how to tackle the growing problem of lithium battery fires.

[Mary Creagh]

Glass is excluded from the DRS in England, Northern Ireland and Scotland. The Government's position is that glass would add considerable up-front cost and create complex challenges for the delivery of the DRS, particularly in the hospitality and retail sectors, as well as disproportionately impacting small breweries. It would be inconvenient for consumers due to its weight and its potential for breakage in transit to a return point. Glass drinks containers across the UK are included in the extended producer responsibility for packaging scheme to ensure they are efficiently and effectively recycled, and the glass recycling targets within that scheme have been increased from 83% by 2030 to 85%. We are also considering how reuse systems could be developed in the future, and I have met representatives of the drinks industry in the last fortnight to discuss that. We will not let the perfect be the enemy of the good when bringing in these regulations.

On Wales, waste is a devolved issue. How a future scheme works in Wales will be for Welsh Government Ministers to determine, and we will continue to work with devolved Governments and industry as we progress the DRS.

David Chadwick: Will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: I am going to finish my points, and if there is time at the end, I will take interventions. We are very short of time.

Turning to material switching, a 2023 report from ReLoop and the Container Recycling Institute considered numerous international examples of introductions and expansions of a DRS, and concluded that there was no evidence of this causing an observed decline in sales of in-scope products. On small retailers, we have engaged with retail—as I said earlier—and we can confirm that retail premises under 100 square metres in an urban area will be automatically exempt from the DRS retailer obligations, which will support some of the smallest retailers. Although those retailers larger than 100 square metres will be required to host a return point, they will be able to determine whether a manual return point or a small reverse vending machine would be best for their store style, with support from the DMO. Evidence from other areas that have introduced these schemes shows that some very small retailers enjoy hosting returns and are keen to experience the additional footfall they bring.

On local authorities, there will be new burdens funding for trading standards, and the DRS will collect at least 90% of containers by year 3. This will have a varying impact on local authorities: they will miss out on the sales of materials, but will make savings of around £30 million from having to collect less litter, so I think we will see a positive impact there. On incinerators, the residual waste capacity note that we published on 30 December shows that there are certain areas in England where significant volumes of household waste are still sent to landfill, and we landfill far too much non-household waste. Disposing of waste in landfill has a greater negative environmental impact than recovering energy through incineration, but this does not take away from our commitment to minimise residual waste. The new conditions we have set out will support economic growth and will drive our push to net zero and our plan for change.

Turning to interoperability in Northern Ireland, the scheme will of course be interoperable across England, Scotland and Northern Ireland, but although there is a separate scheme in the Republic of Ireland—

David Chadwick: On that point, will the Minister give way?

Mary Creagh: No, I am going to make my point and then give way at the end if there is time.

Although there is a separate scheme in the Republic of Ireland, these regulations allow the DMO to work with other scheme administrators, such as Re-Turn in the Republic of Ireland. That means that once the scheme is established, its administrators have the option of collectively developing operational solutions and creating alignment for the benefit of consumers in both countries. Officials have visited the Republic of Ireland and speak regularly to Re-Turn, so the opportunities to work together, to align and to learn from Ireland are there, and they are very positive. I will ensure that Members of the Legislative Assembly are invited, and I am very happy to keep the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) informed.

On regulator costs—an issue that was raised by the Liberal Democrat Front-Bench spokesperson, the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse)—the Environment Agency will be funded for its regulatory costs by the DMO. There are checks and balances in place to ensure that this is proportionate.

In conclusion, we are hearing the same circular arguments from the Conservatives. Their Government talked but did not act, and they allowed dither and delay to dog the reforms. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) how depressing it is for local litter groups to have to step in and pick up the pieces where Conservative cuts have resulted in cuts to street sweeping and cleaning. Frankly, theirs is a Herculean task that should not be necessary, but they are cleaning out the Augean stables. Today is the beginning of the end of that community clear-up. We are literally throwing money into the gutter, and hearing the same old attack lines being recycled, although by different shadow Ministers, to be fair—there are fresh faces.

This is not the end of litter, but it is the beginning of the end of litter in this country. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Honiton and Sidmouth (Richard Foord) for taking the time to listen to the next generation who will benefit from these reforms. I, too, wish to swim with the fish, not with rubbish. I, too, am a believer in deeds, not words. On the Opposition Benches, Conservative Members love to talk; on this side of the House, we love to do. That is the difference a Labour Government will make.

Question put.

The House divided: Ayes 352, Noes 75.

Division No. 90]

[6.51 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane (<i>Proxy vote cast by Bell Ribeiro-Addy</i>)	Adam, Shockat
Abbott, Jack	Ahmed, Dr Zubir
Abrahams, Debbie	Akehurst, Luke
	Alaba, Mr Bayo
	Aldridge, Dan

Alexander, rh Mr Douglas	Costigan, Deirdre	Hinchliff, Chris	Morgan, Stephen
Alexander, rh Heidi	Cox, Pam	Hinder, Jonathan	Morris, Grahame
Al-Hassan, Sadik	Craft, Jen	Hodgson, Mrs Sharon	Morris, Joe
Ali, Rushanara	Creagh, Mary	Hopkins, Rachel	Mullane, Margaret
Ali, Tahir	Creasy, Ms Stella	Hughes, Claire	Murphy, Luke
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena	Crichton, Torcuil	Hume, Alison	Murray, Chris
Allister, Jim	Curtis, Chris	Huq, Dr Rupa	Murray, James
Amesbury, Mike (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Dakin, Sir Nicholas	Hurley, Patrick	Murray, Katrina
Anderson, Callum	Dalton, Ashley	Hussain, Imran	Myer, Luke
Anderson, Fleur	Darlington, Emily	Ingham, Leigh	Naish, James
Antoniazzi, Tonia	Davies, Jonathan	Irons, Natasha	Naismith, Connor
Arthur, Dr Scott	Davies, Paul	Jameson, Sally	Nandy, rh Lisa
Asato, Jess	Davies, Shaun	Jermy, Terry	Narayan, Kanishka
Asser, James	Dean, Josh	Jogee, Adam	Newbury, Josh
Athwal, Jas	Denyer, Carla	Johnson, rh Dame Diana	Niblett, Samantha
Atkinson, Catherine	Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh	Jones, Lillian	Nichols, Charlotte
Atkinson, Lewis	Dickson, Jim	Jones, Ruth	Onn, Melanie
Bailey, Mr Calvin	Dixon, Anna	Josan, Gurinder Singh	Onwurah, Chi
Bailey, Olivia	Dixon, Samantha	Joseph, Sojan	Opher, Dr Simon
Baines, David	Dollimore, Helena	Juss, Warinder	Osamor, Kate
Baker, Richard	Doughty, Stephen	Kane, Chris	Osborne, Kate
Ballinger, Alex	Dowd, Peter	Kaur, Satvir (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Osborne, Tristan
Bance, Antonia	Downie, Graeme	Khan, Afzal	Owatemi, Taiwo
Barker, Paula	Duffield, Rosie	Khan, Ayoub	Owen, Sarah
Barron, Lee	Duncan-Jordan, Neil	Khan, Naushabah	Paffey, Darren
Barros-Curtis, Mr Alex	Eagle, Dame Angela	Kinnock, Stephen	Pakes, Andrew
Baxter, Johanna	Eagle, rh Maria	Kirkham, Jayne	Patrick, Matthew
Beales, Danny	Eastwood, Sorcha	Kitchen, Gen	Payne, Michael
Beavers, Lorraine	Edwards, Lauren	Kumar, Sonia	Peacock, Stephanie
Begum, Apsana	Edwards, Sarah	Kumaran, Uma	Pearce, Jon
Bell, Torsten	Efford, Clive	Kyrke-Smith, Laura	Pennycook, Matthew
Benn, rh Hilary	Ellis, Maya	Lamb, Peter	Perkins, Mr Toby
Betts, Mr Clive	Elmore, Chris	Lavery, Ian	Pinto-Duschinsky, David
Billington, Ms Polly	Entwistle, Kirith	Law, Noah	Pitcher, Lee
Bishop, Matt	Eshalomi, Florence	Leadbeater, Kim	Platt, Jo
Blake, Rachel	Esterson, Bill	Leishman, Brian	Pollard, Luke
Bloore, Chris	Evans, Chris	Lewell-Buck, Mrs Emma	Powell, Joe
Blundell, Mrs Elsie (<i>Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore</i>)	Fahnbulleh, Miatta	Lewin, Andrew	Powell, rh Lucy
Bonavia, Kevin	Farnsworth, Linsey	Lightwood, Simon	Poynton, Gregor
Botterill, Jade	Ferguson, Patricia	Long Bailey, Rebecca	Prinsley, Peter
Brackenridge, Mrs Sureena	Fleet, Natalie	MacAlister, Josh	Quigley, Mr Richard
Brash, Mr Jonathan	Foody, Emma	Macdonald, Alice	Qureshi, Yasmin
Brickell, Phil	Fookes, Catherine	MacNae, Andy	Race, Steve
Bryant, Chris	Foord, Richard	Madders, Justin	Ramsay, Adrian
Buckley, Julia	Foster, Mr Paul	Martin, Amanda	Ranger, Andrew
Burgon, Richard	Foxcroft, Vicky	Maskell, Rachael	Reader, Mike
Burton-Sampson, David	Francis, Daniel	Mather, Keir	Reed, rh Steve
Byrne, Ian	Frith, Mr James	Mayer, Alex	Reid, Joani
Byrne, rh Liam	Furniss, Gill	McAllister, Douglas	Rhodes, Martin
Cadbury, Ruth	Gardiner, Barry	McCarthy, Kerry	Ribeiro-Addy, Bell
Campbell, rh Sir Alan	Gardner, Dr Allison	McCluskey, Martin	Richards, Jake
Campbell, Irene	Gelder, Anna	McDonagh, Dame Siobhain	Riddell-Carpenter, Jenny
Campbell, Juliet	German, Gill	McDonald, Andy	Rigby, Lucy
Campbell-Savours, Markus	Gilbert, Tracy	McDonald, Chris	Rimmer, Ms Marie
Carling, Sam	Gill, Preet Kaur	McDonnell, rh John	Robertson, Dave
Carns, Al	Gittins, Becky	McDougall, Blair	Rodda, Matt
Champion, Sarah	Glindon, Mary	McEvoy, Lola	Rushworth, Sam
Charalambous, Bambos	Goldsborough, Ben	McIntyre, Alex	Russell, Mrs Sarah
Charters, Mr Luke	Gosling, Jodie	McKenna, Kevin	Rutland, Tom
Chowns, Ellie	Grady, John	McKinnell, Catherine	Sackman, Sarah
Clark, Feryal	Griffith, Dame Nia	McMahon, Jim	Sandher, Dr Jeevun
Coleman, Ben	Gwynne, Andrew	McMorris, Anna	Scrogham, Michelle
Collier, Jacob	Hack, Amanda	McNally, Frank	Sewards, Mr Mark
Collinge, Lizzi	Hall, Sarah	McNeill, Kirsty	Shah, Naz
Collins, Tom	Hamilton, Paulette	Midgley, Anneliese	Shanker, Baggy
Conlon, Liam	Hanna, Claire	Minns, Ms Julie	Shanks, Michael
Coombes, Sarah	Hardy, Emma	Mishra, Navendu	Siddiq, Tulip
Cooper, Andrew	Harris, Carolyn	Mohamed, Abtisam	Simons, Josh
Cooper, Dr Beccy	Hayes, Helen	Mohamed, Iqbal	Slaughter, Andy
Corbyn, rh Jeremy	Hayes, Tom	Moon, Perran	Slinger, John
	Hazeltrove, Claire	Morden, Jessica	Smith, Cat
	Hillier, Dame Meg		Smith, David

Smith, Jeff
 Smith, Nick
 Smith, Sarah
 Smyth, Karin
 Snell, Gareth
 Sobel, Alex
 Stainbank, Euan
 Stevens, rh Jo
 Stevenson, Kenneth
 Stewart, Elaine
 Stone, Will
 Strathern, Alistair
 Strickland, Alan
 Sullivan, Kirsteen
 Sullivan, Dr Lauren
 Sultana, Zarah
 Swallow, Peter
 Swann, Robin
 Tami, rh Mark
 Tapp, Mike
 Taylor, David
 Thomas, Fred (*Proxy vote cast by Chris Elmore*)
 Thomas, Gareth
 Thomas-Symonds, rh Nick
 Thompson, Adam
 Tidball, Dr Marie
 Timms, rh Sir Stephen
 Toale, Jessica
 Trickett, Jon
 Tufnell, Henry
 Turley, Anna

Turmaine, Matt
 Turner, Laurence
 Twigg, Derek
 Twist, Liz
 Uppal, Harpreet
 Vaughan, Tony
 Vaz, rh Valerie
 Vince, Chris
 Wakeford, Christian
 Walker, Imogen
 Ward, Melanie
 Waugh, Paul
 Webb, Chris
 Welsh, Michelle
 Western, Andrew
 Western, Matt
 Wheeler, Michael
 Whitby, John
 White, Jo
 White, Katie
 Williams, David
 Witherden, Steve
 Woodcock, Sean
 Wrighting, Rosie
 Yang, Yuan
 Yasin, Mohammad
 Yemm, Steve
 Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:

**Kate Dearden and
 Gerald Jones**

NOES

Andrew, rh Stuart
 Argar, rh Edward
 Bacon, Gareth
 Badenoch, rh Mrs Kemi
 Barclay, rh Steve
 Bedford, Mr Peter
 Bhatti, Saqib
 Blackman, Bob
 Bowie, Andrew
 Burghart, Alex
 Campbell, Mr Gregory
 Cartledge, James
 Chope, Sir Christopher
 Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
 Cocking, Lewis
 Cooper, John
 Coutinho, rh Claire (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Cross, Harriet
 Davies, Gareth
 Davis, rh David
 Dewhurst, Charlie
 Easton, Alex
 Fortune, Peter
 Fox, Sir Ashley
 Francois, rh Mr Mark
 Fuller, Richard
 Garnier, Mark
 Glen, rh John
 Grant, Helen
 Griffith, Andrew
 Griffiths, Alison
 Harris, Rebecca
 Hinds, rh Damian
 Hollinrake, Kevin
 Huddleston, Nigel
 Jenkin, Sir Bernard

Jenrick, rh Robert
 Johnson, Dr Caroline
 Jopp, Lincoln
 Keams, Alicia (*Proxy vote cast by Joy Morrissey*)
 Kruger, Danny
 Lam, Katie
 Lockhart, Carla
 Lopez, Julia
 Lowe, Rupert
 Mak, Alan
 Morrissey, Joy
 Mullan, Dr Kieran
 Mundell, rh David
 Murrison, rh Dr Andrew
 Obese-Jecty, Ben
 Paul, Rebecca
 Philp, rh Chris
 Rankin, Jack
 Reed, David
 Robertson, Joe
 Robinson, rh Gavin
 Shannon, Jim
 Shastri-Hurst, Dr Neil
 Simmonds, David
 Smith, Greg
 Spencer, Dr Ben
 Spencer, Patrick
 Stafford, Gregory
 Stride, rh Mel
 Stuart, rh Graham
 Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
 Thomas, Bradley
 Timothy, Nick
 Vickers, Martin
 Whately, Helen
 Wild, James

Wilson, rh Sammy
 Wood, Mike

**Rebecca Smith and
 Mr Andrew Snowden**

Tellers for the Noes:

Question accordingly agreed to.

Resolved,

That the draft Deposit Scheme for Drinks Containers (England and Northern Ireland) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 25 November 2024, be approved.

John McDonnell (Hayes and Harlington) (Ind): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Speaker and the Deputy Speakers have been helpful and generous in allowing us to raise the case, using various parliamentary mechanisms, of Mr Alaa Abd el-Fattah, a British citizen who is still imprisoned in Egypt. I understand that the Foreign Secretary is to visit Egypt either tomorrow or the day after. Have you heard, Madam Deputy Speaker, whether there may be a written or oral statement from the Foreign Office about the Foreign Secretary raising Mr el-Fattah's case, insisting upon his release or at least seeking a visit to this British citizen in prison? It is a matter of urgency, because his mother is now beyond the 100th day of hunger strike, and I fear for her life.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order. I have had no indication that the Foreign Secretary intends to come to the House to make a statement, but I am sure that the Table Office will be able to advise him on how he might pursue the matter further.

Adrian Ramsay (Waveney Valley) (Green): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish to correct the record following my intervention on the New Homes (Solar Generation) Bill on Friday. I said:

“Regulations were due to come into force in 2016 that would have required all new homes to have zero carbon standards. Those regulations were scrapped by the coalition Government.”— [*Official Report*, 17 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 631.]

In fact, regulations that would have required all new homes to have zero carbon standards were due to come into force in 2016, but they were watered down by the coalition Government in 2014, and the requirement for all new homes to have zero carbon standards was scrapped. What was left of the watered-down regulations was subsequently scrapped by the following Conservative Government in 2015.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of his point of order and for placing his correction of his earlier statement on the record.

Richard Burgon (Leeds East) (Ind): Further to the point of order made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), in the absence of any statement or urgent question being granted on the visit that the Foreign Secretary is hopefully making to Egypt on the fate of British prisoner Alaa Abd el-Fattah, and given the very serious condition of his mother—an academic from Sussex who is on a hunger strike and only taking water, and who a number of Members met today—can you advise, Madam Deputy Speaker, on what other ways we can impress upon the

Foreign Secretary the urgency of this issue? Every single day matters in what could be a life or death situation for his mother.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I believe that my earlier response to the similar point of order offered enough information, but no doubt by raising the point again, Ministers on the Front Bench will have heard again. The hon. Member's point is on the record.

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): Further to that point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As I am here for the next motion and as the Leader of the House responsible for statements to this House, let me reassure Members that I will raise this issue with the Foreign Secretary, who is very forthcoming—he has been to the House twice in the past week to make statements to keep the House updated. I am sure that he will want to keep the House updated on his conversations in Egypt and elsewhere, and I will ensure that the points of order have been heard.

Madam Deputy Speaker: I thank the Leader of the House for a great response to those two points of order.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): With the leave of the House, I will put motions 5 to 7 together.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)),

COMPANIES

That the draft Reporting on Payment Practices and Performance (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 7 October 2024, be approved.

AGRICULTURE

That the draft Free-Range Egg Marketing Standards (Amendment) (England) Regulations 2024, which were laid before this House on 21 November 2024, be approved.

BANKS AND BANKING

That the draft Silicon Valley Bank UK Limited Compensation Scheme Order 2024, which was laid before this House on 6 November 2024, be approved.—(*Gerald Jones.*)

Question agreed to.

HOUSE OF COMMONS MEMBERS' FUND

Ordered,

That Sir Marcus Jones and Craig Whittaker be removed as Trustees of the House of Commons Members' Fund and Sharon Hodgson and Mike Wood be appointed as Trustees in pursuance of section 2 of the House of Commons Members' Fund Act 2016.—(*Lucy Powell.*)

PETITIONS

W12 and W14 bus service in north-east London

7.9 pm

Mr Calvin Bailey (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): Recent changes to bus services running through Leyton and Wanstead have had significant negative impacts on local people, including on school children, who are struggling to get to school on time, and on my disabled and elderly constituents, all of whom are finding it hard to access care at Whipps Cross hospital due to the changes. Our petition to Parliament, signed by residents and local councillors, builds on an online petition to Transport for London with almost 4,500 signatures. More action is needed to address this issue. The petitioners “therefore request that the House of Commons urges... Transport for London to immediately reconsider the changes made to ensure that the negative impacts caused by these changes to the W12 and W14 bus service in north-east London are addressed urgently.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of Leyton and Wanstead,

Declares that recent changes to the W12 and W14 bus service in north-east London have had negative impacts which must be addressed.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage Transport for London to immediately reconsider the changes made to ensure that the negative impacts caused by these changes to the W12 and W14 bus service in north-east London are addressed urgently.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003032]

Haddiscoe gravel pit application

Ben Goldsbrough (South Norfolk) (Lab): I rise to present a petition about the proposed quarry in Haddiscoe, and I really hope that the Government will take note of the 242 petitioners who have signed it. This demonstrates that an overwhelming majority of residents wish for the Government to know how much this quarry will undermine the health and wellbeing of the village.

The petition states:

“The petition of residents of the constituency of South Norfolk,

Declares that the potential for a future gravel pit near Crab Apple Lane in Haddiscoe is a serious concern... The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that planning and mineral strategies consider issues such as air pollution and local opinion.

And the petitioners remain, etc.”

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of the constituency of South Norfolk,

Declares that the potential for a future gravel pit near Crab Apple Lane in Haddiscoe is a serious concern to residents, that an application for a gravel pit in the same location has previously been rejected due to concerns about harm to Grade I listed buildings and the impact of increased noise, dust and traffic, and that these concerns remain.

[Ben Goldsborough]

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that planning and mineral strategies consider issues such as air pollution and local opinion.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

[P003033]

Stourport Relief Road Fund

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

7.11 pm

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): It is a great pleasure to raise the issue of the Stourport relief road in this Adjournment debate. Madam Deputy Speaker, you will be well aware that Worcestershire is an astonishingly beautiful county, and Wyre Forest in the north of the county is a perfect example of what Worcestershire has to offer. We have the forest and the hills, not one but two Georgian towns, and the River Severn, with its astonishing valley and heritage railway.

The River Severn, the longest river in the UK, is a fabulous source not just of natural beauty but of water to the 8 million customers of Severn Trent, and it also divides Worcestershire and my constituency in two halves. Inevitably, this leads to crossing pinch points, and along the stretch of the Severn that runs through Worcestershire there are surprisingly few crossing points. The city of Worcester enjoys a number, but, to the north of Worcester, there are just four points to cross east-west before getting into Shropshire; even then, the next crossing point is in Bridgnorth, 15 miles to the north of Bewdley. Of the four bridges on the 38-mile stretch between Worcester and Bridgnorth, three were built by the Victorians and are not fit for 21st-century traffic. Just one bridge was built in the 20th century, and that is the only bridge that can really take any heavy usage.

The most recent bridge, the Bewdley bypass, was built to support the east-west traffic and relieve Bewdley of heavy congestion through the town centre, which has, for a long time, been on a major route from the midlands to Wales. However, with the incredibly welcome flood defence works going on at the moment in Bewdley, the bridge has necessarily been closed to two-way traffic, increasing the burden on other local infrastructure, and the congestion has inevitably put pressure on other crossings.

Of course, the flood defences will be completed by this summer, and normal service will resume in Bewdley. However, the problems remind us why, four or five decades ago, proposals were put forward for a relief road for the town of Stourport-on-Severn, just to the south of Bewdley. As a parliamentary candidate back in 2004, I got hold of a set of 14 proposals for road improvements for Stourport, from minor town centre improvements to the full £14 million—at the time—bypass.

It is important to remember the problem these proposals were trying to solve. Stourport has a complicated town centre, with a one-way system that everybody accepts is far from ideal. It is trying hard—and, by the way, succeeding—to be a tourist destination town, attracting a lot of people from Birmingham. Yet because of its location and layout, many of the cars in the town centre are not there to be in Stourport, but in Stourport to be on their way to somewhere else. It is important to remember that this stretch of the River Severn in Wyre Forest has a denser population than the wider rural community, with 102,000 people living in the three towns of Stourport, Bewdley and Kidderminster. As I say, it is an incredibly important conurbation in Worcestershire.

Of the 14 proposals, the most ambitious for Stourport was the most popular at the time. It proposes taking a road from the busy Stourport to Kidderminster dual carriageway, running around the town to the south using existing roads that were at the time designed to take the Stourport relief road and old railway track that had been closed under the Beeching reforms, and then crossing the River Severn heading west and landing in the cricket club, before continuing its semi-circular route to join the A451 to Dunley. It then heads off to the western part of Worcestershire and then on to Wales, providing a major route to Wales.

That was a popular proposal and it was signalled for further investigation and development. Back in 2010, the cricket club was looking for Sport England's support but was unable to secure it due to planning blight—the prospect that at any time it may find itself bisected by the new Stourport relief road—so the proposals were shelved. Although they never disappeared, they were not moved on.

Since then, the Stourport relief road has been talked about as a lost opportunity, a myth and a piece of cultural history that a few people remember. So what has changed? What has happened since then? Why is this now something that needs reviving? I mentioned earlier that the flood defence works have temporarily brought extra pressure on Wyre Forest's river crossings, but that will be resolved in the summer. However, the local population is due to increase significantly. Wyre Forest district council recently published its local plan, under which nearly 5,000 new homes will be built across the district. Around 1,400 of those will be in Stourport and that will, inevitably, increase pressure on local infrastructure. That is an 11% increase in housing stock across the district, and a 13% increase in Stourport itself.

The problems are more profound. To the west of Stourport, directly adjacent to the Stourport suburb of Areley Kings, is an area of beauty known as the Snipes. It is right up against Stourport, but is in Malvern Hills district council's area. Malvern Hills district council is a multi-party coalition and it has failed to come up with a local housing plan.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Gentleman for bringing this issue forward. I spoke to him beforehand to get his thoughts on what he is asking for. He is asking for what I have asked for in my town of Ballynahinch in Strangford: a road to bypass small towns so they are not decimated by through-traffic. We have been waiting for that for almost two decades. Does he agree we need to ensure the Government understand that investment in such roads will bring regeneration to small towns and can very well be a rising tide that lifts all boats?

Mark Garnier: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He hits the nail on the head. I will be addressing these points a little later in my speech, but if we want to generate economic growth we need to build the infrastructure first—the growth will follow.

Coming back to Stourport and what is going on in the Snipes and with Malvern Hill district councillors, a number of developers put in an application to build 500 to 1,000 houses. It was met with absolute disdain by Malvern Hills district council, Wyre Forest district council,

local parish councils, town councillors, me and my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Dame Harriett Baldwin). We all rejected it, but when it went to appeal, the Planning Inspectorate ruled that Malvern Hills district council had an unmet planning demand and accordingly granted planning permission against the wishes of literally everybody.

Through a quirk of geography, local government boundaries and poor management by politicians in Malvern Hills, Stourport will see hundreds if not thousands more homes relying on its town centre and facilities, but coming from outside the district. And it gets even worse. The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government told us that in Wyre Forest, we are to build an extra 617 new homes every year for the next five years, putting yet more burdens on the local infrastructure. That is just Wyre Forest; the total for the whole of Worcestershire is 5,300 homes a year. Add to that 1,375 homes for Herefordshire and 1,200 for Shropshire—that is every year—and one can see how the congestion on River Severn crossing pinch points will increase significantly. A lot of that will come through the point in Worcestershire where the three counties meet.

The argument for the Stourport relief road has never been stronger. It is time to revisit what is proposed. I do not profess to be a transport infrastructure expert, and I certainly do not fully understand traffic flows, but I can understand what it is like to be stuck in a traffic jam. The current 20-year-old proposals may still be perfect, but my instinct is that we need to look again at the whole issue of traffic across the Severn in Wyre Forest, and at how traffic flows across the river.

It may be that we need to look at how to join the Bewdley bypass with a road heading south, to the west of the new, unwelcome homes in the Snipes to the west of the river, that then crosses the Severn to the south of the cricket club, joining the Worcestershire A449; or it may be that the Bewdley bypass should continue when it lands on the eastern side of the bank, as was originally envisaged, between Kidderminster and Stourport, bypassing our main town to the south-east and joining the bypass with the A451 Kidderminster Road and the A449 Worcester Road, going on through the A448 Bromsgrove Road and up to the A456 Birmingham road—all of that adding to the existing Stourport relief road and effectively joining all the major roads that serve Wyre Forest. This would deliver a comprehensive and very long-term solution.

