

Thursday
27 February 2025

Volume 762
No. 97



**HOUSE OF COMMONS
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY
DEBATES**

(HANSARD)

Thursday 27 February 2025

House of Commons

Thursday 27 February 2025

The House met at half-past Nine o'clock

PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

INDEPENDENT PORNOGRAPHY REVIEW

Resolved,

That an humble Address be presented to His Majesty, That he will be graciously pleased to give directions that there be laid before this House a Return of a Report, dated 27 February 2025, entitled *Creating a Safer World—the Challenge of Regulating Online Pornography*.—(*Vicky Foxcroft.*)

Oral Answers to Questions

CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Video Games Industry: Gross Value Added

1. **Dame Caroline Dinenage** (Gosport) (Con): If she will make an assessment of recent trends in the gross value added of the video games industry. [902897]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): We recognise the recent challenges for the industry, and we are continuing our support with the video games expenditure credit, providing £5.5 million for the UK games fund next year. The UK is home to some amazing companies and developers, and we want to continue to support them as they grow and develop world-leading games.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: The Secretary of State is right: the video games industry is a great British success story. It contributes £6 billion a year to our economy and 73,000 jobs, many of which are outside London, from Dundee to Brighton—it really is right across our nations. However, there are growing concerns that the UK is losing its competitive edge. Our tax relief rates have dropped below those of Ireland, France, Australia and Canada—all our biggest competitors in this sector. What is the Secretary of State doing to really push the Treasury to ensure that our video games expenditure credits and everything else are up to date so that we retain our competitive edge in this vital sector?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Lady will know that there has been a global slowdown in the video games industry as a whole. That is one of the reasons why we have stepped up to provide additional support. We always keep our tax relief regime under review and we are aware that

this is an intensely competitive area—not just in video games, but in film, TV and other areas. The video games industry is part of a wider ecosystem that needs support, and we are determined to provide the fullest support we can so that our industry can thrive.

Television Industry: Wales

2. **Ann Davies** (Caerfyrddin) (PC): What steps her Department is taking to support the television industry in Wales. [902898]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I am glad to say that we have a thriving TV industry in Wales. We have not only our own broadcaster, S4C, but phenomenal studios, including Dragon Studios just outside my constituency, where “Willow” was produced with the magnificent Warwick Davis. And, above all, we have “Gavin and Stacey”.

I know that it is completely out of order, Mr Speaker, but can I say thank you to Dawn in the Tea Room, who is retiring today?

Ann Davies: Diolch, Mr Llefarydd. Only 41.9% of my constituency of Caerfyrddin has gigabit availability, compared with the UK average of 78.5%. In fact, 2.6% of my constituency has very little broadband at all. While more and more people use on-demand and internet-based TV services, many still have to rely on terrestrial TV to watch their favourite Welsh programmes. Will the Minister support the TV industry in Wales and reassure viewers in my constituency that broadcast TV will remain available for them all to enjoy?

Mr Speaker: The series will be over.

Chris Bryant: I think it is a three-part series, Mr Speaker. I commend the hon. Lady on managing to get gigabit-capable broadband, which is my other responsibility as a Department for Science, Innovation and Technology Minister, into this session. We are determined to try to make sure that across her constituency, everybody is able to take part in the digital future. Incidentally, that is why we published a digital inclusion strategy yesterday, which I very much hope all Members will support.

Electronic Travel Authorisations: Tourism

3. **Liz Jarvis** (Eastleigh) (LD): What assessment her Department has made of the potential impact of the cost of electronic travel authorisations on inbound tourism. [902900]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): We are absolutely determined to reach our goal of 50 million international visitors to the UK by 2030. I am very hopeful that the electronic travel authorisation system will be simpler and make it easier and safer for people to visit the UK in the coming years.

Liz Jarvis: Our travel, tourism and hospitality sectors continue to face huge challenges, yet the Home Office’s own impact assessment of the 60% increase in electronic travel authorisation fees concluded that it could reduce the number of tourists wanting to come here and result in a loss of revenue to the wider economy of £734.7 million over five years. If the Government are to succeed in

achieving the inbound tourism target of 50 million by 2030, would an agreement between the EU and the UK to facilitate easier travel not be a good place to start?

Chris Bryant: I am absolutely delighted that even the Liberal Democrats are citing our target of 50 million international visitors by 2030; we have got that into this session three times now. The hon. Lady is right—of course we have to bear in mind all the issues that could affect those numbers. I do not know whether she has seen the recent video produced by VisitBritain, “Starring GREAT Britain”, which includes film clips from James Bond, Tom Cruise and many others, but we are determined, through the visitor economy advisory council, to make sure that we reach those numbers. We will work with the Home Office to try to mitigate the problems that we may have.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Minister.

Saqib Bhatti (Meriden and Solihull East) (Con): According to VisitBritain, the estimated value of inbound tourism in 2024 will be in the region of £31.5 billion, so it is a huge economic contributor to the United Kingdom. When speaking to tourism businesses that rely on seasonal tourism, alongside the rising cost of ETAs, they express great concern that the reduction in national insurance thresholds and the rise in employer national insurance contributions mean that many more workers will be caught in a damaging tax trap. It will mean that businesses have to reconsider how many people—many of them young, and many of them in their first jobs—they can employ while remaining profitable. Does the Minister have an impact assessment of the effect of those NI rises, and what does it say about how many jobs will be created or lost as a result of Labour’s jobs tax trap?

Chris Bryant: One of the problems with the Conservatives is that they want us to endlessly spend more money on things, but they do not want to find the money that enables us to afford that expenditure. There are lots of things that affect the tourism industry in the UK—incidentally, I think the hon. Gentleman mistook his millions for his billions in what he said—but it is really important that we look at how we can extend the season in the UK and make sure that more international visitors do not just come to London and the south-east, but go to places across the whole of the United Kingdom. That is precisely the kind of thing that I hope we will be able to incorporate into our national tourism strategy this autumn. It will be the first time that the UK has ever had one.

Football Clubs: Financial Sustainability

4. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve the sustainability of lower league football clubs in Wolverhampton West constituency. [902902]

8. **Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): What steps she is taking to help improve the financial sustainability of English football clubs. [902906]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): We are proud to have introduced the Football Governance Bill, which will establish an

independent football regulator to protect the financial sustainability of English football clubs, and we recognise the key role that lower league football clubs play at grassroots level.

Warinder Juss: Given the financial challenges faced by lower league football clubs such as AFC Wulfrunians in my constituency of Wolverhampton West, which also has an excellent boxing gym catering to the local community, can the Secretary of State confirm what steps the Government are taking to ensure that clubs such as AFC Wulfrunians have access to sustainable funding models to secure their long-term financial stability, so that they can continue to foster community relationships, increase local engagement and develop young talent within our communities?

Lisa Nandy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work he has done in supporting his local clubs. Across all sports, Sport England invested over £57,000 in Wolverhampton West in 2023-24. The Government are committed to continuing to support local clubs through investment in the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, as well as through Sport England, which invests over £250 million of lottery and Government funding each year.

Yuan Yang: The Sport Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock), was kind enough to meet me and Reading football club fans last year to discuss the urgent need for an independent football regulator. Since then, the legislation has been held up in the other place by Conservative peers, and I was appalled to hear that the Leader of the Opposition sees an independent regulator as “a waste of money”. Fans and staff in Reading will be able to tell the Secretary of State the importance of the need for a regulator, so