All this is for the experts, and for the community to unite behind. I have already spoken to Marc Bayliss, the Worcestershire county council cabinet member responsible for highways and transport. He agrees that this is an opportunity, and has indicated that it will be worked up and included in plans for the county. The county council is keen to progress our local infrastructure needs, but it needs clarity. It is keen to draw up local transport plan 5, but needs guidance from the Minister's Department on what is expected of it. My ask is for that guidance to encourage local road schemes such as the one I am suggesting, a scheme that will bring not just a relief of traffic congestion but a boost to economic prosperity of the kind that was mentioned by the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and—this is important—for the guidance for LTP 5 to come soon.

I also ask the Minister to give clarity on funding. Of course we need funding and plenty of it—and obviously the Minister receives many demands for that—but as

[Mark Garnier]

part of the settlement, it would be good to understand the status of the proposed reallocation of HS2 money, which was suggested by the last Government to be £209 million over the coming seven years. Additionally, we await the announcement on road investment strategy 3, which will cover the Government's plans for the strategic road network until 2030. I understand that it has been delayed to align with the spending review, but can the Minister tell me when RIS3 will be published, and whether a Stourport relief road could be considered as part of those plans—and will she come and open the new relief road? It would be great to see her there, and I mean not just to cut a ribbon but to drive a Morgan sports car up the new road. We are extremely proud of the fact that some Morgan cars are built just down the road in Malvern, and it would be a fantastic opportunity for her to demonstrate what this Government are doing to support my constituents in Worcestershire.

The new Government are making a very big deal of economic growth, which is incredibly important—I think we would all agree that economic growth is a driver of good for our society—and that is one of the reasons they are keen to build new homes. We can argue across the Chamber on details of how to achieve growth, but the one thing on which we will surely agree is that growth is generated by investment in infrastructure. If we are to build these new, economically productive new homes, we must serve their householders with easy ways to get to work, to school, to medical services when they are needed, and to the town centres to relax and shop and enjoy their communities. The Stourport relief road is one such infrastructure development, which will not just support the town of Stourport-on-Severn and my constituency, but deliver economic growth to the wider rural west midlands. I very much look forward to hearing what the Minister has to say about my proposals.

7.23 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood): I congratulate the hon. Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) on securing the debate, and on speaking so passionately about the transport needs in the historic and growing town of Stourport-on-Severn and across the wider region. I am grateful for the opportunity to discuss transport in Worcestershire, and I can assure the hon. Member that this Government understand the great importance of transport to the people, communities and businesses that power local economies across the country.

In that context, although Stourport-on-Severn remains the focus of today's debate, it would be remiss of me not to take the opportunity to highlight how the quality of journeys and transport across the county of Worcestershire is being improved. England's roads are vital to our transport system—cars remain the most popular form of transport by a long way—and this Government are committed to maintaining and renewing our road network to ensure that it serves drivers, cyclists and other road users, remains safe and tackles congestion. That is why we are committed to a long-term programme of investment to improve road links throughout the region. The hon. Gentleman made reference to road investment strategy 3, which sets out the improvements to the strategic road

network that are due to commence. We have an interim settlement for 2025-26, but the new road investment strategy will begin in April 2026.

There has already been significant road investment throughout Worcestershire, including a £43 million project to upgrade and improve capacity on the A38 in Bromsgrove. That scheme is under construction and will help to tackle congestion and improve local journeys, as well as directly supporting growth through 1,100 new jobs and 5,500 new homes. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to say that transport infrastructure can unlock opportunities and provide the opportunity for people to have new homes that are served in a sustainable way.

The A4440 Worcester southern link road opened in 2022. It is one of Worcestershire's busiest roads and received investment of £54.5 million from the large local majors programme for upgrades, including the dualling of the entire length of the road from the A5 to the Powick roundabout, the new Carrington bridge, and a number of walking and cycling improvements to improve access to the city of Worcester. The A4440 has reduced journey times, helped to keep unnecessary traffic out of the city centre, and helped to drive economic growth in the region by improving access to and from the M5, as well as to the newly opened Worcester Parkway station. There are other examples, such as the Pershore northern link road, although I appreciate that it is some way from Stourport.

The region has also gained from investment and improvements to the strategic road network. Junctions 5, 6 and 7 of the M5 have benefited from improvements to road surfacing, road markings, signage and lighting, while a £15 million, 4.5-mile safety upgrade between junctions 6 and 7 has been completed, which impacts positively on journey times. I am sure the hon. Gentleman's constituents benefit from that when they travel further afield.

As hon. Members will be aware, potholes are an all-too-visible reminder of the last Government's failure to invest in our local road network. This Government are committed to ensuring that investment is provided, so that our roads facilitate the growth and development that the nation needs. That is why local areas, including Worcestershire, will benefit from the £500 million increase in road maintenance budgets for 2025-26. That marks a 50% increase in funding, with almost £1.6 billion allocated to maintaining and renewing England's roads. The total allocation from the autumn Budget for maintaining and improving the network in Worcestershire is £29.5 million for the coming financial year. Hopefully, the hon. Gentleman's constituents in Wyre Forest will see the benefit.

Of course, this is not just about roads; it is about railways as well. England's railways should be a source of pride, because we are the country that created the railways. They are an iconic part of our heritage, and for more than two centuries, they have played an essential role in enabling people to see our country, spend time with loved ones and seize economic opportunities, although I appreciate that Stourport was built on the canals, rather than the railways. The new Worcestershire Parkway station, in the heart of the county, opened in 2020 and has significantly improved connectivity and journey times to major centres, successfully opening up Worcestershire to the whole country. It is a major success story for the region, with usage far exceeding

forecasts, and more than 10,000 homes are planned for the area. The station is a really good example of how well-planned, integrated travel can drive regional growth, help to deliver the homes that Britain so desperately needs, and provide sustainable transport. Kidderminster railway station in the hon. Gentleman's constituency benefited from a total of £4.3 million of growth deal funding. That work was completed in 2020 and has improved interchange facilities, providing better transport links to Kidderminster and the surrounding areas.

Of course, tackling some of the issues that the hon. Gentleman raised, such as congestion, is not just about building more infrastructure; it is also about changing the way that people travel. Buses remain the most used form of public transport across the country, but vital services have been slashed, and there is little accountability to passengers. Some 300 million fewer miles were driven by buses in England in 2024 than in 2010. The transformative work that this Government are doing will turn the tide by giving communities the opportunity to control local bus services and have a real say in building local bus networks that work for them. Following the Budget, we have allocated funding of £9.3 million for Worcestershire in the coming year to support and improve local bus services.

I should mention, alongside the investment made for drivers and public transport users, that this Government are deeply committed to improving the experience of people who choose to walk or cycle. We have local cycling and walking infrastructure plans that allow local authorities to take a long-term approach to developing their networks. Worcestershire county council is developing eight of these plans—for Evesham, Redditch, Wyre Forest, Droitwich Spa, Malvern, Pershore, Bromsgrove and Worcester. All those will help to reduce journeys by other forms of transport, improve health and wellbeing, reduce congestion and improve air quality across the county.

I turn to the issue of a relief road in Stourport. The town of Stourport-on-Severn has played an important part in the nation's industrial and cultural history, going back to 1768. I think it was the canals that really got it going. I acknowledge and fully understand the difficult challenges that congestion and uncertain journey times on key routes may cause to businesses and commuters in a growing and popular town such as Stourport, particularly perhaps in the summer months, as I know it is a place that people like to visit and a tourist destination. I also understand the potential impact on growth, investment and employment in the area.

The Department for Transport continues to work with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and other partners to deliver a well-designed, integrated and affordable transport network that plays a vital role in unlocking homes and delivering wider benefits, including reduced congestion and carbon emissions, and improved air quality. There is also the important benefit of ensuring that communities can access vital jobs and services. For almost everyone, the road network plays a vital role in our daily life, but as the Chancellor has clearly set out, this Government

inherited an extremely challenging financial situation; the previous Administration left a £22 billion public spending gap in this year alone. The gap between the desire for schemes and the money available to deliver them has become abundantly clear.

The hon. Gentleman talked about a number of potential developments in his area. Within this challenging context, as I am sure he knows, it is for Worcestershire county council to decide which local road schemes, or indeed other transport schemes, should be proposed and progressed as part of its strategic transport plans, and what should be prioritised in Worcestershire's local travel plan. The relief road was considered some time ago—I understand it was almost two decades ago—and obviously it has not featured in more recent local travel plans. I know that he is already engaging with the county council on its future priorities. If the local authority needs further guidance in developing its transport plans, I am sure that my officials will be more than happy to provide that additional help and support.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned the third road investment strategy, and I have already touched on the timeframes. Obviously, the total funding available for the road investment strategy over the five years of RIS3 will be established in the spending review. He can correct me if I am wrong, but I do not believe that the suggested Stourport relief road would form part of the strategic road network, so it would not be dealt with in RIS3. Such developments would be brought forward by the county council.

In the past, the county council has benefited from the major road network. If it develops plans, I am sure we could consider them when future funding became available for such programmes. However, it is for the county council to start developing those plans; I am sure my officials would be happy to offer advice and assistance. This would enable the hon. Gentleman and his constituents to put forward a convincing case when future programmes of funding became available.

I conclude by thanking the hon. Gentleman again for securing this debate. As I know he appreciates, transport plays a central role in lives and livelihoods across the country, including in his constituency and the town of Stourport-on-Severn. He has rightly highlighted his concerns about the pressures in Wyre Forest, and in Stourport in particular. I reassure him and the House that the Government are providing record levels of investment for road, rail, bus and active travel projects across the country, including in Worcestershire. I assure him that this Government have heard the case clearly, and will continue to take action to address the issues debated today. I look forward to hearing more from Worcestershire county council—or its successor bodies, as I understand it has expressed an interest in local government reorganisation—in the months and years ahead.

Question put and agreed to.

7.36 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Tuesday 21 January 2025

[MATT WESTERN *in the Chair*]

Auditory Verbal Therapy

9.30 am

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the provision of auditory verbal therapy.

It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship this fine morning, Mr Western. I thank all hon. Members, especially the new Members, who have come along to speak in this all-important debate, which I have the privilege of opening. I thank the Minister for Care, my hon. Friend the Member for Aberafan Maesteg (Stephen Kinnock) and the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) for attending.

I am delighted to see in the Gallery Sam and his parents, whom I met when I sponsored Auditory Verbal UK's parliamentary drop-in back in October last year—how time flies! At that reception, I was talking to Sam and some of the other young people there, and I asked whether any deaf children had come along, only to be told that all the children I had been talking to were actually deaf, including Sam. That is the difference this therapy can make, and why I am so passionately supporting and making this case today.

Sam was diagnosed as being profoundly deaf at five weeks old. It was not until Auditory Verbal UK was recommended to Sam's parents by a friend of a friend, by chance, that his fate changed forever. With the help of auditory verbal therapy, Sam learned to listen and talk just like his peers. Now 13 years old, Sam can speak and do anything he puts his mind to. He is doing really well at school, I am told, and will enjoy the same opportunities as his hearing friends.

For children like Sam, Auditory Verbal UK has been life-changing. Its specialist work and support provided to deaf children and their families is truly remarkable. I am therefore glad to also see representatives from AVUK here today. They will always have my support and should be very proud of the work they do.

Sam stands today as living proof that when deaf children and their families have access to early, effective support to develop language and communication, opportunities are transformed. If the Government, or anyone here or watching at home, need convincing of the clear, compelling and existing evidence of the benefits of auditory verbal therapy, they have only to look to children like Sam.

Although all deaf children would benefit extraordinarily from auditory verbal therapy, the truth is that they will not all be as lucky as Sam. The current reality is that more than 90% of deaf children under the age of five in the UK are unable to access auditory verbal therapy, because there is little to no provision through publicly funded services. Currently, there are a mere 33 certified auditory verbal therapists in the UK. It is clear that

these wonderful therapists, who hold the potential to transform the lives of our deaf children, are sadly few and far between.

In the whole of the north-east, there are no qualified auditory verbal therapists. Deaf children in my constituency of Washington and Gateshead South, for example, are unable to access this support through publicly funded services. This postcode-lottery approach to healthcare is simply unacceptable. This is the situation in spite of public research that shows that a huge 83% of adults from the north-east believe that auditory verbal therapy should be available to all deaf children via publicly funded services. We know the therapy works and that there is public support for its roll-out throughout the country, so what are we waiting for?

Raising awareness that support is out there is just the first hurdle, because if impacted families are aware of the therapy but have no qualified therapists in their area, their challenges persist. Even Sam's journey from discovering auditory verbal therapy to completing it was far from smooth sailing. With no access to the therapy via public services local to him, he and his family had to travel weekly to Oxfordshire from Eastbourne so that they could access this life-changing therapy. Not all deaf children and their families can afford the privilege of time or money to go to such lengths every week, as much as they may want to. Certainly, not all deaf children have the privilege of having a qualified therapist in their area, which is a clear problem. We absolutely need to address that inequality of access.

To extend access, we need to train more specialist practitioners in auditory verbal therapy. By equipping a small proportion of the speech and language therapists, audiologists and teachers of the deaf who are currently working in the public sector with additional skills in this approach, we can enable every family who wants their deaf child to learn to listen and talk to access auditory verbal therapy through publicly funded services close to where they live.

Training is already happening, with UK professionals already qualified and others on their training journey. This is possible only thanks to the fundraising efforts of the charity Auditory Verbal UK, including two teachers of the deaf in the north-east who remain in training. There is a clear route for professionals to become trained in auditory verbal therapy, as well as a cohort of public sector professionals who can then share their experience of training and how it has enhanced their practice. Research points towards the fact that as a result of pursuing the training and qualifying as listening and spoken language specialists, professionals recognise significant growth in their knowledge and skills, equipping them to train others who can then do the same—the "train the trainers" model.

There are around 50,000 deaf children in the UK, and 7,200 of them are under the age of five. They currently face the prospect of lower academic achievement and employment, and they are at a higher risk of poor mental health, bullying and social exclusion. Deaf children are almost twice as likely as all children to complete their first year of school without having achieved a good level of development in relation to the early years foundation. The statistics clearly highlight a stark difference between hearing and non-hearing peers in quality of life, educational attainment, employment rates and mental wellbeing.

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

If the moral argument is not convincing enough, surely no one can deny the huge economic returns. Economic analysis based on His Majesty's Treasury guidelines shows that an investment of just £2 million per year for the next 10 years for training a proportion of the existing public sector workforce could deliver a whopping £152 million of economic benefit to the UK. That is a massive £11.7 billion over a 50-year period.

The economic savings are huge, including £3.4 billion through less need for one-to-one support throughout primary school; £1 billion of increased employment; £4 billion due to increased quality of life; a £7.5 million decrease in Government support; and £30.5 million saved through avoided injury. It is a small economic investment that will transform the lives of some of the most vulnerable children in this country, while also bringing us huge economic returns. Surely this is a no-brainer.

So long as the UK remains unconvinced, we are falling behind as other countries trailblaze the way. Auditory verbal therapy is already state-funded in countries including Australia, New Zealand and Denmark, and the success rates speak volumes. In 2022, following a successful Government-funded pilot in Denmark that showed that 84% of children acquired age-equivalent spoken language after just three years of AVT, compared with 30% previously, auditory verbal therapy became part of the standard healthcare system there. The irony is that here in the UK we are now training many Danish professionals in AV therapy to deliver it to children in Denmark, despite being unable to support our own workforce to enhance their skills to get those outcomes for children here in the UK. That cannot be right.

I thank the Minister for his time and leave him with three questions. First, what scope is there for the UK to implement a pilot scheme, in the same way that Denmark did, at least to prove the transformation potential of this therapy in a couple of areas, for those who remain unconvinced? Secondly, will he commit to supporting the need to increase access to auditory verbal therapy, and provide the investment needed when the funding allows? Thirdly, will he meet the deaf children and families charity Auditory Verbal UK, from which representatives are here today, to hear at first hand about the impact of early support, and the charity's tangible plans to enable families to access the therapy wherever they live in the UK?

I thank the Minister in advance and look forward to hearing the other speakers. I look forward to the Minister's response after he has listened to colleagues' perspectives in this very important debate.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Matt Western (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should bob if they wish to be called in the debate. I never thought I would be saying these words, but it is my pleasure to invite Mr Jim Shannon to speak.

9.40 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you very much, Mr Western. I wish you well in your new role as Chair for Westminster Hall debates. I hope there will be

many occasions on which you will call me to speak, although maybe not always first. It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair.

It is also a pleasure to see the Minister in his place, and I look forward to his response. I look forward to the contribution of the shadow Minister, who has a deep interest in health issues. I give special thanks to the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for bringing this important topic to Westminster Hall for debate, and for her compassionate introduction. She has a deep interest in the subject matter and in making lives better, which is of course why we are all here.

This issue affects children throughout this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. The information sent across by Auditory Verbal UK is a challenging read. It states:

“Deaf children in the UK currently face a lifetime of disadvantage without access to early and effective support to develop language and communication and less than 10% of deaf children who could benefit from Auditory Verbal therapy to learn to listen and talk can currently access it.”

That is the key issue and our key ask. This debate gives us the opportunity to raise awareness and make help available for all the deaf children who need support across this United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

The fact that 90% of children who could benefit from this therapy to improve their lives, including their social, educational and future working lives—I suspect the Government are planning for children with deafness not just for today, but for their future engagement in working life—cannot access such help does not sit well with me or anybody else here. I know the Minister feels the same angst about the issue, which is why I very much look forward to his response to our requests.

It is clear that more must be done to facilitate access to auditory verbal therapy, which is why I am happy to support the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South and speak on behalf of the deaf children in my area and throughout Northern Ireland. The Consortium for Research in Deaf Education found that there were at least 1,428 deaf children in Northern Ireland. Some 77% of deaf school-age children attended mainstream schools, 1% attended mainstream schools with resource provisions—which there should be—and 21% attended special needs schools not specifically for deaf children.

This is a devolved matter, so the Minister does not have any responsibility for that, but those figures reflect what happens in the United Kingdom mainland. Some 36% of deaf children were recorded as having another additional special educational need; that has increased from 27% in 2021. The stats do not make good reading because they illustrate the shortfall and where there is need. My staff and my office have been in touch with the Department back home to chase up the matter.

An issue raised by the research was that the number of qualified teachers of the deaf in employment and working in a peripatetic role, in resource provision and/or in a special school or college not specifically for deaf children has decreased by 7% since 2022—just in the last two years—and by 40% since the survey started in 2011. There is a real need to train people to help to give young deaf children the opportunity to do better and get ready for employment in the future. I am keen to hear the Minister's thoughts; perhaps there will be a role for an Education Minister in that work as well.

It is clear that there is a real need to focus on how we support these children, and that there is much more to be done. I suppose that is the ultimate reason for the debate. Some 80% of children who attend an auditory verbal therapy programme for at least two years achieve the same level of spoken language as their hearing peers—wow: that is why we need this; those are the results—rising to 97% of children without additional needs. They attain educational outcomes on a par with hearing children, and the majority attend mainstream schools. That truly speaks for itself.

With an investment of just over £2 million per year over the next 10 years, the Government could transform the landscape of auditory verbal provision and unlock £152 million of economic benefit. On the returns on investment, it is said that we have to speculate to accumulate; in reality, we have to spend time and money on the children to ensure that the economic benefit for all of us, but especially for them, rises to £11.7 billion within the next 50 years. We need to spend that money early and get the returns and, more importantly help people to prepare for life.

We must ensure that UK children have access to this most basic of support and that we give them the lifelong tools that are beneficial for them and for society as a whole. We are long past the days of believing that being born with a different ability means a different life; there are just too many success stories for us to believe that that is a death sentence for normality. I seek in this debate to ensure that young deaf children have the same opportunities as other young children. If we can manage that, I will be very pleased.

We know that a full life can be achieved, but the groundwork must be done in this place with sustained UK funding for auditory verbal therapy. I look forward to the Minister outlining how and when we can expect more for those who need it most. Has he had the opportunity, in the short time he has had, to make contact with the Health Minister in Northern Ireland and other responsible Ministers to see how we can exchange ideas, do it better together and raise awareness, which is very important?

9.48 am

Kirith Entwistle (Bolton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate. We come together today with a shared purpose to champion equity, opportunity and the unshakeable belief that every child deserves the best possible start in life. This debate is about more than a single policy; it is about ensuring that no family feels left behind when it comes to their deaf children's future.

Some 65% of deaf children complete their first year of school without achieving a good level of development. That is not just a statistic: it is a rallying cry that demands urgent action. Why is this happening? The National Deaf Children's Society offers a stark insight: we are failing to assess and invest in the right primary support mechanisms for each deaf child. That failure is a systemic one and strikes at the most crucial time, the early years, when the foundations of language and communication are laid.

The Deafness Resource Centre is clear that early childhood development is deeply social and emotional, thriving on successful interactions with caregivers. By failing to provide tailored support to deaf children, we risk leaving many feeling isolated, frustrated and deprived of the sense of belonging that every child deserves. I am deeply grateful that one such primary support mechanism, auditory verbal therapy, is being recognised here today. I am deeply grateful that one such primary support mechanism, auditory verbal therapy, is being recognised here today. For so many families it is truly transformative—the proof is here in this room—and I commend my hon. Friend for her unwavering commitment to improving its provision.

Let us be clear, auditory verbal therapy is not a silver bullet. There is no one-size-fits-all solution. Every deaf child is unique, and so are their needs. Auditory verbal therapy is incredibly important, but I want to take a moment to emphasise the importance of addressing each child's needs, case by case. Picture this: a deaf child in a deaf family, thriving in a sign-first environment where British Sign Language nurtures heartfelt, seamless connections with their loved ones. Now imagine another child, their confidence flourishing through intensive auditory verbal therapy. Both scenarios are valid and beautiful. What truly matters is meeting the unique needs of each child, guided by expert assessment.

Bolton Deaf Society, located in my constituency, is a charity I am deeply proud to represent and support in Parliament. Its work serves as a beacon of hope and heritage for deaf children and their families. It champions deaf culture, celebrates British Sign Language and recognises that oral communication is not, and should never need to be, for everyone. Although auditory verbal therapy can be life-changing, there are many in the deaf, deafened and hard-of-hearing community in Bolton who would not choose it, even if it were readily available. For some families auditory verbal therapy is tied to the medical model of disability, a framing that implies hearing loss as something to fix, potentially sidelining deaf culture, identity and pride. For other families, like many we have heard about today, that is not the case.

For the families in Bolton who are seeking auditory verbal therapy for their child, I wholeheartedly agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South that we must urgently train more specialist practitioners to extend access. In Bolton alone, there are more than 300 deaf children; across the north-west, that number rises to 6,000, yet there are just five certified auditory verbal therapists in our region. Right now, as my hon. Friend mentioned, a postcode lottery determines whether a family can access the support that their child needs. That is not equity or fairness; it is a failure that we must urgently address. Deaf children in Bolton deserve better.

I strongly urge the Minister to expand access to AVT across the north-west. More than that, I urge him to expand access to primary support mechanisms across the board. Success lies in providing a well-funded, comprehensive, holistic system of support, ensuring that every child can thrive in a way that fits them best. I sincerely hope the Minister agrees.

9.52 am

Mr James Frith (Bury North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead

[*Mr James Frith*]

South (Mrs Hodgson) on securing this important debate and on her contribution to ensuring that this profound therapy is better heard, better known and more available to choose for a great many in our society.

When there is so much to resolve, so much to fix and sort out, it feels like smaller causes struggle to be heard or seen. Our politics seems too busy to care about even more causes; it is all just too much. Alternatively, it can be said that the last Parliament did good things for the deaf community, so to expect new money for new causes is a stretch too far, naive even. We must believe in better. Each Parliament has the opportunity to help the underserved, and there are always issues that, with the right political heat and weight, can be transformed. Such issues have long been on the roll of Government successes, whatever the political weather. Think of the long-standing injustices, new medicines on the NHS, or social equalities we have addressed.

The missions of this Government delivered their enormous parliamentary majority and a mandate to renew, reform and transform. Auditory verbal therapy takes the Government's vital missions for health, for children, for the smashing of barriers to opportunity, and for growth, and it brings them to life. This cause gives the missions cause to blossom. There may not be a better example of a cause that, for such a fraction of an investment, can be transformational.

I know what we are asking for will not be green-lit today, but I know what we need. Former Health Secretaries I have met have spoken of the "whiteboard moment", when we get the issue on to the whiteboard. That is the goal. It is the moment when the Minister asks their civil service teams to make something possible—to draft a plan to take us from where we are to where we need to be. It is a pilot, a tester, a starter for 10, where the Government do not just take our word for it, but see for themselves.

Should there be concern among our deaf community, let me say that this is not about undermining the celebrated protected status of British Sign Language. We celebrate BSL as a language—a unique cultural identity—and the last Parliament's recognition of BSL in law was a landmark achievement. The argument for auditory verbal therapy is an argument for choice—choice for the child, their family and their future—and ensuring that families have the knowledge and support to choose the best path for them. It is not about competing choices, but having access to all of them. The demand is that these families' cause is heard, and the majority of the country agrees. In a recent YouGov poll, 85% of UK adults believed that auditory verbal therapy should be available to all children via publicly funded services such as the NHS.

The first years of a child's life are critical. It is when their brains are most receptive to language and communication. For deaf children, early intervention is essential. Auditory verbal therapy enables deaf children to develop listening and spoken language skills and equips them to thrive alongside their hearing peers. With AVT, 97% of deaf children without additional needs achieve age-appropriate spoken language within two years. That is the transformation we seek. It is not a big ask, but it has giant implications for the impact that AVT can have if we can reach that whiteboard moment

and have civil service teams working with experts to bring this therapy into NHS early years programmes. It is preventive healthcare at its best: cost-effective, compassionate and life-changing.

For someone who learns that their child is deaf, navigating this new world is disorientating and complex, and they will feel unsure. It is also the moment where we should ensure that parents learn that there is a therapy that could help their child to communicate on a par with their hearing peers. The option of AVT should be as freely considered as learning to sign, and traditional or developing means.

Withholding this therapy after people have learned of its existence cannot remain the position, yet learning of AVT only to be told that it is unavailable, unaffordable or simply not an option where someone lives is the reality for far too many families. With only 33 certified auditory verbal therapists across the UK, access to AVT is exclusive and rare. Most families will never hear of it. By removing the barriers, we can give parents and their children the opportunity to decide for themselves. That means training more therapists—supported by Government bursaries—to meet growing demand, building regional hubs, expanding telepractice services so that no family is left behind, and raising public awareness to ensure that families know that AVT is an option.

If the heart of the argument does not move us, the head can. This therapy means economic growth and a sound investment in families' futures and ours. This cause is transformational for not just them but the economy. For £2 million annually—a fraction, or a rounding error, when it comes to the NHS budget—we could ensure that thousands of deaf children access AVT. According to independent economic analysis, this investment would unlock £11.7 billion in benefits over 50 years, and here is how. We would reduce education costs, as early intervention means less reliance on one-to-one support, saving £3.4 billion. We would increase employment, with confident, independent deaf adults contributing £1 billion to economy. And we would improve quality of life, with thriving, independent individuals generate £4 billion in societal benefits. Without early intervention, the costs are far greater. Delayed support leads to unfulfilled promise or potential, higher unemployment, mental health challenges and long-term reliance on public services.

The new Government have wasted no time identifying waste to be cut from their spending. The Cabinet Office has pledged to reduce the £7 billion per year spent on consultants. Official analysis found that total spending on consultancy in 2022-23 was £1.2 billion, with the Department of Health and Social Care among the highest spenders, at £281 million. I share this Government's instincts: the money saved must now transform the lives of those accessing AVT. Does the Minister agree?

For just £2 million a year, we can train more specialists in order to remove the barriers to opportunity, expand access through the NHS and ensure that every family makes informed decisions. We are not asking for those decisions today, but for a commitment to start this journey and to draft a plan that takes us from this underserved system to one that provides choice and opportunity for every deaf child and their family. With parents given every option to choose for them, their children are given the best chance to thrive. When all deaf children thrive, our society is stronger, more inclusive

and more prosperous. This underserved issue can benefit from the Government's mission to transform. As the campaign says, "Hear Us Now."

10.2 am

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for securing the debate, as well as colleagues who have spoken. I will not repeat what everybody has said, but I will mention a few things.

As has been said, auditory verbal therapy provides numerous benefits for deaf children, and that is particularly true of their educational prospects. We need to bridge the gap between the educational attainment of deaf children and their classmates, which is created by the barriers they face in integrating realistically in the classroom. With investment in an AVT programme, we can overcome those barriers.

In 2019, the average deaf GCSE student faced a gap of 17.5 months in learning, compared with classmates with no special needs. That is only a three-month decrease from 2011, so not a lot has changed. AVT would help to deliver the promise of bridging that gap, by intervening in the earlier stages of language development. Accessing that early intervention lays the foundation for a more successful future, which will help deaf children to realise their educational potential. It will also be an integral part of boosting their self-esteem, ensuring that they are not hindered in interacting with their friends and classmates or participating in lessons. AVT also has the potential to foster a sense of social inclusion, and therefore provide deaf children with the skills and confidence to succeed at the same level as their peers who have no special needs, both in the classroom and beyond.

There are currently 7,200 deaf children below the age of five, which is a target subset of AVT. As it stands, there are not enough qualified auditory verbal therapists—I believe there are only 33 in the whole country—so we need more of them to be able to see these children. However, one challenge faced by many families is that they do not have sufficient spare money to spend on these services. The fact that services are so limited, and provision is so hit and miss across the United Kingdom, presents even more of a challenge. A programme that trains speech and language therapists in AVT would make sure that all deaf children have equal access to quality therapy. It is a cause that it is well worth the Government spending money on.

We train professionals from other countries who then go back to their countries, such as Denmark and others. Our deaf children deserve the same care and attention, and we must not forget that there are 50,000 deaf children in our country. If we train more therapists, we can share in the success of such initiatives. As my hon. Friend the Member for Bury North (Mr Frith) said, it is morally right that we look after our young people, but it also makes economic sense to ensure that deaf children are well educated and able to integrate and to be part of the fantastic workforce we need for the future.

Finally, I thank the campaigners and the families who have been campaigning on this issue for the tremendous work they have done. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South for bringing this really important matter forward for debate. I have

to declare an interest: although I am not deaf in the sense that these children are, I am hard of hearing, so this issue is quite close to me personally.

10.7 am

Baggy Shanker (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for raising this incredibly important topic and securing the debate.

You may not know this, but Derby and Derbyshire have the largest deaf community outside of London. The Royal School for the Deaf Derby sits in the neighbouring constituency of Derby North, and the staff do an absolutely fantastic job supporting deaf children and young people to access the very best education they can. However, despite the work of such specialist schools, deaf children nationally face huge educational inequality, which is compounded by the lack of access to critical therapies such as auditory verbal therapy. It is staggering that only 38% of deaf children in England completed their first year of school having achieved their expected levels of development, compared with 66% of all children.

We have seen huge strides forward in support for our deaf community, with pioneering gene therapy delivered just last year, allowing a UK girl who was born deaf to hear unaided. Medical professionals across the country should rightly be recognised for their hard work in delivering such innovative treatments to support our deaf community. These success stories should be celebrated, but unfortunately access to critical therapies and support is often unequal, with less than 10% of deaf children in the UK currently able to access them.

Auditory visual therapy is one of those inequalities. Children in the east midlands and across the UK are missing out on the benefits it can offer. As we have heard today, those benefits are life-changing, with research showing that 80% of deaf children can achieve age-appropriate spoken language following AVT. They are missing out on an incredible opportunity.

Let us be really honest: it is no surprise that the provision of AVT is a postcode lottery, because years of Tory austerity have brought the NHS to its knees. I have been so pleased to see our Labour Government turning the page on that austerity nightmare, committing to the biggest NHS funding uplift since 2010, outside covid. It is vital that AVT provision sees the benefits of Labour's investment in our public services, supporting deaf children and their families, wherever they live in the UK.

10.10 am

Helen Morgan (North Shropshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Mr Western. I thank the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for introducing the debate, as well as Sam, his family and Auditory Verbal UK for campaigning on this important issue. I confess that I am quite new to auditory verbal therapy, and it has been fascinating to research the issue more for the debate and to listen to hon. Members' contributions.

The hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South made a hugely compelling argument for improving access to auditory verbal therapy, setting out not only

[Helen Morgan]

the benefits for the children who would be able to improve their ability to listen and speak, but the economic benefit that would derive from what I think we can all agree is a small investment—as an accountant, I can confirm that £2 million is probably a rounding error in most instances. I also thank other Members for their useful speeches today, not least the hon. Member for Bury North (Mr Frith), who highlighted the importance of early intervention, and the hon. Member for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), who highlighted the educational impact that early access to appropriate therapy can have.

There are more than 50,000 deaf children in the UK. Around 7,200 of them are under the age of five. Some 90% of deaf children are born to hearing parents, who do not have the experience of dealing with hearing impairment. Although deafness is not a learning disability, deaf children face a significant attainment gap during their time at school, and their educational outcomes are poorer. There is also a higher risk of poor mental health. In addition, deaf people are less likely to have decent employment, and suffer generally from inequality as a result of being hearing impaired.

It is important to say up front that all deaf and hearing-impaired people have the right to participate fully and independently in society. Too often at the moment, those rights are not being fully realised. Liberal Democrats believe, as I am sure hon. Members from all parties do, that every deaf child deserves the best possible start in life, the opportunity to flourish and for their families to be supported, so that they can express themselves and communicate with ease, in the way that is most comfortable for them.

The hon. Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) highlighted that offering a range of therapies is the best way to support families who have a child who is deaf, and that they should be able to exercise choice when deciding which therapy is most suitable for them. Under section 17 of the Children Act 1989, local authorities in England have a duty

“to safeguard and promote the welfare of children within their area who are in need”

by providing

“a range and level of services appropriate to those children’s needs.”

A child is defined as being in need if they are disabled, and the Act says that a child is considered disabled if they are deaf. We are therefore in a position where it seems that local authorities must be compelled to provide appropriate support for deaf children and their families. The National Deaf Children’s Society notes that

“in some cases, local authorities do provide funding to help” a child “access AVT”.

The problem is that the Government have confirmed that audiology services are commissioned locally and that

“the responsibility for meeting the needs of non-hearing children lies with...National Health Service commissioners.”

That leaves us with the dreaded postcode lottery. It would be helpful if the Government provided guidance to local authorities on the level of support they should be providing, particularly, in the context of this debate, for AVT.

Locally in Shropshire, headteachers report an inability to access basic speech and language therapy for hearing children. The strain on local government finances will clearly have a significant impact on what is available to children in each area. Will the Minister confirm whether provision of AVT will be a responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care or local government? Therapies such as this might sometimes fall into the gap between the two, and it would be useful to understand how it can best be delivered.

As I mentioned, I am slightly new to this topic but Liberal Democrats have long campaigned for better support for people who are deaf, and particularly for those who communicate through British Sign Language. We would like BSL to have official, equal status to the UK’s other languages, and would like free access to sign language lessons for parents and guardians of deaf children. We welcome all the developments in improving outcomes for deaf children, including technology such as cued speech visual systems, for which there is a major centre in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for South Devon (Caroline Voaden).

I echo the call of the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South for a pilot scheme—that seems a sensible way forward. The existing research on AVT is promising but the evidence base is still narrow and a pilot scheme seems the best way to broaden that evidence base and convince those who have not yet been convinced by meeting children who have benefited profoundly from the therapy. More broadly, the Government should strengthen the availability of basic speech and language therapy training for people working with children to ensure that children who are struggling with hearing impairment can be identified, that their progress is monitored and supported, and that an equal outcome is found for them.

In conclusion, will the Minister confirm whether the provision of AVT is the responsibility of the Department of Health and Social Care or a local government issue, bearing in mind that the provision of such assistance comes through local government? Will he also confirm that the 10-year plan will address services such as AVT for deaf children and adults? Finally, will he consider a pilot scheme to broaden our understanding of the benefits of AVT?

10.17 am

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) on leading this debate and pay tribute to Auditory Verbal UK for its tireless advocacy in this area. I know that, to obey parliamentary protocol, I should never direct comments to the audience but I would like to say thank you to Sam for his advocacy and for being here to watch this debate. Maybe one day he will be on these green Benches, advocating for further changes, although I hope the Government will have served that purpose by then. If Sam is listening, I hope it is okay, Mr Western, to put those comments to him through you.

As Members have noted, the provision of auditory verbal therapy was previously discussed in the House in December 2023. In the aftermath of that debate, I understand that AVUK held discussions with the Department of Health and Social Care and received

support from two Ministers in the last Government: Maria Caulfield, the former Member for Lewes, and Dame Andrea Leadsom, the former Member for South Northamptonshire. I also understand from the charity that, before the election, the last Government were considering how to roll out training for auditory verbal therapy and to upskill the existing speech and language therapist workforce. That is part of the workforce plan for the NHS and I am pleased to see that the current Government are continuing in that vein.

Helen Keller said that the only thing worse than being blind is having sight but no vision. Since the election, it appears that the Government are possibly stepping back from this area. Recent responses to written questions have indicated that the Government have no plans to review the adequacy of the provision of AVT and have stated doubts about the strength of the current evidence supporting its effectiveness, but today we have heard arguments made about a range of studies that suggest AVT really can support deaf children to develop age-appropriate spoken language and attain educational outcomes on par with hearing children. It is not for us, at this point, to make a decision but it is for this House to raise this topic. As a first step, will the Minister commit today to meeting Auditory Verbal UK so that it can present the latest evidence and research from the UK and abroad?

We know that integrated care boards are responsible for commissioning services for their local communities, including the provision of auditory verbal therapy. Thanks to charitable funding and efforts from AVUK, there are now 33 certified AV therapists across the UK. However, as other Members have noticed, there are still major gaps in provision, particularly in the public sector. Will the Minister therefore commission a review about the impact and effectiveness of the AVT that is currently taking place in the NHS? Although there are five AV therapists in Manchester, there is just one for the whole of the west midlands, and, as the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South mentioned, there are currently no AV therapists in the north-east. The hon. Member for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle) also said that there are none in the north-west. That highlights the postcode lottery, which needs to be addressed—especially when, as we have heard, there are 50,000 deaf children in the UK.

AVUK has argued that national guidance to ICBs could help to improve provision across England. Although the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence has guidance on hearing loss for adults, there is no such guidance for children. We know we need an evidence base for guidance, and, given that NICE is the organisation responsible for that, it seems reasonable to focus our attention on it. Can the Minister commit to speaking to NHS England and NICE about current guidance for hearing loss and whether it needs to be updated in the light of the emerging evidence around AVT?

Much has been said by Members today about the return on investment we can see from putting more money into AVT. AVUK has said that for every £1 invested in therapy, there could be as much as a £4 return. We have seen in other areas—for example, the children's hospice grant—how a small amount of national funding can go a long way in supporting community services across England. Therefore, as decisions are made on the allocation of NHS funding announced in the autumn

Budget, will the Minister consider AVUK's ask to provide funding to train more public sector workers in AVT? I think it was also Helen Keller who said, "I cannot do everything, but I can do something. I must not fail to do something that I can do."

I congratulate the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South on securing this important debate and raising these issues. Deaf children across the land are lucky to have an advocate in her—she is doing her part. I thank the hon. Members for Strangford (Jim Shannon), for Bolton North East, for Bury North (Mr Frith), for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi), for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan); they too, are doing their part by raising the issue in this debate. I thank AVUK for all it does; it is doing its part. I hope, in raising constructive questions as His Majesty's Opposition, I am doing my part, too. In turn, I hope that the Minister will answer my questions and others raised today, meet AVUK and assess its evidence, and make appropriate recommendations and changes with the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS so that deaf children can reach their full potential—in doing so, he will fulfil his part.

10.23 am

The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson) for securing this vitally important debate, and for her powerful and moving contribution to our discussion.

I would also like to break with protocol and welcome Sam to Parliament today. He is clearly a remarkable young man, and an inspiration to us all—thank you for being here, Sam. Like the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), I thank hon. Members for their excellent contributions today. We have had a range of contributions, including from the shadow Minister, and from the hon. Members for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), and my hon. Friends the Members for Bury North (Mr Frith), for Bolton North East (Kirith Entwistle), for Derby South (Baggy Shanker) and for Bolton South and Walkden (Yasmin Qureshi). I think that may be all, but huge apologies if I have missed anybody. All their contributions were excellent and very well put.

My hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South has done so much work to champion the interests of children with special educational needs and disabilities, including non-hearing children. I know that she also has an excellent partnership with Auditory Verbal UK, which I welcome to Parliament today. I would, of course, be happy to meet its representatives to follow up on all the points made in this debate.

This Government are committed to raising the healthiest generation of children ever. We will deliver on this ambition through the health and opportunity missions, and through the Government's child poverty strategy. This is not about silos, with each Department delivering one part of a puzzle that does not fit together properly; this is about systemic, holistic change, and ensuring that we join up analysis, expertise and delivery across Government. Our mission-driven Government will drive long-lasting and sustainable change for children now

[Stephen Kinnock]

and in the future. We will break down barriers to opportunity and ensure that every child has the best start in life. This includes all children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities, including non-hearing children.

We know that developing early communication skills is a key foundation for life, and there are serious knock-on consequences when that development is delayed. That is why we are committed to improving access to early interventions so that every child can find their voice. With the right support, children with hearing loss can develop effective communication skills, live fulfilling lives and enjoy the same opportunities as everyone else. The Government recognise the importance of the earliest days of an infant's life. There is strong evidence that the 1,001 days from conception to the age of two set the foundations for our cognitive, emotional and physical development. That is why we are giving a £126 million boost for families to give every child the best start in life.

Thousands of families across England will be able to access family hubs, which will act as a one-stop shop for help with infant feeding advice, parenting classes and perinatal mental health support, among other things. Figures from the National Deaf Children's Society show that there were more than 45,000 deaf children and young people in the UK in 2023. Between one and two babies in every 1,000 are born with permanent hearing loss in one or both ears. This number increases to about one in every 100 for babies who have spent more than 48 hours in intensive care. Early and effective support is crucial for these children and their families. Permanent hearing loss can significantly affect a baby's development, so early and effective support is crucial for these children and their families.

It is vital that we intervene at birth. The NHS newborn hearing screening programme—the NHSP—aims to find babies who have hearing loss as early as possible so that the right support and advice can be offered right from the start. As we all know, language is linked to social, emotional and learning outcomes. From birth through to childhood, children and young people with hearing loss might need a range of therapies, such as speech, language and auditory verbal therapy. However, as we have heard today, those children are not always receiving the support that they need.

We recognise the important role of auditory verbal therapy as one of the therapies that can be useful for children with hearing loss. NHS audiology services, including the provision of therapies for children with hearing loss, are locally commissioned, and responsibility for meeting the needs of children with hearing loss lies with local NHS commissioners, because local systems are best placed to meet the needs of their own communities.

After 14 years of Tory neglect, incompetence and austerity, our NHS and care service are on their knees, but this Government are committed to properly funding the NHS, and we recently provided a £26 billion boost for health and social care in the autumn Budget. NHS England is responsible for determining allocations of financial resources. Each ICB will then commission the services they need for their local area, taking into account their annual budget, planning guidance and the wider needs of the population they cover. NHS England is supporting integrated care boards to make informed

decisions about the provision of audiology services so they can provide consistent, high-quality and integrated care to non-hearing children.

In July 2016, NHS England published “Commissioning Services for People with Hearing Loss: A framework for clinical commissioning groups”. The framework supports NHS ICBs to make informed decisions to address inequalities in access and outcomes between hearing services.

Mr Frith: Does the Minister agree that, for all the good intentions of ICBs, our healthcare system is atomised, but that if they were to take instruction from guidance provided nationally, the pillar-to-post experience of a lot of families seeking auditory verbal therapy would end? Will he commit to updating the nine-year-old guidance to ICBs, or at least acknowledge that it needs updating, with a national pilot that proves the efficacy of AVT for families seeking that intervention?

Stephen Kinnock: My hon. Friend will know that one of the constant challenges in the system is getting the right balance between empowering those operating at the coalface—those who are close to the communities and know them best—to ensure they are delivering the best possible services, and ensuring consistency and coherence, both strategic and operational, across the entire system. It is safe to say that we are not always getting that balance right. One of the key objectives of the 10-year planning process that we are going through will be to address the so-called postcode lottery—variation between regions—across the whole range of health and care. Without that cross-cutting strategic look at the system, it will not be possible to get the balance right. I absolutely take the point, but one thing I will say is that we are crystal clear when we issue guidance to ICBs that they must take that guidance into account, and their performance is monitored on that basis.

Mrs Hodgson: Am I right in thinking, from what the Minister has just said, that he will issue revised guidance following today's debate? Am I right that the Government, having given an extra £26 billion to local areas, will give them guidance that they should be looking to commission these services on a much bigger scale, so that we have more than 33 AVT therapists?

Stephen Kinnock: I can certainly tell my hon. Friend that this is a very dynamic situation. A system never stands still. For a system to work, we have to be constantly reviewing its performance and whether it is delivering to its objectives. I believe that the 10-year plan that we are producing will absolutely lead to a radical rewiring of the way our health and care system works. It will be driven by three big shifts: from hospital to community, from sickness to prevention, and from analogue to digital.

There is no doubt at all that where there are therapies and treatments that are working—that are clearly delivering big results, and value for money for the taxpayer—it is right that we give those priority in the way that we deliver. It is clear that AVT has huge potential, and it appears to have unexplored potential. I cannot pre-empt today how this is all going to pan out in terms of the system and the reforms that we are looking to push

forward, but I can assure my hon. Friend that we are committed to innovating and to building a system that is fit for the future.

In 2019, with input from the National Deaf Children's Society, NHS England produced a guide for commissioners and providers who support children and young people with hearing loss. The guide provides practical advice on ensuring that non-hearing children receive the support they need. Auditory verbal therapy is one type of therapy to support children with hearing loss, and it is important that local commissioners know their population and have the discretion to decide how best to meet its needs. When it comes to commissioning and providing services for children with hearing loss, we have been crystal clear with ICBs and NHS trusts that they must take the relevant guidelines into account.

We recognise the real need to improve access to therapies for all children who need them, including children with hearing loss. In recent years, in very difficult circumstances, the NHS has increased the number of speech and language therapists working in the service, but we know that more needs to be done. That is why the Government are committed to fixing the NHS and building a service that is fit for the future, with the workforce it needs to get patients seen on time.

Dr Luke Evans: The Minister rightly points out the need to try to deal with the postcode lottery and to ensure that there are reviews and sharing of best practice, but may I draw him back to my comments about guidelines? One thing he could do is ask NICE to look at the current evidence and consider what national guidance should be in place. ICBs have the right to choose what kind of treatment they think works best, and they will be driven by the clinical evidence and clinical guidelines; if there are no clinical guidelines, they will simply make their own decisions. Will the Minister commit to doing that?

Stephen Kinnoek: The hon. Gentleman will know that NICE has a prioritisation board, and ultimately that is the decision-making process for prioritising guidelines and the entire operating framework for what falls under NICE's remit. This is something that absolutely should be on the radar, and of course we are constantly in conversation with NICE about its prioritisation, but it is important that it takes an objective clinical stance on the question.

We have committed to develop a 10-year plan to deliver a national health service that is fit for the future. The engagement process has been launched. As we work to develop and finalise the plan, I encourage those concerned about the availability of services to support children with hearing loss, including auditory verbal therapy, to engage with that process to allow us to fully understand what is not working, as well as what should be working better and the potential solutions. I encourage all hon. Members present to go to change.nhs.uk to make their voice heard.

This summer, we will publish a refreshed long-term workforce plan to deliver the transformed health service we will need to build over the next decade to treat patients on time and deliver far better patient outcomes. We are also in the process of commissioning research to understand the gaps between the supply and demand of different therapy types for children and young people

with special educational needs and disabilities. That will help us to understand the demand for speech and language therapists and inform effective workforce planning.

Helen Morgan: I am pleased to hear that the Government have increased the number of speech and language therapists, which is so important for young people who are struggling to achieve their potential in an educational setting, but will the Minister address the specific point on commissioning by local authorities? Often, they are so strapped for cash that they are effectively trying to limit demand.

Stephen Kinnoek: Commissioning is led by ICBs. It is important that ICBs have open channels of communication with local government. We in the Department of Health and Social Care have close contact and engagement with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, and it is important that that relationship and interaction feeds down through the entire system, but the leading organisations on commissioning are the ICBs.

A number of colleagues raised the question of a pilot scheme to identify how our existing workforce can work differently. The early language and support for every child programme is an excellent example of different professions coming together to support children and young people—local authorities, schools, and the health and care system working together in the community to support our children and young people. The ELSEC workforce model focuses on recruiting pre-qualification speech and language therapy support workers into the workforce to improve the capacity and knowledge of staff who support children with emerging or mild to moderate speech, language and communication needs in early years and school settings.

Nine regional pathfinder partnerships are trialling new ways of working to better identify and support children in early years settings and primary schools. We have asked pathfinders to consider how to make the model sustainable after the project period. The therapy assistant roles have the potential to attract individuals to train to become speech and language therapists through the apprenticeship route. I understand that Auditory Verbal UK is progressing a National Institute for Health and Care Research grant application to support a pilot, and I would welcome an update from AVUK about how that is going when we get the chance to meet.

We welcome the work that AVUK is doing to upskill health professionals to deliver auditory verbal therapy. On the point made by the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth, there are as yet no NICE guidelines on hearing loss in children, and NICE has not made any recommendations on AVT specifically. Decisions on the need for guidelines on new topics and updates to existing guidance are made by NICE's prioritisation board, in line with NICE's published common prioritisation framework. I understand that NHS England met with AVUK and discussed the need for more high-level research evidence for the intervention and the need to develop evaluations of impact. I am pleased that AVUK has been invited to join the chief scientific officer's audiology stakeholder group, where it will contribute to decision making.

[Stephen Kinnoch]

We recognise the impact on the lives of children of timely access to high-quality services, including different therapies to help children to develop the right skills to engage with education. The Government's ambition is that all children and young people with SEND or in alternative provision receive the right support to succeed in their education and as they move into adult life. We will strengthen accountability on mainstream settings to be inclusive, including through the work of Ofsted, by supporting the mainstream workforce to increase their SEND expertise and by encouraging schools to set up resourced provision or SEN units to increase capacity in mainstream schools. That work forms part of the Government's opportunity mission, which will break the unfair link between background and opportunity, starting with giving every child, including those with SEND, the best possible start in life. We will work with the sector, as essential and valued partners, to deliver our shared mission and restore parents' trust.

I again thank my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South for securing this debate and sharing her insight on the vital issue of early interventions for non-hearing children. We recognise the importance of such services and the life-changing impact they can have on the lives of children. We are committed to ensuring that all children receive the support they need to live healthy, fulfilling lives. I will continue to work closely with NHS England and the Department for Education as we strain every sinew to deliver on those commitments.

10.43 am

Mrs Hodgson: I thank everyone who has taken the time to come along and made such excellent contributions on this vital issue. I thank the Minister, the hon. Member

for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), who spoke for the Opposition, and the hon. Member for North Shropshire (Helen Morgan), who spoke for the Lib Dems, for listening.

I was happy to hear that the Minister will meet AVUK and explore the potential of a pilot. That is great news. I hope that he might also get a chance to speak to Sam today—that would be wonderful. I also hope that, if NICE deems—as we all have—that this therapy is both clinically and economically valuable, he will update the guidance to ICBs. The Minister also mentioned the NHS 10-year plan. I hope he recognises that it has already been nine years since the guidance was updated and that the issue needs urgent attention, perhaps towards the start of the 10-year plan rather than the end of it; otherwise, we will be getting on for 20 years.

Today, we have the opportunity—the Minister especially—to change the fate of deaf children in this country. They deserve the same opportunities and outcomes as their hearing peers. That surely cannot be a controversial position. These children are the future. We must invest in them, not only because it is the right thing to do morally, but because any financial investment will produce economic returns in abundance. Mainly, we should invest in them because our children deserve it.

Matt Western (in the Chair): I also thank Sam and his family for attending this morning.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the provision of auditory verbal therapy.

10.45 am

Sitting suspended.

Northern Ireland's Political Institutions

11 am

Matt Western (in the Chair): I will call Sorcha Eastwood to move the motion and then the Minister to respond. As is the convention for 30-minute debates, there will not be an opportunity for the Member in charge to wind up.

Sorcha Eastwood (Lagan Valley) (Alliance): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the effectiveness of Northern Ireland's political institutions.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Western. I will present three key points. I will show that Northern Ireland's governance is structurally ineffective and keeps us trapped in cycles of instability and dysfunction. I will outline the modest, straightforward solutions to reform our institutions and unlock Northern Ireland's potential. I will say why the UK Government must act, and why that action must be taken urgently.

Devolution in its most recent form began in Northern Ireland more than 25 years ago. Since then, Stormont has been without a functioning Government for almost 40% of its lifespan. I am not good at maths, but that is nearly half, so it is not a new phenomenon. Stormont has been held to ransom multiple times since its inception, with prolonged collapses in 2000, 2002 to 2007, 2017 to 2020, and most recently in 2022 to 2024.

Those collapses have left our institutions in a cycle of dysfunction, and our public services and finances in a state of decay. Some may question whether the subject of my debate undermines the Good Friday agreement, but that could not be further from the truth. I wholeheartedly support the Good Friday agreement and endorse its underlying principles, values and interlocking relationships.

Jim Allister (North Antrim) (TUV): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sorcha Eastwood: I will not; I will make some progress.

It is in the spirit of the Good Friday agreement that I campaign for reform of our governance. The Good Friday agreement must be understood as it was intended, as a foundation for future progress, integration and normalisation, rather than a permanent solution to the divided society that we had in 1998.

As far back as 1999, my Alliance party wrote of the inherent risks in embedding rigid consociationalism within our political structures. We have always been pragmatic about the need for our political structures to evolve. More than 25 years later, the political structures born out of the Good Friday agreement, and the subsequent agreements, no longer reflect the diversity and progress of our society.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sorcha Eastwood: I will make some progress.

Today, close to 40% of the population hold a national identity that is not exclusively British or Irish, while the proportion of Members of the Legislative Assembly designated as neither Unionist nor nationalist has more

than doubled since 2011. The days of defining Northern Ireland's politics in purely binary terms is over—I am proof of that—yet our power-sharing arrangements continue to do so, at the expense of stability and progress.

There is also a misconception that reform of the Good Friday agreement would be an unprecedented departure from our peace agreements. Again, that is untrue. For example, the changes made during the St Andrews agreement in 2006 on how the Executive operated were a significant departure from the Good Friday agreement, and increased instability and the unfettered power of the two largest parties to the detriment of good government.

The proposals that I will outline would move us closer to the original purpose of the Good Friday agreement's provisions. Although we will have had an Executive in place for the past year, the truth is that our institutions are no more stable today than on the day they collapsed. It is my firm view that it is not a matter of if Stormont collapses, but when. Over the past 12 months, any number of the political events that have unfolded could have triggered a collapse. That risk is never far from my mind or those of my Lagan Valley constituents.

Most of all, that constant looming threat prevents the transformative, bold action necessary to get Northern Ireland's public services and finances in order. That will remain the case for as long as our power-sharing structures grant individual parties the ability to veto the functioning of government. Who bears the brunt of ransom politics and those perpetual cycles? It is the people of Northern Ireland, whether they are Unionist, nationalist or neither, such as myself.

For decades, our communities have yearned and fought for progress only to be shackled by a system that is fundamentally flawed. It is a system that allows one party to veto progress as and when it pleases, leaving the people and public services of Northern Ireland in limbo and decay. The outworkings of this system have been immensely damaging. As many hon. Members will be aware, Northern Ireland has by far the highest health waiting lists in the UK. Our schools are underfunded, our roads in disrepair, and our public services stretched to breaking point. At the same time, our talented young people are leaving for opportunities elsewhere because they see no future in a system that continually fails them.

I asked myself whether I would mention that we have some of the longest waiting lists and that our public services are under pressure, because hon. Members across the UK—and we in Northern Ireland are part of the UK—have the same issues. The outlier is that we have the biggest spend per head in the UK on health, yet we have the worst outcomes.

Robin Swann: On Northern Ireland having the biggest health spend, will the hon. Lady reflect on the fact that that in its recent publication, the Northern Ireland Fiscal Council equated the spend in Northern Ireland to that of north-east and north-west England? It is therefore incorrect to say that we have the highest spend. What we have are the challenges resulting from dysfunctional single-year budgets since 2016 to support our health service, which does not allow for the transformation it needs.

Sorcha Eastwood: I thank the hon. Member for the intervention. I am not sure of the provenance of that line on spend; as the former Health Minister for Northern Ireland, he will be aware of the intricacies. His point is well made, however, because there are structural issues within Northern Ireland. Simply put, our health issues in Northern Ireland are linked to the fact that we cannot manage to have Government long enough to embed a long-term system of public transformation, which is exactly what we need.

For years, Alliance has championed practical, achievable reforms to restore stability, hope and trust in Northern Ireland's governance. First, we must change the way that we nominate the First and Deputy First Ministers. Currently, the process allows one party to block the formation of an Executive, holding the entire system hostage. Indeed, whenever I was first elected to the Northern Ireland Assembly, I sat in my seat on more than one occasion and we voted across the Chamber to elect a Speaker but, due to the rules of the game, we went away time and again for nearly three years because we could not form a Government. Reforming that process would ensure that no single party could veto democracy.

We also need to replace the outdated system of parallel consent, which entrenches division rather than promoting collaboration. Instead, we should adopt mechanisms that reflect the diversity of our society and encourage cross-community support. The petition of concern is another area crying out for reform. Originally designed to protect minority rights, it has been weaponised to block progressive legislation time and again.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the hon. Member give way?

Sorcha Eastwood: I will make progress.

That tool has been used not to protect but to prevent. It is time to reclaim it for its intended purpose. Those proposals are modest and should not be controversial; they do not alter the fundamental principles of the Good Friday agreement. The reforms are not about party politics, but about people. I am sure that every single Member of this House who represents Northern Ireland, and every single Member of the Northern Ireland Assembly, wants to put their constituents first and does not want a system in which they go without Government. How in all good conscience could they support such action?

Finally, I turn to why Westminster must act. Some may argue that reforming Northern Ireland's institutions should be left to the local parties, but let us be honest: that ship has sailed. The Secretary of State's reliance on consensus has stalled progress and it is the people of Northern Ireland who are paying the price. Indeed, it is the people of Northern Ireland—whether they are Unionist, nationalist or other—who constantly say, regardless of their dearly held political beliefs, that they do not believe it is fair for one player to walk off the pitch and thereby, at a very basic level, deny people government.

The UK Government are the co-guarantor of the Good Friday agreement. They have both a legal and moral duty to ensure effective governance in Northern Ireland, and there is a precedent for that. In the past, when consensus has been unachievable because of our institutional framework, the UK Government have stepped

in. On Irish language rights, marriage equality, organ donation and reproductive rights, consecutive UK Governments have stepped up to the plate to ensure that the people of Northern Ireland, which is a constituent part of the UK, are not held back by our institutional failure. Westminster acted because it was simply the right thing to do to implement what I would regard as long-held and settled policies across the rest of the United Kingdom.

The reform that I am discussing today is in not just Northern Ireland's interests, but all our interests. A stable Northern Ireland reduces Treasury costs and boosts economic growth across the UK. Many MPs have rightly questioned—indeed, the hon. Member for North Antrim mentioned—

Robin Swann: South Antrim.

Sorcha Eastwood: Sorry, I mean the hon. Member for South Antrim (Robin Swann)—North Antrim was his old life; the new hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) is here in Westminster Hall. What do we have to show for those Treasury costs? The outcome is directly related to our inability to plan and budget long term, and to take the brave action necessary to reform our public services.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I am enjoying listening to the hon. Lady's speech, as I suspect are many hon. Members. She has touched on the important role that Westminster can play, which of course is true—this is the Parliament of the United Kingdom—but what more does she think the political parties in Northern Ireland can do? The whole premise and substance of devolution is about ensuring that local people can dictate what their communities and their future look like.

Sorcha Eastwood: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I will simply state, as I have already said, that time and time again we hear from people across Northern Ireland—whether they are Unionist, nationalist or other—that they do not want this system of collapse to be permanently baked in. When we stood for election to represent our constituents, we took a job.

Jim Allister: Will the hon. Member give way?

Sorcha Eastwood: I will make progress.

All of us in this House, regardless of our political opinion, took a job to do what is right for people. I do not want to think that there are people who have different political persuasions from mine who think that it is right to deny people government.

I do not regard myself as being better than anybody else because I do not designate as a Unionist or nationalist. Indeed, as time goes on, I sometimes have sympathy for a Unionist perspective and at other times I have sympathy for a nationalist perspective. Both those traditions are a huge part of my life. My family is drawn from across Northern Ireland and nobody can tell me that a Unionist is lesser than a nationalist, or that a nationalist is lesser than a Unionist.

However, the system that we have has an in-built bias towards people such as me, who are drawn from across the community, and it says, "You are lesser than them. Your vote does not count the same as that of a Unionist

or nationalist.” Although that may have been the predominant viewpoint at the time the Good Friday agreement was signed, it does not reflect the Northern Ireland that we live in today.

This issue is not about people saying, “We are better than you, because we don’t involve ourselves in a debate.” That is absolutely not what we are about. We are about making sure that the Northern Ireland that we live in today, which is made up of minorities—there is no one majority view—is represented. I think others would do well to consider that viewpoint. If that is the situation, every single political viewpoint must be regarded as equal, not just because that would take my party up to the level it should be at, but because it is simply unconscionable for us to have a system that collapses time and again, and then to turn round and ask why our public services, our economy and everything else are not working.

What else would hon. Members expect me to say? I am standing here because these proposals are what the people of Lagan Valley want me to ask for. I simply say to the Minister that they are modest proposals, which are not against the spirit of the Good Friday agreement. In fact, I would say that they bolster the spirit of that agreement. Surely, that is the legacy that people of my generation—a new generation—were promised. Let us now get on and deliver.

11.15 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Fleur Anderson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Western. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood) on securing this important debate—I believe it is her first debate since her election—and on the constructive and sensitive approach that has been adopted. She brings an important contribution to the debate. Since her arrival in July, the hon. Member has already demonstrated her passion for the issue and her enthusiasm in making a case for the potential evolution of the Northern Ireland institutions in future. I agree with her that stable political institutions and a devolution settlement that works for all the people of Northern Ireland remain a priority for this Government and, I am sure, for all in Westminster Hall today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is important that we place it on the record that I, as a Unionist—as well as all of us Unionists on the Back Benches here today—am committed to finding a way forward that politically can bring us all together. However, does the Minister of State agree that there can be no effectiveness of the institutions when hampered by EU interference, with no representation, and that effective devolution will take place only when we can make those devolved decisions in the best interests of Northern Ireland, not of the EU?

Fleur Anderson: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and for his shared commitment to finding a way forward. I think that is what everyone in Northern Ireland wants to see. It is the Windsor framework that enables the UK internal market to be protected post Brexit, and it has established powerful democratic safeguards for the Northern Ireland Assembly. They are what should be used to enable the institutions to function

effectively for the people of Northern Ireland. That is what I am going to outline in my speech. However, what do we mean by effectiveness?

Jim Allister: The Minister talks about the Windsor framework protecting democratic standards. Surely, as the Windsor framework surrenders more than 300 areas of law, on which the decisions should be made either in this House or in the devolved Assembly at Stormont, it is the very antithesis of democracy. That is because it submits Northern Ireland’s citizens to laws that they do not make and cannot change—laws made by a foreign Parliament, rather than their own Parliament or Assembly. How does that even begin to be democratic?

Fleur Anderson: We have debated at length the pros and cons of the Windsor framework, and I know we have different opinions on it. The Windsor framework enables the internal market to work and the smooth flow of goods, at the same time as allowing democratic institutions—the Assembly—to have their say and to have those democratic safeguards, as has been demonstrated recently.

We need to establish what we mean by the effectiveness of the political institutions. In Northern Ireland, the key measure of effectiveness in the institutions is peace. The Good Friday agreement remains an unparalleled achievement for Northern Ireland. Almost 27 years on from its signing, it has brought an end to armed conflict in Northern Ireland, and it has enabled a generation to grow up in relative peace, increasing prosperity and allowing the people of Northern Ireland to take steps towards reconciliation.

The journey to the signing of that agreement required incredible political courage and imagination from the Northern Ireland parties. They were required to set aside their deeply felt differences and commit to working together in a new suite of institutions in the hope of a better tomorrow. As we stand here in 2025, I recognise that the same commitment to collaboration, and to helping Northern Ireland achieve its full potential, is among the parties, is witnessed here today, and remains strongly in the Northern Ireland public.

I am delighted that the strand 1 institutions that the hon. Member for Lagan Valley focused on, the Northern Ireland Assembly and Executive, are fully operational again, having been restored nearly a year ago, in February 2024. I am extremely grateful that in full operation, they are doing what they were established to do: enabling power to be shared between communities in Northern Ireland. It is through devolved government that decisions can be taken locally on the issues that matter most to the people of Northern Ireland.

Mr Gregory Campbell: On the stability of institutions, does the Minister agree that there used to be a complaint about the use of the petition of concern, which was alluded to by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sorcha Eastwood), but which has not been used in the past year at all since Stormont returned? We can proceed only when there is agreement between the divided communities in Northern Ireland, and that has to be the basis on which we proceed.

Fleur Anderson: I welcome the hon. Member’s intervention. There was stability for 10 years when power sharing was enabled, and that is at the heart of

[Fleur Anderson]

what must be enabled by the institutions there. Unless there is a real change shown in various different ways, we need to ensure that those institutions maintain that power sharing. That is what has worked to give us peace up to now, but the stability has been in question. That is why it is good to have these debates, as we are today.

Adam Jooe: I very much echo the Minister's points about the commitment of this Government and those on the Government Benches to supporting the people of Northern Ireland. As she is touching on the Executive office, its functions and stability, will she give us her view on the merits of redesignating the offices of Deputy First Minister and First Minister as joint First Ministers? Does she think that would assist in bringing communities together?

Fleur Anderson: We need consensus for change. I welcome the proposals for change laid out by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley today. Everything I can see from the political parties and the debates in Stormont shows that we are still a long way from agreeing what those kinds of changes should be, whether those are the specific ones mentioned by her or others. If anything, what we need now is to focus on delivering for public services, as she also outlined.

A measure of effectiveness is stability. It is clear that the institutions have not always proven as stable as the people of Northern Ireland have a right to expect. There was a period of 10 years of stability from 2007 to 2017, which shows that it can be done. The question now is: can these institutions deliver what they need to deliver, or do they need to change? That is the question posed by the hon. Member for Lagan Valley. The institutions have been inoperable for 40% of their existence, and that has shaken the Northern Irish public's faith in them and had detrimental consequences for the delivery of public services.

Despite the challenges, the people of Northern Ireland agree that power sharing remains the best basis for Government in Northern Ireland. I recognise that power sharing is challenging, but the UK Government are committed to upholding the Good Friday agreement in letter and in spirit, and to a positive and active partnership with the Executive.

Jim Allister: Will the Minister give way?

Fleur Anderson: No; I will make some progress.

Our partnership approach enables us to work together to overcome joint challenges and to strengthen the institutions through delivery.

Robin Swann: Will the Minister give way?

Fleur Anderson: No; I will make some progress.

One of the most important contributions that we, as the UK Government, can make is to provide that long-term certainty and stability to Northern Ireland after the tumult of recent years. It is the focus of the UK Government and, I am sure, of all the Members here present. We do not want Stormont to fall into a pattern of collapse, as we have seen previously.

I know that the hon. Member for Lagan Valley feels strongly about the political evolution of those institutions, as do many in Northern Ireland. I remain committed to listening to those conversations going forward and to listening to all the views of MPs and Members of the Legislative Assembly, but the priority must be to support the Executive to deliver on those most pressing public service issues—health, jobs, the cost of living and education.

The third measure of effectiveness is delivery. Although the strand 1 institutions have been a significant success, more remains to be done to ensure that Northern Ireland is the thriving, successful place we know it can be. Northern Ireland has much to be proud of, benefiting from increasing economic prosperity and investment since 1998, both from the UK Government and the private sector. Northern Ireland has thriving tourism, film, TV production and cyber-security sectors, which are a leading dimension of Northern Ireland's diverse economy.

However, from my conversations with many people in Northern Ireland, I know that palpable frustration remains at the state of the public services, as the hon. Member for Lagan Valley outlined. I am very aware that receiving medical treatment in a corridor or waiting more than 12 hours in one of the hospitals across Northern Ireland has become normal, that some children with special educational needs wait for more than a year for the educational support they are entitled to, that social housing waiting lists are increasing, and that court delays remain a challenge, with a significant difference between court delays in the rest of the United Kingdom and Northern Ireland. I do not highlight these examples to be critical, and I know from my many conversations with Northern Ireland Ministers that they are fully aware of these challenges and serious about addressing them.

Improving public services is, rightly, the responsibility of the Executive, so the key question is whether the institutions, in their current form, can deliver on public services. The answer is yes, they can. The Executive now have the political will and stability, as well as a record funding settlement of £18 billion for Northern Ireland in 2025-26, which is an increase of £1.5 billion. Funding for the Northern Ireland Executive in the autumn Budget exceeds 124% of comparable UK Government funding per person in the rest of the UK, and the Executive have all the levers they need to tackle these challenges. The UK Government are focused on delivering our five missions across the UK, are a willing partner with the Executive in this and want to help the Executive to seize this opportunity. We are committed to working collaboratively and ensuring that Northern Ireland's institutions can work effectively to deliver for the people of Northern Ireland.

Robin Swann: I raised the issue of the £235 million transformation fund that the Government have given with the Minister in Northern Ireland questions. I know the Minister and I agree that it is crucial that we get that transformation money released to the Executive and spent in Northern Ireland to transform those services as soon as possible.

Fleur Anderson: I am glad the hon. Gentleman has raised that issue. There is a £235 million part of the restoration package focused on transformation, and it

is transformation that can demonstrate the effectiveness of the institutions. This is a demonstration of the UK Government's willingness to work together in partnership for genuine transformation. I know that these projects will be agreed by the Finance Minister shortly, and I agree that this needs to be done quickly. As the hon. Gentleman knows, transformation takes time. There needs to be collaboration, willingness and political will, and we have that with the Executive right now.

In conclusion, Northern Ireland's political institutions, arising from the Good Friday agreement, have been extremely effective in embedding and upholding peace. They have enabled locally accountable decision making and brought increasing prosperity to Northern Ireland since the signing of the agreement in 1998. The hon. Member for Lagan Valley has outlined the challenges and frustrations felt by many in Northern Ireland, and we are politicians in challenging times. The focus of Government policy in Northern Ireland remains the securing of a brighter future for generations to come.

The UK Government remain committed to working with the Executive—in a spirit of collaboration and partnership that was not seen with the previous Government—to support the transformation of public services and ensure the institutions' long-term effectiveness to deliver on those issues that every Member in Westminster Hall today will agree matter most to people in northern Ireland—economic growth, the cost of living, safety, jobs, education and health.

I thank the hon. Member for Lagan Valley for her contribution to this debate; an ongoing debate needs to happen all the time on the reform of Northern Ireland's institutions.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Knife Crime: West Midlands

[SIR JOHN HAYES *in the Chair*]

2.30 pm

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Before I call Sarah Coombes to move the motion, I ought to explain that this is my first time chairing a debate in Westminster Hall, so I expect you to be very gentle with me. If you are not—well, I am in the Chair.

Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the prevention of knife crime in the West Midlands.

It is a pleasure to serve under your first chairmanship, Sir John. I want to open this debate by talking about a knock on a mother's door—the kind of knock that too many parents have experienced and too many more dread. Last week, a woman from my area told me her story. She had already heard through friends that something had happened that night. Her sister was out searching the local hospitals. She had rung the police and been told someone would be there soon. Then she heard a knock on the front door. She said:

“What happened to my son was what I was always worried about. He was the kind of person who always protected his friends. That's what happened—he stepped in front of his friend to protect him and he was stabbed.”

The loss of a child in this way feels too enormous to comprehend. She explained to me the ways it had affected not just her life but those of her other children:

“My daughter is so angry, but she won't talk about what happened. She feels there is no justice for her brother. She's only in primary school but she's self-harming.”

We are here for this debate because we have got to stop this happening—families being shattered and communities destroyed by knives. It is my duty, as the MP for West Bromwich, to do everything I can to work with the police, schools, constituents and my community to stop this nightmare happening in the first place. In the west midlands, we have the highest rate of knife crime per capita of any region in England. But I do not want to talk about stats today. I want to talk about the stories of the victims, of those who live in fear, and even of those who have committed these terrible crimes. This debate is focused on prevention, so I will talk about the role that policing has to play in that, as well as intervention by schools, communities and families to keep young people safe.

Last year, I went to a football tournament in memory of one of the young players, who was stabbed to death. I spoke to some of the teenagers there and was truly shocked by what I heard. They were angry and distrusted the police, but they still felt there should be more of them around. They felt trapped in places where crime was all around them. They felt they had no opportunities for a different and better life. One teenage boy said to me—I will never forget this—that he did not think he would live to the age of 22.

This past week I got in touch again with the coach and asked for the young people's thoughts on what the Government need to do to tackle knife crime. Here is some of what they said:

[Sarah Coombes]

“The gang violence and knife crime is getting worse in my area. We need more youth centres and funding to help stop this.”

“Could we do more to stop youths from buying knives on the internet?”

“Why aren’t there more police patrolling the town centres that are known for knife crime or gang violence? Our local area is getting worse and no one seems to care enough to do anything to help it.”

“Education around knife crime should happen at a much younger age. A majority of young people don’t take it seriously because it has not happened to someone close to them, so maybe education needs to be by someone who has really suffered as a consequence of knife crime.”

The mother I mentioned earlier felt similarly:

“There is no support, no prevention—not enough youth clubs...It’s too easy to access these weapons. You can go and buy them online with no proof of ID. There’s nothing for young people to do now. My youth club provided experiences—things like white-water rafting. Now the youth clubs are all gone, social media has come in and crime is through the roof.”

After years of cuts to policing and youth services, it is no surprise that we have not been able to turn the tide on knife crime. Our new Labour Government have shown important ambition in committing to halving knife crime in a decade. I would appreciate the Minister going into detail about how we plan to achieve that. The young people I mentioned identified some themes that get to the heart of the matter: visible policing as a deterrent, reducing access to knives, and early intervention and education. How are young people being involved in policy design to ensure that the action the Government take is effective?

The police service in the west midlands was slashed in the austerity years. We still have 800 fewer police officers and 500 fewer police community support officers than we had in 2010. The knock-on effect of that is obvious. It is not just seeing police walking around our town centres and crime hotspots that keeps us safe, but police and PCSOs having the time and space to build key community relationships and gain the trust and vital intelligence that can stop crime. One of our most important pledges during the election was to restore neighbourhood policing, and I look forward to us having 13,000 extra officers and PCSOs across the country. As well as wanting to see police on our streets, people often raise with me the need for strong sentences to deter people from carrying a knife. Fundamentally, we have to reduce access to these legal weapons.

On the rates of knife crime per capita, West Brom has the highest rate for possession of weapons in Sandwell. We had a dreadful incident before Christmas when young people were running round West Bromwich in broad daylight wearing balaclavas and wielding machetes. That was terrifying for the people who were there and has a huge knock-on effect on local businesses and the entire area. West Midlands police has set up the Life Or Knife initiative, which provides education in schools and allows people to anonymously report when someone is carrying a knife. Our police and crime commissioner has also funded weapon surrender bins across the region. But we have to cut this off at source.

My local paper, the *Express & Star*, ran an award-winning campaign with a Wolverhampton mother, Pooja Kanda, to ban zombie-style knives and machetes. I applaud the paper for that important work and I fully support the Labour Government’s commitment to ban them. As the

victim’s mother I talked about earlier said to me, online retailers must be held to account. Now that the ban has been in place for a few months, will the Minister say whether it is proving successful? In particular, what enforcement action is being taken against online retailers who deliver zombie-style knives straight to people’s homes?

Police presence and reducing access to lethal weapons are important, but perhaps the most important thing of all is education, early intervention and constant support for young people who could get caught up in violence. Research shows that young people who are excluded from education are at greater risk of getting involved in violence, which is why it is so important that we do everything we can to keep young people in school. In the last few years, there have also been important programmes with organisations such as St Giles Trust that have supported young people at teachable moments, such as when they are in custody or A&E.

But in too many cases the intervention comes too late—as in the next case I will talk about. This might be slightly unusual, but I will read the words of someone on the other side: a constituent of mine who went to prison for 14 years for his involvement in the murder of a man using a knife. His words are powerful and important, because, as we have heard, young people respond to others’ lived experience. When I asked him how he feels now about being involved in a knife attack that took someone’s life all those years ago, he said:

“I feel so many emotions. I feel ashamed, I feel embarrassed, remorseful, unequivocally. It doesn’t matter that it wasn’t my plan and I didn’t wield the knife. Ultimately decisions I made that night led to that and if I hadn’t made certain decisions he would still be here. I feel dirty for that...I don’t dream often but when I do they are bad dreams, violent, people trying to kill me...Whenever I see knife crime stories about mothers losing their sons it takes me back. It’s the ripple effects...the people whose houses back on to the park where it happened, the first responders, the guy who was walking his dog who found the body. All these lives are changed forever.”

Having spent so much of his life so far in prison, he now wants to work with young people to stop them following the same path of violence. I asked him what would make the difference for young people now to stop them committing such a terrible crime, and he said:

“It’s more than what to say, it’s what I’d do. The authenticity and realness and empathy is so important.

You need somebody like me who has the life experience. So you can openly talk about their home life, parents, friends, family, hobbies, hopes and dreams. And build the trust and rapport. And show love...Take them on positive trips—take them places they’d never usually be able to afford and show them that this could be your life.

It has to be a 24/7 thing, support all the time.

That night of the offence when I would have reached out—it would have been late and you need someone to be there then. Not office hours and then they turn their phone off. You need someone to say ‘Where are you, I’m coming to you, stay where you are.’”

There is so much more of my conversation with him that I think it would be useful for Members to hear, but there is not the time, unfortunately. I hope the Minister will address the importance of wraparound and consistent support for young people, and the need to make interventions and offer mentoring from a very young age, not just at the point when a child is suspended or already in trouble. My constituent’s key message about what will reduce knife crime is that we need “education from an early age, in the right way, delivered by the right people.”

Knife crime does not just destroy families. It destroys communities. It destroys towns centres when people are afraid. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) could not attend this debate, but she asked me to reflect on the impact that knife crime also has on schools such as Wodensborough academy, where a pupil who was killed will forever be remembered. I am proud that this Government are so committed to stopping the nightmare of knife crime in our communities, and I see it as my role as the local MP to do everything I can to be part of that.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that if they want to attract my attention, they need to bob. But I can see they know that already.

2.41 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under you, Sir John, during your first chairmanship in Westminster Hall. I am grateful to the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this important debate and for providing many of us from across the west midlands with the opportunity to contribute. The tragic and devastating effects of knife crime have been a central concern for communities across the west midlands and in the Walsall borough, particularly for those of us who represent constituencies that have been impacted by such violent acts.

Knife crime is a problem that cannot be ignored. It requires the attention and action of all of us in this House and beyond. In December 2023, I secured a debate on knife crime in the west midlands and highlighted the shockingly high rates of violent incidents in our communities. Sadly, as we enter 2025, the statistics remain deeply troubling. In the 12 months to March 2024 alone, West Midlands police recorded 7,000 knife-related offences, which is sadly a 70% increase from 2016. But these are not just numbers: families, friends, loved ones and entire communities are affected.

We must, as a nation, reflect on the devastating toll that these crimes take on real lives, because behind each statistic lies a story of personal loss and grief, of families torn apart, and of communities shaken to the core. In my constituency of Aldridge-Brownhills, we are reminded of the heart-wrenching consequences of knife crime through the loss of James Brindley, who tragically lost his life in 2017. James was just 26 years old when he was fatally stabbed by a 17-year-old as he walked home from a night out.

James's death sparked an outpouring of grief in the community and led his parents Mark and Beverley to found the James Brindley Foundation, a charity committed to reducing youth violence and promoting positive change in our community. The foundation's work, particularly its #LifeOrKnife campaign and its commitment to providing knife amnesty bins across the Walsall borough, plays a vital role in providing young people with the tools and support they need to make better choices. The installation of the bins, coupled with education and mentoring, which is also crucial, and partnerships with local businesses, is an inspiring example of grassroots action to tackle knife crime.

One initiative I want to highlight is Project Ray of Hope, which was born from the success of the visit of the "Knife Angel" to Walsall in 2023. I went to see the "Knife Angel" and it is one of the most poignant sculptures I could ever have imagined. Just to stand and see it is incredibly powerful. The project, which the James Brindley Foundation is working on, aims to create a permanent public art installation in the heart of Walsall to serve as a poignant reminder of the damage caused by serious youth violence. Importantly, the project aims to engage young people throughout its development, providing them with an opportunity to shape the future of their community through creative expression. This collaboration between the James Brindley Foundation and Walsall council exemplifies the positive role that local organisations can play in raising awareness and providing solutions.

I am aware of the Government's announcement of the coalition to tackle knife crime. I urge Ministers to include the James Brindley Foundation in this critical initiative, if they have not done so already. The Government should be working closely with this type of organisation, whose expertise and community engagement are essential to exploring effective solutions to this pressing issue. As we all acknowledge the important contributions of organisations such as the James Brindley Foundation, we must also turn our attention to the broader question of how we as a society are responding to knife crime. The Government have a critical role to play, but so too do our local leaders and public services.

The Labour police and crime commissioner and the Mayor have significant responsibilities to ensure that our communities are safe. Yet I fear that, in many cases, we are not yet seeing the level of leadership required to tackle this scourge effectively. Policing and public safety must remain a top priority. The west midlands has one of the highest rates of knife crime in the country, with 175 knife-related offences per 100,000 residents recorded in the region last year. Yet at a time when we need effective leadership, the response from our police and crime commissioner and the Mayor is not good enough.

I have long campaigned for a greater share of police resources in my constituency, including maintaining the police station in Aldridge, which is crucial for ensuring that our community feels safe and has the support it needs to tackle crime at the local level—yet it still remains under threat of being sold off by the police and crime commissioner.

The police must also be empowered to act swiftly. The proposed devolution of powers over policing to the Mayor could, if handled correctly, provide a more direct and focused response to this ongoing issue. I very much hope that the police and crime commissioner will not waste valuable taxpayers' resources by taking legal action to resist the proposed changes.

It is time for strong leadership. It is time for a change in approach—one that acknowledges the scale of the problem and responds with the urgency it deserves. That includes ensuring that local authorities, our police and our third sector organisations work together more effectively to prevent knife crime and protect vulnerable young people from falling into the trap of gang violence and criminal exploitation.

I believe that one area where we can make a tangible difference is in education. I have long added my voice to calls for the integration of knife crime prevention into

[Wendy Morton]

the national curriculum, an initiative that could serve as a powerful tool to raise awareness and shape the next generation's understanding of the devastating consequences of carrying a knife. We need to teach our children about the risks, but we must also equip them with the support they need to resist peer pressure and make better choices. That is why I continue to back the campaign for knife crime prevention to be made a compulsory part of school education. It is a move that has already garnered significant support.

Furthermore, the Government should widen the scope of knife bans. Far more knives are banned now than was the case in 2010, which is good, but it is an issue that all parties should be concerned about. I know the Government continued the policy of banning zombie knives in September, which is great. However, more can and should be done, which is why the previous Government sought to increase the maximum penalty from six months to two years for the offences of private possession, importation, manufacture, sale or supply of prohibited offensive weapons, and for selling knives to those who are under 18.

I am aware that the current Home Secretary commissioned a rapid review to understand how such weapons are sold online and delivered to under-18s, to identify gaps in legislation and to find the most effective ways to close them. I commend that effort, but now we need to ensure that it leads to swift action that strengthens our laws and holds those responsible to account. Rapid reviews must lead to rapid actions.

I reiterate the importance of collaboration across all levels of society. We must work together to reduce knife crime and ensure that our communities and our young people have the support they need to build a future free from violence.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I can see that a lot of people want to contribute on this important subject. Before I call the next speaker, I therefore suggest that you restrict yourselves to speeches of about five minutes. We will then get everyone in and have plenty of time for the spokesmen to speak and for the mover of the motion to say a few words at the end.

2.50 pm

Preet Kaur Gill (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this timely and important debate and highlighting the real-life impacts of knife crime in her constituency. Knife crime is a public health crisis. I speak as an ex-cabinet member for public health and an ex-children's services manager when I say that it is essential that we tackle both the causes and effects of knife crime.

In July, the Office for National Statistics found that knife crime in England and Wales had risen by 78% over the past 10 years. That is a staggering increase and sets out the scale of the challenge facing the new Government in reversing that terrifying trend within a decade.

I am sad to say that the West Midlands police force area is responsible for 10% of knife-enabled crime in the whole of England and Wales; only the Met police have more cases. However, the statistics alone never tell the real story and, as the MP for Birmingham Edgbaston, I have been witness to some horrific cases in recent years. Jordan Moazami, who was 18 years old and described as a "role model" by his peers, was stabbed and killed on Tennyal Road in my constituency in 2019. Muhammad Hassam Ali, 17 years old, was followed and killed by a 15-year-old after a four-minute conversation in Birmingham city centre. And in 2021, Dea-John Reid, my constituent, 14 years old, was hounded by a gang of five boys and grown men before being stabbed in the chest and dying.

I cannot do justice in words to the horror of those cases. In every one, what struck me immediately was the senselessness of it. And in many ways that is where we need to start when thinking about finding meaningful solutions to the epidemic of young boys taking each other's lives. Prevention has to be our watchword.

Understanding the root causes of knife crime is complicated. It is often a picture of poverty, drugs, gangs, exploitation, school exclusion, domestic violence, adverse childhood experiences and being in care. One of the two 12-year-old boys who killed Sean Seesahai in Wolverhampton in 2023 had experienced significant trauma in his life and been at risk of child criminal exploitation. According to the defence, he had been groomed, exploited and trafficked by men in the community, so there is a complicated story to tell there.

One of the questions we ask ourselves is, "Who is looking out for these boys?" I think child criminal exploitation is often misunderstood by professionals, which prevents the early identification of child victims. Too often, child victims of exploitation are criminalised rather than safeguarded—something that exploiters and organised criminal gangs anticipate and utilise to their advantage. The services that might identify them as at risk—schools, youth services, mental health services—are all under strain: youth mental health services are in crisis, school exclusions have been at a record high and youth services have been cut to the bone. The tragedy is that sometimes it is that absence of a safe space that is putting children at risk.

Some of the stories we hear are absolutely bleak. A Barnardo's practitioner at a service dealing with child exploitation shared evidence that, during winter, groups of children often gathered outside a leisure centre and sat by the air vents, as that was the only place they could feel warm and safe. That became a spot for exploitation, described as

"a hotspot for adults or older teens with cars driving by and offering lifts...and McDonald's".

Of course, that is how the dynamics of exploitation start: the favours, the debts, the escalating patterns of criminality.

I was struck recently by a comment by Martin Griffiths, a consultant trauma surgeon in London and NHS England's national clinical director for violence reduction—an incredible practitioner who has done some amazing work through his charity. He said:

"County lines drug carriers are all being exploited, whether it's knowingly or not, by individuals or organisations who utilise them because they are impressionable. They are mentoring these kids to do bad things. These are children who are low on support, self-esteem and resources."

It is precisely that lack of spaces and opportunities that is part of what puts children and young people at risk. Research by YMCA in 2021 found that, in England, local authority spending on youth services totalled £379 million, a £1.1 billion cut in youth services on 2010. I am hugely relieved that, in Birmingham, despite the current challenges for the council, all youth centres will now remain open and be retained by the council or partner organisations. It is a huge testimony to the importance that residents and young people place on these services in our city, and I want to thank everyone who made their voice heard in the recent consultation.

Communities and families have solutions, and they need to be part of the plan for change. I am really excited about the 10-year Young Futures programme the Home Office is working on, as it has the potential to do great things in my city. The creation of a new network of youth hubs is exactly what we need, and I should be grateful if the Minister would meet with me to discuss the provision in Birmingham.

There were 50,000 knife-related crimes in the year to March 2023 across England and Wales, around 5,000 of which were in the West Midlands police force area. I am heartened by the Home Secretary's categorical commitment that every youngster found carrying a knife will trigger a rapid intervention, including a prevention plan, to stop them reoffending. Identifying those young people before it is too late is half the battle, and when the signs are there, we must act on them. Can the Minister say more about the plans laid out in our manifesto this summer to place youth workers and mentors in A&E and pupil referral units?

I want to pay tribute to brilliant charities, such as Redthread in my patch, which has been working at the Queen Elizabeth hospital for several years. I mentioned Martin Griffiths, a surgeon and clinical director; the work he has pioneered at his A&E as a trauma surgeon is extraordinary. Young people that he had seen many times before would often turn up on his operating table. He realised that A&E admissions were a critical opportunity to intervene. He has a multidisciplinary team at his hospital, based in A&E. Instead of just patching up children and sending them on their way, the team help them to get education, work or somewhere to live. There is mental health treatment and advice on special educational needs, and the police provide protection and support for those who want to get out of a gang. The hospital allows the patients to stay there until it is safe for them to be discharged. The results have been incredible: readmission rates have dropped from 30% to 4%.

Redthread has a similar model and has demonstrated similarly remarkable results. Some 90% of the young people supported by Redthread did not return to hospital for a violence-related injury in the following year, and six months after the intervention 100% of the young people supported said they felt as safe or safer than they did before the incident. Young people who engaged in the full programme were 51% less likely to reattend than those who did not. A cost-benefit analysis showed that for every £1 spent, there was £4.90 of economic and social benefit. Can the Minister say more about the multidisciplinary and multi-agency work to address violence or exploitation?

Finally, we need to crack down on the criminals and routes into serious violence and crime. It baffles me that we still do not have a specific statutory definition of

child criminal exploitation. There have been multiple definitions, resulting in a confused, fragmented response by authorities, and investigators have to use laws on modern slavery to punish those coercing or forcing children to move drugs. A new offence of criminal exploitation of children would allow us to go after the gangs that are luring young people into violence and crime. I look forward to working with the Government on their plans to introduce this new law in due course.

I am proud of the swift action the Government have taken to tackle knife crime so far: banning zombie-style blades and machetes, which were used to kill Ronan Kanda in Wolverhampton, setting an ambitious mission to halve knife crime in a decade, and launching a new coalition to tackle knife-enabled crime working together with technology companies, sports organisations and the health service. But there is undoubtedly a lot more to do. When does the Minister hope to bring forward the crime and policing Bill, so that we can move ahead with the Young Futures programme and strengthen those laws?

The message we need to send to young people is one of hope and opportunity—that our society cares about them and that we are invested in them and their futures. Tackling knife crime has always been about prevention and protection as much as prosecution. After 14 years of abject failure by the previous Government on this issue, I am looking forward to working with the Labour Government to deliver change that saves more lives.

2.58 pm

Manuela Perteghella (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this important debate. Knife crime continues to be a devastating issue across the UK, and the west midlands is no exception. The number of recorded offences—over 3,600 last year, a 6% increase on the previous year—underscores the urgent need for more robust preventive measures. As hon. Members have observed, a return to proper community policing will contribute to making our communities safer.

The tragic murder of my constituent Cody Fisher, a young and promising footballer and PE teacher, in a Birmingham nightclub in December 2022 highlights the devastating impact of these issues on families, friends and the wider community. Cody was fatally stabbed with a smuggled zombie knife, exposing serious failings in venue security. His mother, Tracey, has shown incredible courage in campaigning for Cody's law, which would mandate bleed control kits and metal detectors in late-night venues—practical, cost-effective measures that would save lives.

Tackling knife crime requires more than reactive measures; we must address its root causes by prioritising investment in youth services, which have been cut to the bone, education in schools, and community-led programmes that offer young people opportunities and alternatives. We also need to tackle the online advertisement and sale of knives to our young people. Cody's law is an essential step towards reducing knife crime in licensed venues and must be part of a broader strategy to protect young lives and create safer communities. I urge the Minister to adopt the proposal and ensure that no more families endure the senseless loss that Cody's family suffered.

Several hon. Members rose—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. Because of the character of the debate, I will prioritise Members from the west midlands. I hope hon. Members from other places will understand that. I think it is reasonable and fair.

3 pm

Alex Ballinger (Halesowen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your premier chairmanship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for calling this important debate and for her passionate speech. It is fantastic to hear from both the victims and the perpetrators of these crimes.

As the MP for Halesowen, I am all too aware of the scourge of knife crime across our region. Many people from my constituency still remember the tragic death of Ryan Passey, a promising young footballer from Quarry Bank who was stabbed to death in a nightclub in 2017. Ryan was killed as his assailants were able to carry a knife into the venue without being stopped and with no fear of being caught. It is shocking that no one has been found guilty of his murder. His family are still fighting for justice more than seven years after he was killed.

Since Ryan's tragic death, knife crime has continued to blight our community. In August last year, three youths attacked and slashed a man on Silverthorne lane in Cradley Heath. In September, students at Leasowes high school were placed under lockdown for their safety after masked youths were seen hanging around outside the school with machetes. The number of young men and boys carrying and using knives with impunity across our communities is deeply worrying. Residents are scared, with many telling me that they no longer feel safe leaving their homes alone. That is unacceptable. People deserve to feel safe in their communities, and students should not have their learning disrupted by threats of violence.

The figures on knife crime in our region are terrifying. Research by the Office for National Statistics shows that the west midlands has the highest rate of knife crime of any region in the country, with more than 5,000 offences reported last year. The rate of knife crime in our region has increased year on year since 2015, and it is now higher than London's. Worryingly, that seems to be driven by a big increase in children and young people carrying knives. Last year, over 3,200 young people aged 10 to 17 were charged with knife offences, up 20% on a decade ago. As MPs for the west midlands, we should be deeply concerned about those statistics.

The truth is that the situation is a legacy of a poor decisions over the last decade by the Conservative Government—a legacy of cuts to neighbourhood policing and youth services, rising child poverty, and a failing youth justice system that works in the interests of no one. This Government have a moral responsibility to act now to tackle the crisis, and our response requires a multifaceted approach. First, we must focus on preventing weapons from reaching our streets. That means making it harder for young people to access dangerous weapons such as machetes, ninja swords and zombie blades, and I welcome the Government's new ban on those weapons.

Secondly, the police must have the resources and powers to stop and seize weapons from young people on our streets. I was shocked to learn that the rate of police stop and search in the west midlands is less than half that in London. As we put more bobbies on the beat, police in the west midlands should be using stop-and-search powers more frequently to respond to rising knife crime.

Finally, and most importantly, we need to address the root causes of offending. We must offer young people hope, opportunities and positive alternatives to destructive pathways. The Government's creation of the Young Futures programme, which includes prevention partnerships across England, is an important step to intervene early and stop young people being drawn into crime. It is also important to act when people come into A&E departments with violent injuries. That is a time when social workers and youth workers should step in and offer pathways away from violent behaviour. There is no room to let people fall through the cracks.

I have seen the impact that knife crime has on our communities. The families of victims like Ryan Passey deserve real action to prevent these tragedies from happening again and again. I am confident that we can work together to prevent more knives from getting on to our streets, to deter people from carrying them, and to make people across the west midlands finally feel safe.

3.5 pm

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): It is an honour and a privilege to speak under your chairmanship, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this important debate. I hope to be somewhat succinct. I echo the sentiments expressed by other hon. Members, but I want to talk about my personal experiences as someone who grew up in an area that has had, historically, the highest deprivation, high crime and a gang culture—the area of Aston.

I grew up in an environment where young lads would hang around on street corners, in the local park or in local shopping centres, and we know the phrase “idle hands are the devil's workshop”. What was it that allowed me and my siblings, and people closely affiliated with me in my social surroundings, to achieve so much coming out of an area such as Aston? I reflect on my personal experiences, and one of the most important factors that allowed me to remain out of gang culture, not standing on corners or in the local park or shopping centres, was the youth centres.

I had two prominent youth centres within walking distance of my home. One is now called Saathi House, and there was a play centre within Aston park. We had youth workers. I chuckle when I talk about the youth workers that helped steer my life—Fat Phil was the name of one of them, and Sandra was another. They were instrumental, because they took us away from standing on corners, and from the local shopping centres and parks. They took us out on weekend trips. I came from a family that was not wealthy. My father worked 12-hour shifts and I hardly ever saw him, and my mum was very keen to ensure that we stayed on a straight and narrow path. It was the youth centres that took up all

my evenings and weekends. It was all the social activities that they took us on that meant we were out of the gang culture, which was rife.

While the hon. Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) rightly points out that Birmingham council, although it originally decided to slash youth centres, has now decided to keep them all open, the resources are not being provided—staffing levels are being reduced. I urge the Minister to review what we have in Birmingham. The debate is on the west midlands, but the statistics show that there were 6,185 knife-related incidents in the last three years just in Birmingham.

If we are serious about tackling knife crime, of course prevention is vital, and youth centres are instrumental in that, but we need to resource them appropriately. There is no point having a youth centre where children cannot go to events or play football at a local football stadium because they cannot afford the £7 per child—parents simply do not have that money. Resourcing youth centres adequately is very important, so that they can provide the sort of things that I experienced.

Hon. Members have talked about social media, and I am glad that the Government are taking strident steps to address that aspect, but the online purchase of weapons is critical. It is not just about closing the gap by making sure that Amazon, eBay and other online retailers are held to account; we also need tougher rules and sentences for adults who purchase online and provide weapons to young children. That is important, given what we understand about gang culture and the way that young children can be coerced into that environment.

Police officers and PCSOs are also important. We had community support officers in inner-city areas setting up equipment for football, rugby and cricket. They would be in charge and take young children to local parks and interact with them. It has already been mentioned that we had a significant reduction in police officers and PCSOs. I hope that the additional officers will assist, but they cannot assist if they are not adequately resourced to do the things that can drive young people away from gang culture.

In closing, I again thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich for securing this debate. I sincerely hope that the Minister will take away my personal experiences, and the need for additional resources in Birmingham, especially when Birmingham city council has an enormous deficit of more than £376 million. It simply does not have the resources to deal with this issue, and it requires additional funding from the Government.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. I have got two more west midlanders, and I am relying on them to make time for the Members for Strangford and for Worcester to get in.

3.11 pm

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing the debate.

In 2022-23, the west midlands reported 180 incidents per 100,000 people, giving it the unenviable title of knife-crime capital of the United Kingdom. Knife crime

is the leading cause of homicides in England and Wales. Around 11,300 knife crimes occurred in the west midlands between November 2020 and October 2023, and Wolverhampton, where my constituency lies, accounted for 7.6% of those crimes.

I am pleased by the action that the Government are taking, and to see that they have launched a coalition to tackle knife crime, working with the actor Idris Elba and the Elba Hope Foundation. I look forward to seeing how that coalition will work to bring together campaign groups, families of people who have tragically lost their lives to knife crime, young people who have been impacted, community leaders, technology companies, sports organisations, partners in the health service, education and the police, and experts, to try to understand and appreciate what causes young people to be dragged into violence and knife crime. I hope that will provide the evidence to drive Government policy.

I am also pleased that the Government are committed to strengthening the laws around the online sale of knives, and to see the creation of the Young Futures programme, with the new local prevention partnerships, and particularly the creation of a new network of youth hubs. But we need to do more in the west midlands, with the West Midlands police and community initiatives.

We need an increase in neighbourhood teams to carry out specific patrols in knife-crime hotspots at the times of greatest risk. We need to continue the knife amnesty programmes that encourage people to give up their offensive weapons in exchange for avoiding prosecution for possession. In Wolverhampton, 185 weapons were safely deposited, 97 of which were handed in close to the Tabernacle Baptist church in Whitmore Reans in my constituency.

The community initiative to reduce violence will be run in the cities of Coventry and Wolverhampton, funded by the Home Office through the Youth Endowment Fund. It is part of a global initiative seeking interventions with young people involved in violence and connecting them to an exit pathway from gangs. I hope that that will be focused throughout the west midlands.

I thank the hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) for raising the issue of youth clubs, because we must realise the importance of youth clubs and youth services in preventing knife crime. We need to have trusted role models in youth workers, and we need our youth to have activities in a safe, welcoming place where they can exercise their passion and drive and have access to support mechanisms that are provided through proactive strategies.

In my constituency, we have the Way Youth Zone, which has had a positive impact on knife crime prevention by providing engaging activities and programmes; building positive relationships; taking safeguarding approaches; bridging the empathy gap by bridging the gap between young people and law enforcement; and having partnership projects with other organisations. We need to have more of that.

3.15 pm

Mrs Sureena Brackenridge (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I extend my deeply felt thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for bringing forward this important debate. Before I

[*Mrs Sureena Brackenridge*]

continue, I want to express my deepest condolences to the victims, their families and everyone who has been affected by this devastating crime.

My constituents and I often ask why we have come to this: a situation where we have children murdering children. We have young people who feel they cannot carry on with their everyday lives without carrying some kind of weapon. We have easy online access to such awful, graphic, extreme violence. Tragically, in the west midlands—the knife crime capital of the UK, as we have just heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss)—that is the reality we face.

In my former role as a deputy headteacher, I saw how schools are in the eye of the storm. I will never forget the devastating impact on our community when two young men were murdered near a school where I worked. It was incredibly sad. Their names were Ronan Kanda and Shawn Seesahai. Innocent lives were taken due to senseless violence. Shawn was only 19 years old. He was walking through a park with his friend. He saw two 12-year-olds sitting on a bench, and they murdered him. It is senseless. Ronan Kanda was mistaken for someone else. At the age of 16, just a few steps away from the safety of his home, he was cruelly murdered. I have seen the courage of Ronan's mother and sister, Pooja and Nikita, as they fight for change so that no family endures what they endure day in, day out. Their strength humbles me, and I stand with them and with every family affected by these senseless tragedies.

Staff in schools have a motto: "It can happen here." We are always on high alert, as we know that knife crime can happen anywhere. But we should not be fooled by stereotypes; this is not just about street corners and gang culture. This problem has not been dealt with, so it has diffused into wider society. All communities are at risk and affected to some degree by the dangers of soaring knife crime. We must act not just with stronger enforcement, but by addressing the causes of knife crime. I welcome the new Government's commitment to prevention, education and engagement, alongside robust enforcement.

When it comes to prevention and education, we all know that education is often the first line of defence. I personally saw the power of programmes that brought mentors with lived experience into schools to show students the real consequences of knife crime. We will invest in early intervention, helping those at risk through targeted support for families, schools and communities.

Secondly, there is the issue of engagement. We know that knife crime often stems from a feeling of utter hopelessness—of being stuck in a rut, with a lack of opportunity, and therefore being vulnerable to the grip of negative influences. I welcome investment in programmes such as the Young Futures programme—a version of Sure Start for teenagers—in youth centres and youth workers and in bringing local services together to offer young people a safe space and better opportunities.

There is also the issue of enforcement. Police must have the resources they need to crack down on knife crime—curfews, enforcement of penalties, drug and alcohol interventions, mental health treatment, and stronger action against the criminal gangs that are drawing young people into this crime. This Government have

acted to close the loopholes and get ninja swords, machetes and zombie knives off our streets, but I continue to call on Ministers to work at pace.

Victims of knife crime and their families deserve our unwavering commitment to prevention and change, to create a society in which no young person feels the need to carry a knife.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): The winding-up speeches will begin at 3.30 pm.

3.20 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, I wish you well, Sir John, as Westminster Hall Chair. I also thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for leading this debate and setting the scene so well.

Knife crime prevention in the west midlands is of course no different from knife crime prevention in Northern Ireland, London, Wales or Scotland. So the issue is prevalent and pertinent to everyone in this Hall, and it is always good to address issues that are pertinent across the whole of this great nation.

We are very much aware of the increase in knife crime. I have listened closely to what hon. Members have said and to their thoughts on how to address these issues. I look forward to the Minister's response, because she always gives us encouragement in her responses to the questions we ask, and I will ask her a question at the end of my speech.

I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich for sharing experiences from her constituency and for addressing the horrors of knife crime. Knife crime remains a significant concern in the United Kingdom. In the year ending March 2023, there were approximately 50,500 offences involving a sharp instrument—a 4.7% increase on the previous year. The Metropolitan police recorded around 15,000 offences in 2023-24—the highest number since 2019. When we think that that is a four-year high, we grasp just how important this issue is and why it is so important that we speak about it today.

The figures are shocking. Every week—or nearly every day, unfortunately—we seem to hear or read online or in the paper about yet another knife attack. There are many that stick in my head. I always think of the murder of Lee Rigby, the soldier who was outside his camp, and of Ben Kinsella. More recently, we had the horrific Southport stabbings, on which there was a statement in the House about an hour ago. Three lovely wee girls at a dance class were killed, and others were severely injured.

The horror of knife crime cannot be underlined enough. It is accepted that Northern Ireland does not have the same problem as other areas of the United Kingdom, but the stats are still shocking and must be addressed properly. In the 12 months leading up to July 2022, there was an 8.4% increase in violence on the year before. There is also data showing that a disturbing percentage of sexual offences in Northern Ireland involve knives or sharp instruments. In 2023-24, the Belfast city police district recorded the highest number of crimes in Northern Ireland—some 33,000. That shows the high prevalence of the crimes we are talking about in urban areas.

In Northern Ireland, attacks on women and girls are unfortunately at the highest level in the United Kingdom. One of the women murdered was Natalie McNally. She

was brutally stabbed the week before Christmas 2022. Natalie was 15 weeks pregnant. The Northern Ireland Policing Board has expressed concerns about the prevalence of knife-related crimes. The impact on communities is significant.

I often think about the families. I know that you, Sir John, and others in the Chamber will feel the same compassion at someone's loss of a loved one as a result of such a violent and horrific crime. It is a grief that one can never get away from, so we must do more to address this issue.

I have a question for the Minister. This issue is her responsibility, and if we are going to address it centrally here at Westminster, how can we better share experiences, push together the legislation and give advice to some of the regional Administrations? I am thinking of the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Justice Minister, Naomi Long, in particular, as well as the Northern Ireland Policing Board.

I have every hope that we can do more to make our towns, villages and constituencies safer. As always, we must give thanks to the police and the emergency services, who do their bit to save lives and keep people safe in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. I hope that knife crime will become a thing of the past, but there is much to do yet.

3.25 pm

Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Sir John. I recently met the young people representing our county in the Worcestershire Youth Cabinet, and they shared with us their priorities, the highest of which, to my shock, was crime and safety. They are very concerned by the issue, and knife crime was at the top of their list of concerns. They suggested actions, and we discussed all the things my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) raised: visible policing, prioritising the restriction of access to knives, and early intervention and education, including restoring youth centres and youth services. However, their key ask was that we do the work to understand the root causes and motivations behind knife crime among young people.

My first takeaway from that conversation was how keen young people are to collaborate on this issue as we start to tackle it. My second takeaway was how important it is that we do not work from assumptions, but really try to understand, from the perspective of young people, what is driving this problem—that we listen to, involve and empower young people. That is all the more important when we realise just how fuelled this issue is by fear, apathy and disenfranchisement.

Young people care deeply about this issue. They are ready to engage, and they deserve a voice. On behalf of the young people in Worcester, I want to echo their call and their offer: let us act urgently at all levels of policing, disrupting and preventing knife crime, but let us, as we do that, put young people at the very heart of that response. We will tackle this issue most effectively when we put our influence, power and resources in their hands, so let us put young people at the centre of what we do as we tackle and end the problem of knife crime.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Before I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, I thank hon. Members for

their brevity and their co-operation in making sure that all colleagues contributed. I want to leave some time for the mover of the motion to speak at the end.

3.27 pm

Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship for the first time, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this important debate and for her passionate speech. It has been deeply moving to hear from Members across the House about the horrific experiences their constituents have had to endure. It is tragic that the names of so many victims of knife crime have been read out today.

As the House knows, the tragedy caused by the knife crime epidemic is, unfortunately, not confined to the west midlands. Although I represent a constituency in a different metropolitan area, it is key to highlight that these issues blight cities and towns across the country. There is something uniquely challenging and disturbing about the vicious cycle of collapsing communities, poverty and gang violence in our cities. That should unite us across this House in a new-found resolve to tackle the issue head-on.

As a Liberal Democrat spokesperson for London, I am acutely aware of the scale of this epidemic of violence across our capital city. Just two weeks ago, 14-year-old Kelyan Bokassa was murdered on the 472 bus in Woolwich. In my own community, in December 2023, we were devastated by the senseless loss of 17-year-old Ilyas Habibi, who was tragically murdered outside Sutton station. Ilyas was a young man with his entire future ahead of him. He had aspirations, potential and opportunities that a blade cruelly stole from him on that cold winter's day. My heartfelt thoughts are with his family and friends as they continue to cope with such a heartbreaking loss. It is particularly painful that the alleged killer remains free overseas.

Knife crime in our capital has risen year on year, with more than 14,588 offences recorded in 2023 alone. We have all seen tragic stories of teenagers stabbed to death on buses, in their local highstreets, and outside their schools. No young person in this country should have to live in fear of such violent crime when they leave their home. Parents should not have to worry each day about sending their children into the world, and dread the threat that they may fall victim to a senseless stabbing that would tragically cut short their burgeoning life.

The crisis was not properly addressed by the previous Government, or by the current or past Mayor of London, and must be urgently addressed today. It is encouraging to see the Government take new steps to clamp down on the sale of ninja and samurai swords, and to give the police greater powers to seize and destroy weapons, but there is much more to do and a whole-of-society approach is desperately needed.

One huge step forward, on which the Labour Government need to focus, would be a return to proper neighbourhood policing, where officers are visible and known in their local communities. In my constituency and across London, we are increasingly seeing safer neighbourhood officers being abstracted from their areas to other forces and other parts of London, leading to a significant reduction in the capacity for ongoing proactive

[Luke Taylor]

policing in our communities. Although the level of abstractions has dropped in my constituency and across Sutton in recent months, they are still a problem.

We have also seen a massive reduction in the number of police community support officers. The number of PCSOs in the Metropolitan police declined by 32% from 2015 to 2023. The data shows that in 2015 there were 1,787 PCSOs, but that number dropped by 572 to only 1,215 in 2023. Although that is a startling statistic, more dramatic were the cuts made under Mayor Johnson. Between 2008 and 2016, PCSO numbers dropped from 4,247 to only 1,626, so under the last Conservative mayor, PCSO numbers were cut to 38% of the level that they were at when he took office. That means that fewer than two in five PCSOs remained after his eight years running the capital.

The failure to protect proper community policing, under both Labour and Conservative administrations in London, is deeply concerning because it undermines the important role that visible policing plays in creating a sense of security and, of course, in deterrence. Research consistently shows that having officers on the beat serves as a powerful deterrent to violent crime, including stabbings, with criminal activity dropping significantly in areas where police are actively engaged and present.

The surge in violent crime only highlights the dangers of reduced police presence in our neighbourhoods. It is extremely concerning to think that the tragic murder of Ilyas occurred just minutes from a police station, outside a busy train station and a packed bus stop—an area where policing should have been as visible and as proactive as possible. That tragic incident, among many others, should be a wake-up call for the Government to get the Metropolitan police to take seriously the scale of the problem of repeated abstractions, and should underscore the importance of maintaining dedicated officers in our communities. We need to ensure that all areas are adequately staffed with officers, who can prevent crime before it happens and respond quickly when needed. Only then will we see a reduction in knife crime.

On the community side, we must not forget that the previous Conservative Government made the problem worse by savagely cutting youth services. Those services are often on the frontline in the war for young people's hearts and minds; they stand as a buffer between a life of violence and a life of opportunity. Too often those services are derided as a waste of money, or belittled as merely another community project. That is utterly misguided. As Members on both sides of the Chamber have already made clear in this debate, youth services should be recognised for offering a vital public service: early intervention.

When they are well funded, such services are able to fulfil a vital role, alongside the police, schools and other third sector organisations, in developing what we really need: a public health approach to knife crime. That approach—which Liberal Democrats, in London and across the country, have long called for—is the right one. It would mirror the approach that Glasgow took, which has been shown to yield results.

Let us be clear: results in this area are measured in something more important than profit or efficiency; results in this area mean lives saved, lives nourished and lives reinvigorated. A society that stands by and watches

youth services wither away is not one that is truly committed to delivering for young people and preventing knife crime. Let us move forward with the renewed conviction that the measure of a civilised society is how it treats its most vulnerable, as we must also remember in the context of young people.

3.34 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): It is a pleasure, privilege and honour to serve under your chairmanship on this first occasion, Sir John. I thank the hon. Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this important debate. Hon. Members have shared the horror and pain caused by knife crime, which has been suffered by too many across this country.

The rate of knife crime in the west midlands has been and remains too high. Knife crime is a blight on the region, creating challenges that go beyond injuries or, tragically, fatalities. It undermines communities and leaves people feeling unsafe, and in some cases deters people from going about their daily lives. Any Government would be right to prioritise this issue and they have set a worthy goal in committing to reducing knife crime by 50% in the next decade. Precisely how they intend to achieve that goal remains uncertain, however, and it will require difficult and targeted action.

As many hon. Members will know, the number of offences, excluding fraud and computer misuse, dropped by 50% between 2010 and 2023. The number of fraud and computer misuse offences also dropped by 20% from 2017, when it was first recorded, to 2023, and there were also significant decreases in cases of violence with and without injury. We know, therefore, that substantial reductions in crime are achievable, but the specific challenges posed by knife crime will require tailored solutions. Will the Minister elaborate in greater depth on how the Government plan to achieve that ambitious reduction?

People need to know that when they make the decision to carry a knife, there is a good chance they will be caught and face the full force of the law. Police officers need to know that when they make the decision to stop and search, the state will be on their side. We cannot take knives off the street without trusting, empowering and properly resourcing our police officers. That should include utilising violence reduction units and ensuring that the police are deployed in the right places at the right times using hotspot policing.

Continued funding for serious violence in the police funding settlement is welcome, but it appears to fall short of the £55 million a year previously allocated to the 20 violence reduction units. The last Government outlined plans to increase that by 50% to support preventive interventions. I understand that funding for those initiatives is often drawn from multiple sources. Can the Minister clarify how much funding the units will receive and whether further increases are expected in future years?

There are now more police on the streets than ever before, but police forces have raised concerns that they might need to reduce headcounts over the next year due to funding pressures from the recently announced settlement. That issue has been exacerbated by the increase in employer national insurance contributions, and there are projections that as many as 3,500 officers could be lost. Although the Government have indicated

that they will increase the number of neighbourhood police, can the Minister assure us today that total officer numbers will not decline over the coming years? A reduction in officers would pose significant challenges to investigating knife crime and delivering justice.

There are also areas where I hope we can find agreement. The Criminal Justice Bill, which was unable to pass prior to the general election, contained measures to strengthen knife crime legislation, including addressing the sale and use of weapons. One proposal was to increase the maximum penalty for selling knives to those under 18 from six months to two years' imprisonment. Another was the introduction of a new offence for the possession of a knife or offensive weapon in public or private with the intent to use unlawful violence, which carried a maximum penalty of four years' imprisonment. When the chair of the National Police Chiefs' Council gave evidence to the Criminal Justice Bill Committee, they expressed full support for the proposals. Do the Government intend to include such measures in upcoming legislation during this Session of Parliament?

Turning to the west midlands specifically, knife crime is undeniably a significant issue. The crime survey for England and Wales, released in October, revealed that 10% of all knife crime occurred in that region. Although there was a small positive development, knife or sharp instrument offences recorded by West Midlands police saw a 1% decrease compared with a 16% increase recorded by the Metropolitan police. Overall levels remain far too high. Indeed, the total number of offences recorded by West Midlands police is still 2% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

It is worth noting that NHS data from September 2024 also shows a small decrease in hospital admissions involving sharp objects or firearms, compared with the previous year, with 10 fewer incidents recorded in the west midlands. However, we all agree that we need further reductions. Both the local police force and the Government must strive to reduce the levels of knife crime in the region.

As hon. Members from the region will recall, the police efficiency, effectiveness and legitimacy—PEEL—assessment by His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services was critical of West Midlands police. Improvements have undoubtedly been made since, but there is more to do. One positive example highlighted in the assessment was the force's use of a knife prediction tool, developed by its data analytics lab. The tool uses three years of data to predict, up to four weeks in advance, where injuries caused by knives are most likely to occur. Measures are then put in place to reduce risks in those areas. Between April and August 2023, compared with the same period in 2022, the force reported a 4.4% reduction in recorded cases of serious youth violence involving knives, and an 11% overall reduction in serious youth violence.

Furthermore, in 2022, West Midlands police benefited from 20,612 additional patrols, funded by the Home Office's Grip and hotspot policing initiatives. With continued advancements in technology, it is reasonable to expect further gains. Can the Government confirm that they will ensure sustained financial support for those effective policing methods?

Despite those examples of progress, the inspectorate identified areas requiring improvement. One key recommendation was to ensure that officers have the

skills and capabilities needed to carry out high-quality investigations. That concern is reflected in the statistics. In the year ending March 2024, 30.1% of offenders who were charged or summonsed for possession of weapons offences nationally were successfully prosecuted. In the west midlands, however, that figure was just 17.4%. Although the figure encompasses various dangerous weapons, knives remain among the most common. How do the Government intend to work with West Midlands police and the Crown Prosecution Service to ensure that offenders are brought to justice?

Finally, I wish to raise the matter of devolved powers. As hon. Members from the region will be aware, the former Mayor of the West Midlands and the previous Government sought to transfer police and crime commissioner powers. Although that proposal was not supported by the Labour PCC, it raises questions about the Government's future plans. In the light of the devolution White Paper, does the Minister foresee the mayor assuming the powers of the PCC?

I am confident that the Minister understands the scale of the challenge to reduce knife crime. It is by no means an easy task, so I hope that we can work together in this Parliament to support measures that will take meaningful action to reduce knife crime, not only in the west midlands but across the country.

3.42 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate you on your impeccable charring of Westminster Hall this afternoon.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes) for securing this debate, and for her powerful and eloquent opening speech. I am grateful to her and to all the other hon. Members who have contributed. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) has a long-standing interest in the subject, and she highlighted the important work of the James Brindley Foundation.

My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) referred to the Labour party manifesto commitment in July for a mandatory referral to youth offending teams for young people caught carrying knives, which is very important. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) and my hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) talked about tragic cases in their constituencies.

The hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) talked about his personal experience of youth provision and how important that was in his life. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) talked about the coalition to tackle knife crime, which I will say something about in a moment. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) brought her enormous experience as a former deputy headteacher to the debate.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked about the horror of knife crime and attacks, particularly on women and girls, and the need to work together throughout all the nations to bring together experience of what works. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins) made a compelling speech about young people and putting them at the heart of the response to knife crime. I am grateful for all those contributions.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

It has been made clear throughout the debate that knife crime is a source of harm, fear and, in the worst cases, unbearable grief. The debate has focused on the west midlands, but the truth is that this issue affects far too many communities across Britain. The stories that we have heard so powerfully today affect families up and down the nation. We have seen that yet again in recent weeks, with a number of fatal stabbings of young people in different parts of the country. We can only imagine what the loved ones of those who have lost their lives will be going through, and all our thoughts and prayers are with them.

Knife crime has destroyed far too many lives. That is why we described the issue as a “national crisis” in our manifesto, and why, as part of the safer streets mission, which is central to the Government’s plan for change, we aim to halve knife crime within a decade. We have already taken some important steps since the general election. I will touch on those and on further measures we will take as I respond to the points that have been raised.

First, I want to deal with the issue of resources being available to police in the west midlands. For the coming year, the total funding for police forces overall will be up to £17.4 billion—an increase of nearly £1 billion compared with 2024-5. West Midlands police will receive up to £838.4 million in funding in 2025-26—an increase of £48 million compared with the 2024-25 settlement, and 3% more in real terms.

We have talked a lot today about neighbourhood policing and the idea of visible policing being important to our communities. The Government are determined that neighbourhood policing will be rebuilt, and that communities in the west midlands will benefit from our neighbourhood policing guarantee. As constituency MPs, we all know the impact that good neighbourhood policing has on local community confidence and on preventing crime, and that should never be underestimated. Local officers and PCSOs who know their patch are the building blocks of every aspect of policing, be that tackling knife crime, serious or organised crime, or extremist and terror threats. That is why the restoration of neighbourhood policing is at the heart of our plans to reform policing, and why we have committed to delivering an additional 13,000 police officers, PCSOs, and special constables in neighbourhood policing roles.

I also want to refer to violence reduction units, because one of the big challenges in dealing with knife crime is getting all the different agencies together. Violence reduction units have been an essential part of bringing partners together to understand and tackle the drivers of serious violence in their areas, and to deliver a range of early intervention and prevention programmes to support young people away from a life of crime. That includes activity in Coventry and Wolverhampton to support high-risk young people and to connect them with an exit pathway from gangs, violence and county lines. I can confirm that all VRUs have the A&E navigator programmes as part of what they provide locally.

I will move on to the specifics of what the Government have introduced to tackle knife crime. First, we have taken swift action to take dangerous weapons off the streets. We ran a surrender and compensation scheme for zombie-style knives and zombie-style machetes between

26 August ’24 and 23 September ’24. Following that, the ban came into force on 24 September and it is now illegal to sell or own those weapons.

Secondly, we ran a consultation between 13 November ’24 and 11 December ’24, seeking views on the legal description of a ninja sword, to help our plans for an effective ban.

Thirdly, we have commenced a review into the online sales and delivery of knives, led by Commander Stephen Clayman, the national policing lead for knife crime. That will identify gaps in the current processes and legislation and the most effective ways to address them. The review will report to the Home Secretary at the end of January, and I very much hear the need for rapid action when that review is produced.

Fourthly, we have consulted on introducing personal liability measures for senior executives of online platforms or marketplaces who fail to take action to remove illegal content relating to knives and other weapons. The consultation was launched on 13 November and closed on 11 December, and we are analysing the responses.

I pay tribute to the coalition to tackle knife crime. We are clear that we will not succeed in our ambition to halve knife crime in isolation. That means working together with those who share our vision for safer communities. That is why, in September, the Prime Minister launched the coalition to tackle knife crime, bringing together campaign groups, families of those who have tragically lost their lives to knife crime, young people who have been impacted and community leaders—all united in their mission to save lives. We are delighted to have representation from the west midlands, with Pooja Kanda, Lynne Baird and Mark Brindley members of the coalition. I pay tribute to all the families who have campaigned so hard in this space and have had to do so for far too long. Having the lived experience of young people is critical to the coalition. We are keen to ensure that they have a platform to share their views, ideas and solutions to make Britain a safer place for the next generation.

That leads me to the next issue: far too many children and young people today face poorer life outcomes, including becoming involved in knife crime, because they are not effectively identified and supported early enough. To address that head-on, we have committed to the creation of the young futures programme, which will establish a network of young futures hubs and young futures prevention partnerships, to intervene early to ensure that that cohort is identified and offered support, as well as creating more opportunities for young people in their communities through the provision of, for example, open access to mental health, mentoring and careers support. Young futures hubs will bring together the support services that tackle the underlying needs of vulnerable children and young people, making the services more accessible to those who need them. Young futures prevention partnerships will bring together key partners in local areas across England and Wales to identify vulnerable children and young people at risk of being drawn into crime, map local youth service provision and offer support in a more systematic way to divert them.

Let me say a few words about knife-enabled robbery. This is another of my top priorities, and it is incredibly distressing and dangerous for victims. Levels of knife-enabled robbery are unacceptably high and have risen by 11% nationally in the past year. That is why I chair a new taskforce on knife-enabled robbery, bringing together

chief constables and other criminal justice partners to take urgent action to tackle it. Working with the College of Policing, the taskforce has used the latest data and evidence to establish what works when tackling this crime. I have asked taskforce chiefs to consider how they will implement those insights in their plans.

Through the taskforce, I have heard directly from West Midlands police about what action they are taking locally to combat knife-enabled robbery. Under the leadership of Chief Constable Craig Guildford, the force has bolstered prevention-focused activities in its hotspots, made improvements to how priority offenders are identified and managed, and taken steps to ensure and enhance the quality of investigations. Recent results are very promising, with considerable reductions in offence levels and increasing numbers of suspects brought to justice.

I also want to refer to serious violence reduction orders in relation to stop and search. West Midlands police is one of the four forces piloting serious violence reduction orders. The two-year pilot, launched in April '23, is due to finish in April this year. Those court orders can be placed on adults upon conviction of a knife or offensive weapons offence. They provide the police with the power to automatically stop and search individuals convicted of knife offences, with the aim of deterring habitual knife-carrying behaviour.

Stop and search is an important tool, but it must be used fairly and effectively. In the 12 months to March '24, 1,293 offensive weapons and firearms were found by police through stop and search in the west midlands. However, as we know, the tactic often disproportionately affects ethnic minority communities, so it needs to be deployed in a targeted way and with sensitivity. Although the Government welcome reductions in the ethnic disparity and disproportionality of stop and search in recent years, there is more work to do. In the west midlands, black people are still 2.7 times more likely to be stopped and searched than white people.

Another issue that we need to talk about, and which several hon. Members raised, is county lines. To achieve our goal of halving knife crime in a decade, it is essential that we tackle the drugs gangs that drive violence and exploit children into criminality. That is why our manifesto included a commitment to introduce a new offence of child criminal exploitation. County lines is the most violent model of drug supply and a harmful form of child criminal exploitation. The west midlands is one of four urban regions in which we are funding a dedicated task force to close lines, prosecute violent offenders and safeguard vulnerable people. Last month, West Midlands police took part in the national week of intensification targeting county lines gangs, and it achieved excellent results, making over 80 arrests, safeguarding more than 90 children and 20 vulnerable adults, and taking dozens of dangerous bladed weapons off our streets.

I repeat my earlier thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich and all who have participated in this debate. Whatever side of the House we sit on, and whatever our constituency, this issue matters deeply to us and the people that we represent. We all have a responsibility to do everything in our power to tackle the scourge of knife crime.

3.56 pm

Sarah Coombes: It has been a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I appreciate the very moving contributions from everyone in the room.

The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), talked about the James Brindley Foundation and the “Knife Angel”, which we also had in Sandwell. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Edgbaston (Preet Kaur Gill) said that this is a public health crisis, which it absolutely is. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) talked about Cody’s law, which she has been campaigning for. My hon. Friend the Member for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger) talked very movingly about the terrible case of Ryan, who was also killed in a nightclub.

The hon. Member for Birmingham Perry Barr (Ayoub Khan) talked about the importance of youth clubs and his experience growing up in Aston. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss) talked about the west midlands being the knife crime capital of England; we need to change that. My hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) talked about her experience in school and the impact it can have when there are horrendous incidents nearby, such as those involving Ronan and Shawn.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) talked powerfully about the impact on women and girls of knives being used in sexual violence and the case of Natalie, which is extremely tragic. My hon. Friend the Member for Worcester (Tom Collins) talked about the importance to young people in his area of tackling violence.

I appreciate everything that the Lib Dem spokesman, the hon. Member for Sutton and Cheam (Luke Taylor), said as well. The Opposition spokesperson, the hon. Member for Stockton West (Matt Vickers) talked about welcoming the commitment to reduce knife crime by 50%, which is good—although our views on the figures about police in this country differ.

I appreciate the Minister talking about how one of the top missions of this Government is to make our streets safer. That is about putting more resources into policing and about how we get those knives off our streets. I am glad that we are reviewing every bit of the current legislation and looking at the gaps regarding online retailers and how people are still getting these knives. Personal liability for the people who are selling them is absolutely essential. I am also glad about the work of Idris Elba and others around the coalition to tackle knife crime. It was great that the Prime Minister welcomed that coalition to the Cabinet table in September to tackle this issue.

If we fulfil our commitment to halving knife crime in a decade, the rewards will not just be lives saved, but higher levels of trust in our communities, streets that feel safer and town centres that are more successful. The prevention of knife crime is not easy. There are no quick fixes for this, but it is our duty to try.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the prevention of knife crime in the West Midlands.

Welfare of Doctors

4 pm

Peter Prinsley (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the welfare of doctors.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. Our NHS is described as “broken”. Gigantic waiting lists; ambulance delays; collapsed confidence that the NHS is there when we need it; poor access to general practice, dentistry and pharmacy; and, disgracefully, falling life expectancy in some places—these are all failures of the last Government, who could not look after the NHS despite record funding. Labour must mend the NHS; we have no choice. We invented the NHS. We fixed it before and we will fix it again.

In this debate, I speak about the people who work in the NHS. There are nearly 1.5 million of them, all contributing in their own way, but let me speak specifically about our doctors. Doctors in this country are in crisis. They are leaving the profession, retiring too soon and emigrating. Who is looking after our doctors? I come to this place as a surgeon. I am one of the very few surgeons ever elected to Parliament.

My dad was an RAF medic, who served in Aden in world war two before joining the newly invented NHS in 1948. He became a consultant physician in Teesside, where I grew up, and then a professor of geriatric medicine in Melbourne. He wrote an excellent account of his life called “New Ideas for Old Concerns”, which is full of fascinating accounts of his medical experiences during the war and later in the new NHS. It was a time of such hope and optimism, and I sincerely wish that we will be able to recreate that hope today.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I spoke to the hon. Gentleman beforehand about bringing up an issue that I think is important. I commend him on securing this debate, as the welfare of doctors is so important. He will be aware that GPs in Northern Ireland pay the highest indemnity costs in the United Kingdom, and that adds to the primary workforce pressures. The Medical Defence Union is working with the Government in Northern Ireland to find a long-term solution. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that support would help the Northern Ireland Executive to address this issue and get our GPs and doctors in Northern Ireland on par with those here?

Peter Prinsley: I will speak of general practice shortly. My son is an A&E doctor here in London, and I am therefore one of three generations of doctors who have served the NHS continuously since it began; the welfare of doctors is personal for me. This Government have already done much for doctors, who are on the frontline and not the picket line for the first time in several years, but burnout, fatigue and stress are still very real problems that threaten to undermine the efficacy of our NHS.

Today’s new doctors graduate into the profession with debts of nearly £100,000. They immediately enter a lottery to be appointed to their first jobs as pre-registration doctors, sometimes ending up miles away from family and friends in places they have never visited before. Now that reminds me of another job that I just started.

Young doctors are left immediately responsible for life-and-death decisions, sometimes with insufficient support. They are left scrabbling at the very last minute for somewhere to live—the on-call accommodation that my generation remembers has disappeared—and I have known several of them to sleep in their cars.

It has not escaped my notice that the new name for junior doctors is “resident doctors”. Resident doctors? That is the very last thing they are. If they are lucky, there is a place for them to rest, but many a time I have arrived to find a young doctor fast asleep from exhaustion at an office desk.

Warinder Juss (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Given the desperate need for more doctors in the NHS, does my hon. Friend agree that we need to be looking after doctors’ welfare to encourage more people to enter the medical profession?

Peter Prinsley: I agree with my hon. Friend, as he will see.

There are odd shifts, night duties without hot food, and days and weeks that go by without an opportunity to meet supervising consultants. Short clinical attachments mean that the relationships previously created with senior mentors are rare. Just last week, I received an email from a surgeon who was my consultant in 1986. He had noticed in a surgical journal that I had become an MP, and I remembered him as the brilliant surgeon that he was. These are the relationships that make people feel as if they belong within a wider profession, but I doubt whether the young trainees of today would have the chance to make such lasting connections.

There is little security of employment, because doctors are obliged to apply every year or two for another post, probably in another place. The doctors’ mess used to be a place where young doctors could find a sort of surrogate family in an unfamiliar place, but that is now sadly a thing of the past. According to research from the British Medical Association, fewer than 10% of UK trusts or health boards offer hot food after 11 o’clock at night.

The demands of the job affect relationships. Many young doctors are in relationships with fellow doctors, but lucky indeed are the couple who can work and live in the same place, or even contemplate raising a young family together. Sadly, relationship difficulties and breakdowns are commonplace. Holidays must be taken at odd times, and rotas are inflexible. Doctors are left unable to take a day off to attend a wife’s graduation, a sister’s wedding or even their own wedding—all true.

Progression in a chosen career depends on a multitude of competitive interviews and hugely costly professional exams. There is no security of employment. In a survey called “Fight Fatigue” conducted by the Royal College of Anaesthetists, 50% of respondents said that they had had an accident or a near miss when driving home after a night shift—I recall fatalities like this in my own hospital; 84% were too tired to drive home after a night shift; and only 64% had access to any rest facilities. What would we say if the same were true of airline pilots, to whom anaesthetists are sometimes compared?

John Milne (Horsham) (LD): Last week I met with a GP in my constituency, and she described very much what the hon. Gentleman is talking about: at the end of the day, after blitzing through 25 patients, back to back,

she sometimes found herself sitting in her car, simply too tired to drive home for half an hour. Does he agree that we are expecting too much of our medical staff in relying on their dedication to go beyond the call of duty?

Peter Prinsley: I agree with exactly what the hon. Gentleman said.

In a recent survey, 29% of hospital doctors said they were unable to take any breaks at all during the working day; for GPs, the figure rose to 40%. That is simply not safe, for either doctors or patients. In a 2023 survey conducted by the Royal College of Surgeons, half of respondents cited poor working conditions as the main challenge in their job. It is no wonder that so many colleagues are retiring too soon. The average age for a radiologist to leave the NHS is now 56, yet we are desperately short of these vital specialists. This is happening across many specialties. Just in 2023, 23,000 English doctors left the profession prematurely.

We cannot afford to lose our most experienced doctors. Too often they are discouraged from continuing in practice by a bureaucratic and costly appraisal and revalidation process, and they simply throw in the towel. Their experience is a vital asset to the NHS, and we must think carefully about how we retain them or return them to the workforce. One solution will be to create simple routes for experienced doctors to practise flexibly.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): The hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. Langport surgery, in my constituency, is in the all too common position of struggling to attract and retain staff because of stretched budgets that limit its ability to offer attractive terms and conditions to those working in these challenging roles. Does he agree that the recruitment and retention crisis—particularly facing rural GPs—is negatively impacting doctors' welfare, and that urgent steps must be taken to address that?

Peter Prinsley: I agree completely with the hon. Member, which will be no surprise.

The training of doctors is under threat. I spoke in the House about how cash-strapped universities are issuing redundancy notices to clinical professors, with no real plan on how to teach the increasing number of medical students or to continue the vital medical research for which our country has such a strong reputation. There was a 31% decline in the number of clinical academics in the country between 2004 and 2022. Something must be done about that.

Our GPs are under pressure as never before. Who is looking out for them? They face massive lists of patients and huge demands. We know that we must support them, for they are the front door of our NHS.

Ayoub Khan (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I thank the hon. Member for his articulate and persuasive statement. In my constituency, we have surgeries such as the Al-Shafa medical centre, which has more than 6,000 patients. Given the pressure on the NHS, more work, such as basic analysis and experiments relating to cardiovascular disease and so forth, now needs to be done in local surgeries. Does the hon. Member agree that when such GP practices have the additional burden of paying

increased national insurance, there need to be more methods, or maybe redirection of income, so that they can sustain their great work in constituencies?

Peter Prinsley: I agree that we must put resources into general practices to deal with the Government's plan to move care from the hospital out into the community. I am sure that needs to be addressed.

The partnership model, which has served us so well, is now surely threatened as fewer young GPs are prepared to take on the responsibility or the financial risk of general practice.

Alison Bennett (Mid Sussex) (LD): I thank the hon. Member for securing this important debate, which I feel could have been easily extended beyond a mere 30 minutes. On the pressure and responsibility for GPs looking to become partners, I cite the example of Silverdale practice in Burgess Hill in my constituency. In December and January, it had a problem with the sewers being blocked up, which resulted in contaminated water coming up into the surgery and car park. The point is that it has taken weeks to get support from the NHS; the pressure on those GP partners and practice managers must be huge. Does the hon. Member agree that there needs to be more support for GPs who are prepared to take on the responsibilities of a partnership?

Peter Prinsley: I do agree. I believe that the Government intend to do something about the somewhat terrible state of GP premises; the Health Secretary confirmed that only yesterday.

There are serious questions about the support that individual GPs receive, especially for mental health. At present, GPs rely on the NHS practitioner health service for addiction and mental health support.

Robin Swann (South Antrim) (UUP): We should not be looking to the old saying "Physician, heal thyself" within our national health service. It is critical that the practitioner health service should be available across all parts of the United Kingdom; the hon. Member may not be aware that it is not currently available in Northern Ireland. Would he encourage the Government to work with the Northern Ireland Executive to ensure that all our health professionals get the same standard of care that they want to give their patients?

Peter Prinsley: I was not aware that the practitioner health service was not available in Northern Ireland; I certainly agree that it ought to be.

The practitioner health service was designed to be used by only 0.5% of GPs, but in fact it is accessed by 10 times that number. Ensuring that such services are fully funded will be important. There is alcohol and drug abuse, loneliness, depression, insomnia, anxiety and, sadly, suicide—including two of those who I graduated with from Sheffield, both in their very first year of medicine; and two doctors, a psychiatrist and a neurosurgeon, from my own road in Norwich. One of my own trainees was rescued at the last minute from a very serious attempt. All doctors know of this problem, but few speak of it.

Last week, I informed the House of my former student who described the terrible flashbacks and post-traumatic stress disorder of the young clinical intensive

[Peter Prinsley]

therapy unit staff who witnessed 40 or 50 covid admissions die at a hospital in Yorkshire, and the complete lack of support they received. Many are reluctant to seek help and do not know where to turn. Itinerant junior doctors not registered with GPs are known to self-medicate. We simply cannot leave them on their own.

In conclusion, I will respectfully make some suggestions, which have little or no cost implications. In making them, I am thinking especially of our resident doctors. They include to provide identified mentors, not simply people called educational supervisors; simplified contracts, transferable across trusts and between hospitals; clear, early information for doctors about what they will be paid and their rotas, timetables and holidays; hot food at night, and places to rest and sleep; to cover exam fees and make examinations fair and achievable; and to provide parking at the hospital and, crucially, a GP for every doctor and simple access to mental health support.

Medicine is a brilliant career—satisfying, interesting and rewarding. Let us look after the doctors who look after us.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): May I ask the Minister to finish a little before 4.30 pm so that I can put the Question?

4.16 pm

The Minister for Secondary Care (Karin Smyth): I will of course adhere to your instruction, Sir John.

I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley) for bringing this important topic to the House. I know it is close to his heart, as a working doctor. I thank him for his continued dedication to the NHS, as a surgeon and an MP, and I thank his family, too, for their dedication to it. We welcome the knowledge and expertise that he has already brought us, and he has done so again powerfully today. What a lovely memento he has of his own father's service.

I thank my hon. Friend for highlighting the incredible role that resident doctors play in our NHS. We absolutely recognise the challenges that they face as they progress through postgraduate training. We are committed to giving them the support that they need to develop and thrive in the NHS. My hon. Friend spoke passionately about the welfare of doctors. Let me acknowledge, as I know he would, the tireless professionalism and dedication that all health professionals show across the NHS daily.

The NHS is broken, but we have a plan to fix it. In his investigation into the state of the NHS last year, Lord Darzi identified that this Government have inherited an NHS that is in serious trouble, with record waiting lists, people struggling to see their GP, and quality of care often lagging behind other countries. He found that too many staff are disengaged, that levels of sickness absence are worryingly high, and that many people working in the system are still exhausted from the pandemic and its aftermath, which has resulted in

“a marked reduction in discretionary effort across all staff groups.”

The Government completely agree with that assessment. We are on a mission to fix our broken NHS by driving fundamental reform to bring our analogue health service

to the digital age. Through our 10-year health plan, we will cut waiting lists, reduce waiting times and get the health service delivering for patients and staff once again. Those ambitions will be possible only thanks to the hard-working staff, so it is essential that doctors and others are properly valued, supported and looked after at work.

Employers across the NHS play a pivotal role in looking after doctors. Strong and effective leadership is fundamental to building a healthy organisational culture and too many NHS organisations are falling short in that regard. I have been shocked to hear stories, some of which we have heard again today, about the lack of support received by resident doctors, whether on shift patterns and rota changes, access to rest breaks while on duty, or really basic things that we should expect from any employer, such as hydration and the provision of decent food. We have heard about people sleeping in cars and not being able to go to a close relative's wedding or to be the best person at their best friend's wedding. It is unbelievable, really, and it cannot continue. It has to improve. We expect better from trusts and employers and we will make sure that that happens.

We brought an end to the industrial action by resident doctors that was impacting the NHS's ability to deliver a good-quality service and having such a corrosive effect on the morale of the workforce. As part of that deal, resident doctors and dentists in training received an average uplift of just over 4% into the 2023-24 pay scales, on top of the average 8.8% uplift they received for 2023-24. The Government have committed to improve the current exception reporting process, and to work in partnership with the BMA and other health organisations to review the current system of training, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket highlighted, and rotational placements. That is in addition to the work being undertaken by NHS England to improve working lives.

We want to work with the unions on the key issues that doctors face on the frontline, and improve their working lives. That applies to all NHS staff. For example, we are working at the moment with the BMA resident doctors committee to improve the exception reporting process. We know that is important to residents, and we agreed to address it as part of their pay deal.

It is vital that we look after the health and wellbeing of the whole NHS workforce. High-quality care and support for patients cannot be effectively provided without a compassionate and inclusive working environment. My hon. Friend listed a number of actions, some of which are more easily addressed than others. We would expect many of them to be included as part of a supportive culture in trusts. I accept that some are more challenging and involve discussions with NHS England, the Government and trusts, but I do not think that many are beyond local trusts and systems, working with the profession, to resolve.

The mental health of doctors and all NHS staff is incredibly important. We saw the strain and trauma placed on staff during the pandemic. They do so much for patients, and we owe it to them to ensure that they are properly supported in return. The NHS offers occupational health and wellbeing services for staff when they need them, but provision can be patchy. There is a drive to improve the quality of those services across

the NHS. Not only can that reduce sickness absence and improve retention, but proactive and preventive occupational health can lead to improvements in productivity and, in the long run, save taxpayers money.

Access to specialist mental health support is important. I know that services such as the practitioner health programme, which we have heard about this afternoon, are highly valued by many doctors. NHS England is currently reviewing the mental health and wellbeing support available across the NHS, and looking at how it can be made more equitable and sustainable. There is no doubt that we need to continue to improve the mental health support available to NHS staff, and I look forward to seeing the outcome of that review. NHS England is also moving forward with a joint initiative with NHS charities to invest £10 million in health and wellbeing initiatives for staff. That will provide grants for better facilities and invest in improved wellbeing support.

I want to make a point about violence, which I do not think my hon. Friend particularly highlighted in his speech. Sadly, the threat of violence in the workplace is another thing that NHS staff are dealing with, as we saw in last week's horrific assault in Oldham—I extend my wishes to the nurse and her family for a speedy recovery, as I know we all do. I reiterate that the Government take a zero-tolerance approach to that type of behaviour. Doctors, nurses and all healthcare workers are the backbone of our NHS and should be able to care for patients without any fear of violence or abuse.

At a national level, NHS England is focused on improving workplace experience, with the NHS people promise and the NHS retention programme addressing the issues that matter to staff, whether that be improving opportunities for flexible working, tackling racism and

discrimination, preventing and reducing violence in the workplace, or improving facilities so that staff have the basic opportunity to rest and recover. Resident doctors face many challenges as they progress through postgraduate medical training, as my hon. Friend outlined. Expanding access to less than full-time training, rationalising and reforming statutory and mandatory training, and increasing choice and flexibility in rota management are just some of the things we are looking to do to improve their working lives.

We are also working with NHS England to support the GP workforce, including with measures to boost recruitment, to address the reasons why doctors are leaving the profession and to encourage them to return to practise. The NHS is working to address training bottlenecks, so that there are enough GPs for the future and patients can get the care they need. We have provided £82 million of additional funding for 2024-25 to address GP unemployment and support the recruitment of more than 1,000 new GPs.

In conclusion, through the 10-year plan, we are engaging widely with staff, patients and the public and listening to their views on how we need to reform and modernise the NHS. That applies equally to the NHS as an employer. Our ambition is for the NHS to become a modern, innovative and supportive employer. That is a necessity if we are to continue to attract and retain skilled and experienced professionals, give them the support they deserve as they care for the nation, and build a robust and resilient NHS. I look forward to working with NHS England. My hon. Friend the Member for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket will bring great expertise to this work in the House, as will Members more broadly, to make it a reality.

Question put and agreed to.

4.24 pm

Sitting suspended.

Asylum Seeker Hotel Accommodation: Reopening

4.30 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the matter of re-opening hotels for asylum seeker accommodation.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John, and a privilege to speak in this Chamber on an issue that is important to the British public and that needs to be urgently addressed by the Government. It is great to see that colleagues from both sides of the House have made time to discuss an issue that is emblematic of the failure in our current immigration system. The failure is, I concede, one of both sides, but it is worsening under the latest Government.

This issue cuts through to the public because it is so visible. These are not—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. I am sorry, but there are Divisions in the House. We will suspend for 15 minutes for the first Division and an additional 10 minutes for each further Division. There are to be three Divisions, so we will return in 35 minutes.

4.31 pm

Sitting suspended for Divisions in the House.

5.5 pm

On resuming—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): The sitting is now resumed and can continue until 6.5 pm. I will call the Front Benchers to speak at 5.43 pm.

Jack Rankin: It is a privilege to speak on an issue that I know is important to the British public and needs to be urgently addressed by the Government. It is great to see colleagues here from all sides of the House.

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is disappointing that there are no Members from the Government Benches here to take part in this debate?

Jack Rankin: I was trying to be generous in my remarks, but I think the point has been made for the record.

This issue is emblematic of the failure of our current immigration system. I will accept, for the Minister, that this is a failure of both sides of the House, but I would say that it is deteriorating under the new Government. The issue cuts through with the public because it is so visible. These are not detention centres in specific coastal areas or on the fringes of our towns. They are often hotels at the very heart of our communities throughout the country—north, south, east, west, rich and poor. Constituents can see how their taxes are being misspent and how their borders are being mismanaged, and they mark the state's homework. Why are we allowing tens of thousands of people to enter this country illegally each year? Why are we entertaining a farcical so-called asylum system benefiting only those who break the law, and lawyers funded by taxpayers?

Datchet is a lovely Thameside village in my constituency, of about 4,000 people. At its heart is an old-fashioned village green with a church, a pub and—unusually for a village that size—a hotel. The hotel is enabled by Windsor castle being less than a mile and a half away. Datchet sits on the north bank of the Thames, and literally just the other side of the river is Home Park, the private area of Windsor castle, where both Their Majesties and Their Royal Highnesses the Prince and Princess of Wales live. In November that hotel—the Manor hotel—was reopened at great public expense to 85 “single adult males” who in my view are illegal economic migrants. If they are in such a location as Datchet, a mile from Windsor castle, then they are everywhere.

The Manor hotel is just one of 14 asylum hotels that have opened since the election, evidence of Labour's broken manifesto pledge to close such hotels. With 220 hotels around the country now being used for such asylum accommodation, I am told that one in three Members of Parliament will be dealing with this problem. That shows just how endemic it is. This reopening was thrust upon my constituents with just 24 hours' notice. Commandeering hotels at such notice without consultation requires some efficiency. Just imagine if that pace and efficiency could be used to deport these very migrants.

That is to say nothing of the detrimental effect such a change can have on local pride and community cohesion. With 85 adult men in a small village of 4,000 with no warning and no information provided about who they are and where they came from—if any vetting at all has been done—my residents, and the constituents of Members across the House, are right to be concerned. When the hotel was previously open for a public meeting, residents raised numerous concerns about antisocial behaviour associated directly with the hotel, including verbal abuse, public defecation and the photographing of children outside schools. These are the real-life impacts of this effective asylum amnesty.

I have since pressed the Minister in the main Chamber to provide my constituents with a timescale for the ending of the misuse of the Manor hotel, but my question was brushed aside, as many similar questions posed by colleagues on this topic have been.

Sir Gavin Williamson (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): It is a great privilege to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate. He touched upon the lack of notice that was given to his constituents, and that is certainly what I have experienced with the Roman Way hotel in my constituency. There is a lack of information forthcoming from the Government. He refers to numbers of 220 hotels—14 of those opened since the election, but that figure had to be forced out of the Government by an urgent question. Does my hon. Friend hope that the Minister will be open about how many hotels have been opened since the general election, the total number and, most importantly, when they are going to be closed?

Jack Rankin: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention; I am sure the Minister takes note of his questions. My view is that yes, the public simply deserve transparency on this issue. The men individually cannot really be blamed; they are acting, arguably, in their own

best interests, but we, collectively, are the fools for putting a pot of gold at the end of the rainbow—we need to remove it.

Ultimately, to stop the use of asylum hotels we need to stop the boats, and there is only one way to do that—deterrent, deterrent, deterrent. Nobody who comes to this country illegally should be able to claim asylum. France is a safe country. They should be arrested immediately and deported within days to their country of origin or a safe third country. With the correct political will, it really is as simple as that, but Labour scrapped the deterrent before it could even begin.

Instead we have an incentive system that, at every step, encourages illegal economic migrants to chance their arm. For example, smuggling gangs know that they can equip migrants with unseaworthy vessels because they know they will be picked up by the British authorities before they sink. Migrants know that once they land, armies of lawyers and campaign groups will fight to keep them here while they are housed in hotels and given an allowance for the trouble. The latest data shows that a staggering 66% of those arriving on small boats are granted asylum. We have a system that works against the interests of the British people.

The Labour Government say they want to smash the gangs and end the backlog by recruiting caseworkers, but without deterrents those commitments are meaningless—the flow will continue. The Minister admitted—in my view—the futility of smashing the gangs when she described it as playing whack-a-mole. The Conservatives spent years trying to do the same, and although we made progress on cutting crossings from Albania—note, with deportation—the wider problem remained. Repeating the same exercise and expecting a different result is madness.

While the initial cost of housing is funded nationally, when that asylum is granted that cost—in my understanding—falls on the local authority. Could it not be the case that the extra caseworkers provided by the Government will simply be rubber-stamping asylum claims to cut the backlog, but then simply transferring the cost to another one of the taxpayer's pockets through social housing benefits and the welfare state? Increased processing simply means more asylum cases granted, and pushed and smeared into the welfare state. One of my local councils, the Lib Dem-run royal borough of Windsor and Maidenhead, has recently asked to increase council tax by 25%; how can it be expected to find extra resource for 85 illegal economic migrants entering our welfare system?

In the main Chamber, the Minister celebrated processing 11,000 decisions a month. The approval rate last year was 52%, which could mean as many as 66,000 illegal economic migrants granted asylum and entering our welfare system every year.

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I draw Members' attention to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests as a local councillor. Does my hon. Friend agree that if we have more people processing these claims, and we process these claims even quicker, more people will come? That is actually a pull factor, because they can get through the system much more quickly than they have been.

Jack Rankin: I agree wholeheartedly, and that is why I have broadened my remarks. To talk about cutting the backlog is not of interest to me, if that simply means processing people into the welfare system. That is getting a number down artificially. We need to stop people entering the top of the funnel, as it just becomes a problem elsewhere.

In 2010, the approval rate for asylum cases was 26%—so we have seen an unprecedented rise in the acceptance of these cases. I will also note that in 2010, hotels right across this country, including in my constituency, were used to house tourists rather than asylum shoppers. I appreciate that the Minister has provided a March target for closing nine hotels, but with 23,000 individuals crossing on small boats since the Government were elected—up 29% on the previous year—where will those new arrivals go? We will have to wait for the summer, when small boat crossings are at their highest, to truly measure any progress.

Whilst I am sure we would all welcome the closure of asylum hotels in our constituencies, I am concerned that the Government are simply transferring this problem to other parts of the state, and that also hides the issue from the public and fails to tackle the root cause. At my most recent surgery, a constituent told me that her son was being served notice by her private landlord because the local authority was able to offer landlords much more for private rented accommodation to house illegal economic migrants who have just been processed. They are simply being passed into the welfare system and a taxpayer is being displaced, with the housing benefit being provided to a foreign citizen. That is a truly stark warning. It is my fear that the Government's current proposals in this area, including extra caseworkers, are a surface-level solution to a deeper underlying problem.

I ask the Minister to address the concerns outlined in my speech, including by providing the latest update on the closure of hotels, particularly the Manor hotel in Datchet, her plans for bringing in deterrence, and an update on the impact of approving hundreds of thousands of claims on the welfare state up and down the land.

5.16 pm

Lewis Cocking (Broxbourne) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. My comments today need to be viewed in the context of my interest as a local councillor.

My constituents in Broxbourne have borne the brunt of this policy in recent years. I hear loud and clear on the doorstep how angry they feel. The Home Office took control of the Marriott hotel in Cheshunt in 2022. It was just one of three hotels in my constituency at the time. In my general election campaign, I said I would fight daily to ensure that the hotel was closed to asylum seekers; and when I was leader of Broxbourne council, I fought tooth and nail to prevent another two sites within my constituency being used as asylum accommodation. The hotel in Cheshunt has since supported one of the highest numbers of asylum seekers in the east of England, while Hertfordshire as a whole was the individual council with the most hotels housing asylum seekers in 2023.

The situation we are discussing is plainly unsustainable, with millions of pounds a day being spent on these hotels across the country. My constituents have been

[*Lewis Cocking*]

feeling the impact on already overstretched public services. You cannot get your child into the school you want and you have to wait longer to see a GP locally.

I welcomed the actions that the last Government took to reduce reliance on asylum hotels, but there is no getting around the fact that my party made mistakes. However, it is definitely getting worse under this new Labour Government. Ultimately, it is only by deterring people from coming to the UK illegally in the first place that we will be able to get a grip on the asylum system and the immigration system. The Labour manifesto promised to end the use of hotels for asylum seekers, but the Government have been more focused on delivering promises that were not in their manifesto: increasing national insurance on business, imposing the family farm tax and stripping winter fuel payments from pensioners.

I am seriously disappointed that, in January 2025, we are discussing the reopening of hotels for asylum seeker accommodation. There were 35,651 people in hotel accommodation at the end of September, up 21% from the end of June 2024. That is a 21% increase since Labour was elected on a manifesto commitment to end the use of asylum hotels. The downward trend that was started by the last Government has been reversed, and since the general election, 14 more hotels have been taken over for the purpose. Hotels were supposed to be a temporary measure, but they are starting to feel anything but temporary to my residents in Broxbourne. The Minister has said that nine hotels are scheduled to close by March, but I have my doubts that the Government will meet that commitment.

The Government have failed to take the necessary steps to deter the number of asylum seekers coming to this country illegally in the first place. Small boat crossings are up since July, and so are the number of cases awaiting a decision in the asylum backlog. I urge the Minister to put the words “smash the gangs” into action by getting a proper deterrent in place, ensuring that every failed asylum seeker is removed, closing all the asylum hotels and significantly cutting immigration.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I should have said before the previous speaker that if Members wish to speak, they need to bob.

5.20 pm

Mr Peter Bedford (Mid Leicestershire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I put on record my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for securing this important debate.

Illegal migration, an often overlooked issue in the country, was frequently raised on the doorsteps of Mid Leicestershire during the recent general election campaign. I am sorry to say that the last Conservative Government failed to make significant progress in this area, but as the Leader of the Opposition said in a speech last week, the dreadful Labour Government are doubling down on the mistakes of the past. At the general election, the Labour party promised to smash the gangs and reduce the number of hotels used as asylum accommodation. Let me ask the Minister, how is that going?

The vile gangs profiteering from the exploitation of vulnerable people remain firmly in operation, the camps in Calais are still run by criminal networks and hundreds of illegal migrants are crossing the English channel daily, all while the UK Government seem to be sitting idly by and doing very little about it. Instead of reducing the use of hotels for asylum seekers, the Government have actually increased their number. Communities are forced to accept those hotels with little to no consultation, creating significant community tensions and leaving local authorities to foot an enormous bill. Astonishingly, the Government have compounded the already dire situation, so let us look at the numbers, as my hon. Friend the Member for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking) said a moment ago.

Since 5 July, nearly 20,000 people have crossed the English channel, which is a 23% increase on the same period in 2023. For a Government that pledged to smash the gangs, those figures are nothing short of an abject failure. Indeed, the National Crime Agency has said that without a deterrent, the numbers are likely to rise.

Under the Labour Government, 220 hotels across the UK are now being used for asylum seeker accommodation. Without seeking to pre-empt the Minister’s response, I suspect that she will tell us that the Government are likely to reduce that number by the end of March. How can my constituents trust the Government? Migrant numbers are rising and the Government have no credible plan beyond the slogan to “smash the gangs”. The costs keep going up: the taxpayer is now footing a £3.1 billion bill to house 35,000 illegal migrants. That is a slap in the face to the millions of pensioners who recently lost their winter fuel payments.

Within Mid Leicestershire, two of the three boroughs that straddle my constituency have more than 245 illegal migrants housed there. Those migrants are costing the hard-pressed taxpayers of my constituency £35,000 a day—more than £12 million a year. The impact on the local economy is equally damaging, because hotels that once supported our villages and brought in tourism revenue are now closed to the public. Local jobs have been lost and, worst of all, communities feel deceived and disempowered by the Home Office’s lack of transparency.

The Minister will no doubt attempt to shift the blame to other parties, but let us be clear: the situation has worsened under the Labour Government. As my right hon. Friend the Member for Newark (Robert Jenrick), the shadow Secretary of State for Justice, has said, we need to have a serious conversation about the UK’s continued membership of the ECHR. Leaving the ECHR would give us the tools to take back control of our borders and challenge the influence of left-wing activist lawyers who undermine efforts to enforce robust immigration measures.

Deterrence works. Australia has proven that with its own deportation schemes, which dramatically reduced illegal migration. Laughably, even Germany is now using the framework established in the Rwanda scheme developed by the last Government, yet our Government clearly lack the political will to follow in the footsteps of those successes. The Government have also decided to double the length of time that asylum seekers can stay in hotels from 28 to 56 days. That single policy change adds £4,000 to the bill of accommodating each migrant,

and it must be reversed, particularly if the Government hope to close more hotels. My constituents in Mid Leicestershire should be under no illusion that this dreadful Government are making things worse. They have no plan, they have no credibility and they have no commitment to solving this spiralling crisis. It is time for action.

5.25 pm

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) on securing this important debate. As a Conservative, I firmly believe that people who enter our country illegally have no right to stay here. We need to have strong borders, we need an effective deterrent to stop people making what is often a perilous journey, and the Government must take all possible steps to drive down numbers of illegal crossings.

I am not going to repeat all the numbers that have been cited, because I think people, in this House or in the country at large, are aware of the scale of the issue. We have seen numbers go up as a direct result of the Government's decision to scrap the Rwanda deterrent and repeal the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which prevented those who came to the UK from claiming asylum. We heard from my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor that more than 60% of them are granted asylum and leave to remain. That increase in the numbers means that Labour has increased the number of hotels open since the election—I think the number cited was 14.

Communities across the country, including mine in Bromsgrove, have a legitimate fear that hotels are going to emerge in their area, where people have not previously seen the benefits of such accommodation being used to house illegal migrants pending the processing of their applications. The reopening of such hotels is a political choice by the Government—they chose to do that; they did not have to. They could have chosen to use alternative accommodation sites, including military barracks or the Bibby Stockholm barge. They also chose to repeal tough legislation to protect our borders.

Bromsgrove has hosted asylum hotels in the recent past. Fortunately, it does not at the moment, but there have been three instances in recent years.

Anna Gelderd (South East Cornwall) (Lab): Constituents in South East Cornwall have expressed concern about the use of a hotel in the Fowey valley. Does the hon. Member agree that it is essential for asylum seekers to be housed appropriately where facilities are available and where infrastructure exists to avoid undue strain on local communities?

Bradley Thomas: I agree with the hon. Lady's point about the appropriateness of the location. We all recognise that hotels are often based in rural areas or in an economy without any relevant services nearby, which is wholly inappropriate.

To return to the broader question of the Government's approach to dealing with illegal migration, I am grateful that, in Bromsgrove, every one of the unsuitable sites that was previously used is no longer in use. There is a more fundamental point, however, about fairness to the UK taxpayer.

Successive Governments have tended to view people as an economic unit, but they cherry-pick the category of person they define either as a net economic contributor or as a draw on the economy. Students, for instance, go through university and accrue student debt, which is a debt to society that will be repaid after graduation when they are net economic contributors. When illegal migrants arrive in the UK, however, a financial accrual starts ticking that includes everything to do with the cost to the state of processing applications, the cost of hotel accommodation and the cost to the UK taxpayer of giving them an allowance to spend while they are out and about in the communities where they are residing.

On the point about fairness, that does not feel equitable to many of my constituents and, I am sure, many constituents across the country. It strikes me as perverse that students accrue debt while they are at university and, when they become economic contributors, that is drawn down through the PAYE—pay-as-you-earn—system from their earnings, yet we allow a seemingly bottomless pit of funds to accrue as a debt to be absorbed by the UK taxpayer. Why do the Government not explore a scheme whereby, if asylum seekers are deemed to be genuinely in fear and are allowed to integrate and remain in the UK, they repay their debt when they become economic contributors and are active in the workplace? It could be a tiered, sliding scale that recognises the cost that the UK taxpayer is expected to shoulder for people fleeing from a state of alleged persecution.

We must significantly redress the balance in favour of the UK taxpayer. I speak to numerous constituents who are concerned about the extent of the debt that the state is accruing. We have heard about increasing dependency on welfare, and countries across the west already face a demographic time bomb and a demographic twilight as populations age and burdens on the state grow. We in the west do not have enough of a pipeline of economic talent coming in at the bottom end, so we already face what we could call a time bomb of indigenous welfare dependency, exacerbated by the additional costs of processing illegal migrants on ludicrous timescales that the general public laugh at. Frankly, they feel short-changed by the efforts of—I will be quite honest—successive Governments, who have failed to get a grip on the situation.

In short, we desperately need to redress the balance. We cannot be in denial about the extent of the cost to the British state. Any migrant who comes to the UK and is able and willing to make an economic contribution will almost certainly always be welcome—we have dozens of potential growth industries that our economy desperately needs to support—but this is about getting the balance right. If the Government choose to view people as economic units, the interests of the UK taxpayer must be first and foremost. We cannot view UK taxpayers as just being there to shoulder a bill and disregard their concerns for their communities, while the Government at the same time choose to consider asylum seekers for more than just their economic value.

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform) *rose*—

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Order. I will call the hon. Gentleman, although he has not bobbed throughout the debate despite the fact that I said that was the appropriate thing to do. With the exception of the Minister,

[*Sir John Hayes (in the Chair)*]

the shadow Minister, myself and Sir Gavin, we are all new Members here, so it is important to respect the conventions and courtesies.

5.32 pm

Rupert Lowe (Great Yarmouth) (Reform): Thank you very much, Sir John, and apologies for not bobbing appropriately. It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship.

Our message to the world has to be this: if you come here illegally, you will be deported. Not housed in luxury accommodation, fed and cared for at the taxpayer's expense; deported. Not allowed to roam the streets entirely unchecked, with no limits; deported. Not free to apply for asylum under whatever lie the Home Office is buying this week; deported.

Removing those with no right to be here is not cruel; it is not heartless; it is necessary. Language matters, and these men are not desperate asylum seekers; they are not irregular migrants—they are illegal migrants, and they should be treated as such. Spreading them across the country into unsuspecting communities is pure insanity. Members should ask themselves honestly: if a hotel at the bottom of their road was suddenly filled overnight with young foreign males who had entered the country almost entirely unchecked, would they be happy for their teenage daughter to go out after dark? The answer is no.

Anna Gelderd: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that women across the country face very difficult situations walking home at night, and that often the tone of debate is incredibly important to maintain our safety in all situations?

Rupert Lowe: I do not think the tone of the debate is in any way relevant. What is relevant is what the Government do to protect the interests of the British people.

The answer to the question I asked is no, and if Members disagree they are even more deluded than the Home Office. When I try to explore the actual cost of these hotels and the surrounding healthcare, travel, translation, recreational activities and more, I am denied vast swathes of information by the Home Office. It is a cover-up. It says that it does not pay for x or y, but that is because it is all subcontracted out on billion-pound contracts spread over 10 years. The list of further subcontractors on those contracts is fully redacted. Why might that be? Again, it is a blatant cover-up. Let me be abundantly clear: the full cost of these hotels is being concealed from the British public. I am doing everything in my power to uncover the truth.

Locals are not even informed about what has happened in their town. I asked the Home Office to develop a consultation process with residents before a hotel is hijacked. It refused and reminded me of its obligation to care for illegal migrants. What about the safety and needs of taxpaying local residents?

Hotels are being filled with young men in close proximity to girls' schools. Does anyone here find that acceptable? I have pushed the Government to undertake a review of the impact on British women and girls of crime emanating

from these hotels. Again, they refused. Who is the Home Office actually serving? Sadly, I have little doubt that far more crime is being committed by illegal migrants than we are being told.

I have raised the matter time and again with the Government. Nobody seems to care. There are roughly 30,000 illegal migrants in hotels around the country. As we know, the vast majority are young males, many from cultures that do not respect women. That is not racist, far right or whatever else; it is a reality, and one we must start to deal with.

Secure detention is required, not open hotels. If the facilities do not exist, build them. If we get serious on deportations, they will not be necessary for long. Send the following message and the boats will stop: "If you come to the UK illegally, you won't be met with luxury accommodation. What will the British Government do to you? Two words: detain and deport." That is the only way.

5.37 pm

Susan Murray (Mid Dunbartonshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. I am grateful for the opportunity to speak on the important issue of reopening hotels to accommodate asylum seekers. Despite repeated ministerial promises, we continue to see the result of a broken system—a system that has caused immense hardship for asylum seekers and communities and has placed a significant burden on taxpayers.

Let us be clear that this debate arises only because of successive Conservative Governments having failed to deal efficiently with the growing backlog of asylum claims. According to the Migration Observatory, the number of outstanding asylum applications under the Conservatives soared from 27,000 in 2018 to 132,000 by 2022. As of September 2024, Home Office data indicates that over 97,000 cases involving 133,000 individuals still await an initial decision, with a further 127,000 in the appeals and removal process. Despite repeated assurances, most claimants still wait beyond six months for any clarity on their status. During that process, asylum seekers are trapped, unable to work, unable to integrate and forced to depend on Government funds.

The reliance on contingency accommodation, whether in the form of hotels, barges or former military barracks, is an expensive sticking plaster to cover a deeper wound. It provides neither dignity for asylum seekers nor value for money for the taxpayer. We have heard Ministers assert that these hotels are only a short-term measure, yet Home Office figures show that there were over 35,000 individuals in hotel accommodation as of September 2024. Successive Governments have spoken of reducing dependency on this provision, yet the number of people in hotels remains persistently high. Worse still, the backlog remains alarmingly large and we are left grappling with new, reactive announcements rather than a cohesive plan.

The situation benefits no one. The fundamental problem is the time it takes to make decisions on asylum claims, coupled with the ban on working. It is the worst of both worlds: forced inactivity for those seeking safety and to pay their fair share, and an unnecessary bill for the public purse. The National Institute of Economic and Social Research estimates that granting the right to work would generate £1.3 billion in additional tax revenue

and would reduce expenditure by as much as £6.7 billion each year. We could address the backlog more effectively and reduce the public cost if we ended the rigid prohibition on work, yet time and again Governments have resisted such a solution.

The Liberal Democrats have advocated a clear, sensible plan. First, we propose creating a dedicated, well-resourced processing unit that is separate from the Home Office, with a singular mission of resolving cases quickly. Secondly, we propose reinstating a six-month service standard so that claimants receive an initial decision quickly. Finally, we would grant asylum seekers the right to work after a set period, allowing them to pay their fair share instead of languishing in costly Government-funded accommodation or on street corners.

As we consider whether to reopen asylum hotels for asylum seekers, we must remember that no one genuinely wants this. Asylum seekers deserve dignified conditions, local communities deserve to feel safe from people loitering with nothing to do and taxpayers deserve an end to the wasteful spending brought on by Government's incompetence. I urge colleagues from all sides of the House to support practical reforms as proposed by the Liberal Democrats, which will finally clear the asylum backlog, end the expensive overreliance on temporary accommodation, such as asylum hotels, and allow those who are seeking refuge to stand on their own feet and contribute to society.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I would like to call the Minister at 5.53 pm, which will give her 10 minutes.

5.42 pm

Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con): Thank you, Sir John, for chairing your third debate. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) for proposing this discussion on an important issue for many MPs and their constituents across the country.

If we need to provide accommodation for those who arrive in the UK seeking asylum, it is critical that we do all we can to ensure that that accommodation is cost-effective and does not unduly burden our communities. Unfortunately, we know all too well that hotel accommodation for asylum seekers fails to meet either of those criteria. Despite the disagreements that have been expressed today, this is an issue on which all Members of the House can and should agree.

As the Minister is aware, significant steps were taken by the last Government to reduce the number of people housed in hotel accommodation, which went from a peak of 56,042 in September 2023 to 29,585 at the end of June 2024. That is a 47% decrease. That was accompanied by the closure of many hotels from their peak number. It was therefore welcome to see this Government's manifesto promise to close asylum hotels entirely. The pledge was clear: the Government would "end asylum hotels". That is a goal that we all hope they will achieve, as it would undoubtedly benefit communities across the country.

The unfortunate reality, however, is that since this Government took power, we have gone in the opposite direction. Official Home Office statistics show that as of 30 September, 35,651 people were in hotel accommodation, an increase of 21% since the general election. Instead of hotels being closed, we have seen the contrary: the

Minister informed the House last week that there has been a net increase of six hotels since the election. We have heard from MPs that announcements about new hotels are often made with little notice, leaving minimal time to prepare and a lack of clarity. Although the Government should undoubtedly improve that process, surely the most impactful approach would be to reduce the reliance on hotel accommodation altogether.

Sometimes it is too easy to focus on statistics. Although they provide an important part of the picture, it is through speaking to residents that we hear about the very real consequences for communities. In November, Councillor Nathan Evans invited me to visit Altrincham to see the huge impact of such a hotel on his community. I spoke to residents, business owners and the local chamber of commerce about the direct and indirect effects of Labour's decisions. They emphasised the need for safety, security and clear communication. Those were reasonable requests that they felt had fallen on deaf ears at both the Home Office and the local authority.

As well as the concerns about security, there was a very evident impact on the local economy. In Altrincham, the loss of nearly 300 hotel places in the local hospitality sector was huge. Families who had worked day and night for years to create incredible small businesses, operating in an already challenging environment, now had to deal with another huge and unpredicted blow to their footfall. I suggest that the Minister considers visiting Altrincham, not only to see some incredible small businesses with a unique offering, but to see the impact of the decisions she makes.

Too often, places like Altrincham receive information at the last minute, leaving them unable to prepare and taken aback by the sudden loss of normal business generated by these hotels. That lack of warning undermines trust and further fosters animosity towards the system. I understand that this is a complex issue, but will the Minister consider the suggestion that the shadow Home Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), made in November: that greater notice be given to MPs before a hotel opens in their constituency? I also ask the Minister how sites are chosen and what consideration is given to proximity to local schools, care homes and centres for the vulnerable, as well as the impact on the local business community.

I recognise that the Minister and other hon. Members will point out that the number of people housed in hotels was too high under the last Government. They are correct, and my party does not shy away from that fact. The Leader of the Opposition has been clear that mistakes were made regarding immigration. Nevertheless, the last Government were taking steps to rectify these issues by closing hotels and attempting to halt illegal immigration. Since the election, however, we have seen increases both in contingency accommodation and in dispersal accommodation.

Ultimately, the Minister, like the rest of us, knows the root cause of the problem: the illegal and dangerous channel crossings. As of 19 January, 24,132 people had crossed the channel in small boats since the election, a 30% increase on the same period in 2023-24. What is more, the number of those being deported is actually going down.

We need a deterrent. If people arrive here illegally, they should not be allowed to stay. Until that is the case, they will continue to arrive in ever increasing numbers.

[*Matt Vickers*]

Despite pledges to “smash the gangs”, it appears that the gangs remain active and evasive. This behaviour underscores the importance of deterrence, as highlighted by the National Crime Agency and reportedly by the head of the Government’s Border Security Command.

Policing alone is insufficient. The rise in small boat crossings illustrates that scrapping the UK’s deterrent policy before it had even started was a short-sighted decision; in fact, it was a decision of national self-harm. The deterrent approach has been successfully implemented in other countries such as Australia, which managed to resolve similar issues through decisive action. We have even seen it working here in the UK, with the Albania returns agreement reducing arrivals by more than 90%. Given the increasing numbers and the failure to reduce small boat crossings into this country, will the Government reconsider whether their approach to illegal migration has been effective thus far?

On costs, the Government’s policy is to expedite asylum decisions. Consequently, the costs associated with accepted migrants risk being obscured within the welfare system. The Home Office has previously acknowledged that it has no estimate of the potential cost of benefit claims and council-housing bills for those individuals. Will the Minister commit to recording and publishing the costs for migrants whose asylum claims are accepted?

I know that the Minister has previously stated that hotels are a temporary measure, not a solution. While she may be well intentioned, the continuing small boat crossings suggest that the need for contingency accommodation is unlikely to subside without decisive action. Can the Minister therefore explain whether there is a contingency plan should small boat crossings persist? Additionally, will the Government ensure that every possible policy option is explored to reduce the number of people in hotel accommodation in a cost-effective manner?

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I call the Minister of State for Border Security and Asylum. Minister, I hope that you might finish at 6.03 pm to allow the hon. Member for Windsor to say a few words at the end.

5.49 pm

The Minister for Border Security and Asylum (Dame Angela Eagle): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir John. Having sat in the Westminster Hall Chair many a time, I can report that in this Parliament it seems to be much warmer in this room. It used to be freezing, but perhaps my complaints about the heating when I was in the Chair have had a positive effect in this Parliament—for the comfort of us all, I hope.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): I’m going to take all the credit.

Dame Angela Eagle: It is a pleasure to respond to this debate. I congratulate the hon. Member for Windsor (Jack Rankin) on securing it and thank all Members who have contributed.

I remind hon. Members of the strained asylum system that this Government inherited. Listening to all the contributions, I had to pinch myself and think about

the reality: we had 14 years in opposition; we have had six months, getting on for perhaps seven, in government—yet everything is somehow our fault. There was a slight nod in some of the contributions, including those of the hon. Members for Windsor and for Stockton West (Matt Vickers), towards the mistakes that were made in the running of the asylum system during the past 14 years. Mistakes certainly were made, and they leave legacies: messes to clear up and difficult things to do.

We inherited a system with massive backlogs. There was an attempt to introduce a completely different system, the so-called Rwanda deterrent and the Illegal Migration Act 2023, which distracted the Government from the day job, as I have called it. Because of the design of the Illegal Migration Act, we also had a huge build-up of those who had arrived in the system from March 2023, when the switch was meant to be being arranged. They were put in hotels with absolutely nowhere to go, with no prospect of having their claims looked at and awaiting a theoretical trip to Rwanda. No trip ever happened.

To those who say that the Rwanda scheme was a deterrent, I gently point out that from when it was first announced in the Bill to when it was scrapped, 84,000 people crossed the channel in small boats. If that is a deterrent, it is a very peculiar one. Deterrence is difficult to achieve when people are desperate. We have to look to see whether that worked, and I do not think it did. It led to a huge build-up. The hon. Member for Stockton West hinted at that when he pointed out that the previous Government had more than 400 hotels open at one point. That was because of the build-up in the old system and the build-up in the new system. In the old system, people were in huge queues. With the new system, the previous Government’s idea was that they would not even process any of them: they would just hold them in hotels until the new system was up and running. In essence there were two backlogs.

The previous Government then decided that they would make a massive attempt to clear what they called the legacy backlog: the people who arrived before the Rwanda scheme was designed and announced. They did that for first asylum decisions in 2023. Those who were granted asylum left the system, and many ended up homeless, but those who were not granted asylum appealed. Those who were not granted asylum in that gallop to deal with the legacy backlog are still in the appeals system. The number of people in the appeals system doubled as a result of the previous Government’s work on the legacy backlog. We then had the legacy backlog dealt with at first hearing, with half of those cases going into the appeals system, and a growing number of asylum seekers who had arrived after March 2023, with no prospect of being dealt with at all, just filling hotels. That is why the previous Government had more than 400 hotels.

We can disagree about whether the Rwanda scheme would have worked. Personally, I do not think it was a deterrent—that so many people crossed the channel while it was in prospect demonstrates that it was not a deterrent. It also cost a great deal of money: the National Audit Office said that the payments the Government agreed to make to people who were going to be deported to Rwanda amounted to around £156,000 per person over five years. In theory, they were going to deport 250 people a week. I do not think that was realistic or

that it was ever going to be deliverable. Opposition Members are entitled to a different view, but the view of the Government is that the scheme was not going to work.

We are dealing with an issue with no easy answers. There are international agreements that we have signed up to, including the refugee conventions that give protection to people who are fleeing danger and were put into place after the second world war. We are now in an era where we have more people on the move because of events around the world than we have had since the second world war, which has put pressure on the asylum systems of all countries.

There are asylum seekers and there are economic migrants. When listening to the hon. Member for Windsor's contribution, I was a bit distressed that he did not distinguish between the two; he seemed to think that everyone who arrives is automatically an economic migrant who ought to be deported. That is his view, but it is not the view of the law. The previous Government, under his party, had a system that tried to see whether people who were claiming asylum were actually asylum seekers or were failed asylum seekers—there is a difference.

Lewis Cocking: Will the Minister outline her Government's policy and what she is going to do? She has given us a history lesson on what has happened, but what are the Labour Government going to do moving forward? Can she give us a date for when they are going to meet their manifesto commitment to close the last asylum hotel?

Dame Angela Eagle: I am happy to go on to what we are doing, but the legacy that one inherits is important and has to be taken into account when thinking about how we deliver for the future. We said that the Rwanda scheme was not going to work and that we would restart asylum processing. We also said we were going to set up the Border Security Command, which has been done. Opposition Members will know that there is legislation pending on border security and asylum, which hopefully will come before the House in the not-too-distant future. It has taken shape, but it is going through various processes to get agreement on when we can publish and introduce it.

Given the concern of Members in this Chamber, I hope they will attempt to engage positively with the new Bill when it is published, so that we can get the Border Security Command up and running as quickly as possible with the correct powers, including counter-terrorism powers. That will allow us to take more effective action to start dismantling and disrupting the activities of the smuggler gangs. In the last few years we have seen them be allowed to grow across the channel, becoming increasingly sophisticated and industrialising their processes. I hope all Members will agree that we have a duty to take action. We want to restore order to the asylum system so that it operates compassionately and efficiently. That will enable us to exit hotels and bring down the cost of the asylum system by billions of pounds.

Let me address the motion specifically. The strain on the system has necessitated the continued use of hotels in the medium term to enable the Home Office to deliver its statutory responsibilities to house asylum seekers while their claims are looked at. Of course, the

more efficiently and effectively we can look at the claims, the less trouble we will have trying to house people—as the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) said. I disagree with her comments about the right to work. There are legal ways of trying to get into this country with a right to work that are processed through the visa system. We cannot have people getting around that by coming illegally and then having the right to work. That would be a huge pull factor that we simply do not want to countenance. She and I will disagree about it, but that is the Government's view.

Since the general election, nine hotels have closed. Fifteen hotels were opened temporarily, and I apologise to the hon. Member for Windsor for the speed with which that had to be done. It is not ideal and I would not want to be in that position again. I have asked Home Office officials to be more open and transparent, as far ahead of time as possible, to try to give warning. We do not want any nasty surprises, but the hon. Gentleman had one. I have apologised for that—

Matt Vickers: Will the Minister give way?

Dame Angela Eagle: I will be happy to, but let me finish apologising. I apologised to the hon. Member for Windsor in my response to the letter he sent me. It was not an ideal situation and it is not one we want to get into again.

Matt Vickers: What would the Minister say is a sensible period of notice that she would like the Home Office to give before migrants arrive in a hotel?

Dame Angela Eagle: We do not want to get into that situation, because we want to go down rather than up, but I would want notice of significant changes to be “as much as possible” because, sometimes, operational things occur. A hotel site can be lost—for example, we lost one in Manchester during the floods. Unexpected things can happen that have certain implications, so I will say it is as much notice as possible.

Matt Vickers: And MPs would know in advance?

Dame Angela Eagle: Yes, as much as possible and, I hope, more in advance than we managed during the openings that I talked about.

Since the general election, nine hotels have closed. There were 15 opened temporarily—which is what this debate is really about—and nine are scheduled for closure by the end of March 2025. I certainly hope that, as we look for more dispersed accommodation and a more effective, faster system, we will get to the stage where we do not have to open any more. I cannot give the hon. Member for Windsor any date when the hotel in his constituency might close but I am working to close all such hotels. As I have said on the record, the use of hotels is undesirable and is not value for money. It is unsustainable in the long term and we want to get away from it.

Given that it is 6.03 pm, I congratulate the hon. Member for Windsor on securing the debate. I am happy to stay in touch with him about what is happening with the hotel in his constituency.

Sir John Hayes (in the Chair): Please finish just before 6.05 pm, to leave time for me to put the Question.

6.3 pm

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I thank everybody who has contributed to this crucial debate. I certainly agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge (Sir Gavin Williamson); my hon. Friends the Members for Broxbourne (Lewis Cocking), for Bromsgrove (Bradley Thomas) and for Mid Leicestershire (Mr Bedford); and the hon. Member for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe). I thank the hon. Members for South East Cornwall (Anna Gelderd) and for Mid Dunbartonshire (Susan Murray) for taking part, even though I did not necessarily agree with their contributions.

The Minister is right to say that the Conservative party failed in this policy area and that she has a mess to clean up, but she is wrong about the reason for that mess. She seemed to suggest that the Rwanda deterrent

distracted from the day job, which she seems to think is processing all these people. I do not think that is the problem. We want to stop the people coming. The reason why the Rwanda deterrent failed is because there was never enough political will behind the Conservative Government for them to do everything that was necessary to make the deterrent work, notwithstanding the provisions on human rights and the international accords that the Minister mentioned. I thank her for her pledge to continue to close the nine hotels by March, and for her apology. I welcome her comment that she will keep us all informed on which specific hotels are to close.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the matter of re-opening hotels for asylum seeker accommodation.

6.5 pm

Sitting adjourned.

Written Statements

Tuesday 21 January 2025

NORTHERN IRELAND

Stormont Brake Notification

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Hilary Benn): On 20 December 2024, the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly provided to me a notification signed by 35 Members of the Assembly under schedule 6B of the Northern Ireland Act 1998, seeking to prevent a replacement of the Chemical Classification, Labelling and Packaging Regulation from applying.

The democratic scrutiny provisions in schedule 6B, commonly referred to as the Stormont brake, place important legal obligations on me as the Secretary of State. The Government take these legal obligations seriously, noting that they are designed to enable Members of the Legislative Assembly to raise concerns where a regulation would have an unacceptable impact on everyday life in Northern Ireland.

I have considered the concerns raised by MLAs and, specifically, the notification provided, against the tests provided for in law. I am grateful to them for their submission. I have yesterday written to the Speaker of the Northern Ireland Assembly giving notice of my determination that the conditions for the use of the Stormont brake have not been met, and setting out the reasons for this decision. However, in doing so I have been clear that, because of the concerns set out in the notification, the Government will take the steps necessary to avoid new barriers arising within the UK internal market through our classification, labelling and packaging regimes for chemicals. As part of this, the Government will explicitly consult on applying a consistent regime across the United Kingdom, should this be required to safeguard the UK internal market.

Industry and members of the public will be encouraged to contribute to the consultation when it has launched, which the Government intend to do as soon as possible. I have also committed to the Speaker of the Assembly to write to the Chair of its Windsor Framework Democratic Scrutiny Committee to advise on the opening of this consultation, so that Assembly Members may contribute to it.

This approach will ensure that our domestic regime does not undermine the smooth operation of the UK internal market, and Northern Ireland's integral place within it, in all circumstances, which the Government is steadfastly committed to safeguarding.

This outcome is a direct result of the scrutiny that has been conducted by Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly, and I am grateful for their consideration of the issues, and particularly that undertaken by its democratic scrutiny Committee.

This process—just as with the steps the Government took last year on the supply of dental amalgam in response to the concerns of MLAs—demonstrates the importance of the democratic scrutiny mechanisms under the Windsor framework. Objective consideration has been given to a notification given by MLAs, and action

is being taken by the Government in response, even where, as in this case, the strict legal tests for the use of the brake have not been met.

I have placed a copy of my letter to the Assembly Speaker in the Library of the House for future reference.

[HCWS374]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Digital Government

The Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Peter Kyle): I am pleased to present the “State of Digital Government Review” and “Blueprint for Modern Digital Government” to Parliament.

We have already shown how technologies like artificial intelligence can drive economic growth, create new jobs and improve living standards. We have announced AI-powered tools that will make the state more productive, too. Now, we are setting out how we will use technology to empower citizens and transform their experience of the state and the services it provides.

In the last two decades, the digital revolution has changed the world. Commerce, banking and travel are easier and more convenient than ever before. However, the state has been allowed to fall behind.

The “State of Digital Government Review” shows just how wide the gap between the state and the private sector has become. A comprehensive evaluation of the United Kingdom's public sector digital infrastructure and capabilities, it shows that successes are too often achieved despite the system: they rely on the dedication of experts doing their best with limited resources, navigating processes which were not designed for a digital age, and implementing policies which were not designed to be digital first. As well as finding that our current paradigm of digital transformation is not working, it reveals a fragmented technology landscape that is dependent on ageing legacy systems and exposed to cyber-attacks and technology failure; where data is siloed; and which does not have enough skilled people to sustain and transform it.

The statistics are shocking. Failure to adopt new technology costs the taxpayer £45 billion a year. Some 47% of central Government services still rely on non-digital methods like phone calls or paper forms, and the Driver and Vehicle Licensing Agency alone processes 45,000 letters every day. Over half of government's tech budget goes to external consultants, short-term contractors and managed services providers.

It is working people who are paying the price. To manage a long-term disability in Britain today, you have to engage with more than 40 different services across nine organisations. A recent cyber-attack on NHS provider Synnovis led to over 10,000 appointments being postponed—heartbreaking news for patients who had already waited months, sometimes years, to be seen.

As progress has stalled, satisfaction has declined. There has been an 11% fall in satisfaction with Government digital services in the last decade. We need a co-ordinated, strategic vision for modern digital Government more than ever. That is what the “Blueprint for Modern Digital Government” provides. It sets out our vision for putting the state at citizens' fingertips, with public services that fit around the lives of the people who use them. To deliver that vision, it sets out a six-point plan:

We will join up public sector digital services, acting as one public sector to enable next-generation public services, better supporting businesses, and ensuring that services are consistently high-standard.

We will harness the power of AI for the public good, establishing an AI adoption unit to build and deploy AI into public services, growing AI capacity and capability across Government, and building trust, responsibility and accountability into all we do.

We will strengthen and extend our digital and data public infrastructure, expanding gov.uk One Login and other common components, enabling access to data through the national data library, strengthening cyber and technical resilience and building more responsibly.

To make this happen, we need to elevate digital leadership to the centre of public sector decision-making, invest in the digital and data profession to compete for talent, and raise the digital skills baseline for all public servants.

And there are some hard changes to make to how we deliver in government. We need to reform the Government's approach to funding digital and technology, and maximise the value and potential of public procurement.

As we do this, we will be open with this House and the public, publishing and acting on performance data, and doing more of the work of Government in the open, so that people can help shape changes that affect them.

The blueprint will transform how citizens experience the state, empowering them to engage with digital public services when, how, and where they choose. It also sets out how we will use technology to drive radical, far-reaching reform across the public sector.

Delivery of the blueprint will be led by the new digital centre of Government within my Department. This new team has now been established, bringing together the work of the previous Government Digital Service, the Centre Digital and Data Office, and the incubator for AI from the Cabinet Office, as well as the Geospatial Commission and part of the responsible technology adoption unit from other parts of my Department. This new integrated function will be referred to as the Government Digital Service.

[HCWS375]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Automatic Enrolment: Earnings Trigger and Qualifying Earnings Band Review 2025-26

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Torsten Bell): Automatic enrolment into workplace pensions has transformed workplace pension saving for millions of workers. The Government are committed to looking at long-term steps we can take to further improve pension outcomes.

I have completed this year's annual statutory review of the thresholds within automatic enrolment. The main focus of this year's annual statutory review of the AE earnings trigger and lower and upper earnings limits of the qualifying earnings band—the AE thresholds—has been to ensure the continued stability of AE for employers and individuals. It is important that AE works for individuals, supporting those for whom it makes economic sense to save towards their pensions while also ensuring affordability for employers and taxpayers.

The thresholds review has therefore concluded that all AE thresholds for 2025-26 will be maintained at their 2024-25 levels.

The 2025-26 annual thresholds

The automatic enrolment earnings trigger will remain at £10,000.

The lower earnings limit of the qualifying earnings band will remain at £6,240.

The upper earnings limit of the qualifying earnings band will remain at £50,270.

The analysis supporting the review will be published and a copy will be placed in the Library of the House. It will be available on the www.gov.uk website, following publication.

[HCWS376]

ORAL ANSWERS

Tuesday 21 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
TREASURY	841	TREASURY—continued	
Economic Growth.....	847	Official Development Assistance	843
Former Mineworkers' Pensions.....	852	Servicing Government Debt	841
Green Infrastructure Investment.....	845	Supporting SMEs, Retail, and Hospitality and	
High-emission Steel	851	Tourism.....	854
Money Laundering in Retail Businesses.....	852	Topical Questions	856

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Tuesday 21 January 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
NORTHERN IRELAND	23WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	26WS
Stormont Brake Notification.....	23WS	Automatic Enrolment: Earnings Trigger and	
		Qualifying Earnings Band Review 2025-26	26WS
SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	24WS		
Digital Government.....	24WS		

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CONTENTS

Tuesday 21 January 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 841] [see index inside back page]
Chancellor of the Exchequer

Community Engagement Principles and Extremism Definition [Col. 865]
Answer to urgent question—(Alex Norris)

Southport Attack [Col. 873]
Statement—(Yvette Cooper)

Arms Trade (Inquiry and Suspension) [Col. 892]
Bill presented and read the First time

Marine Protected Areas (Bottom Trawling) (England) [Col. 893]
*Motion for leave to bring in Bill—(Katie White)—agreed to
Bill presented and read the First time*

Armed Forces Commissioner Bill [Col. 897]
Not amended, considered; read the Third time and passed

Environmental Protection [Col. 949]
Motion—(Mary Creagh)—on a Division, agreed to

Petitions [Col. 978]

Stourport Relief Road Fund [Col. 980]
Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall
Auditory Verbal Therapy [Col. 247WH]
Northern Ireland's Political Institutions [Col. 267WH]
Knife Crime: West Midlands [Col. 276WH]
Welfare of Doctors [Col. 301WH]
Asylum Seeker Hotel Accommodation: Reopening [Col. 309WH]
General Debate

Written Statements [Col. 23WS]
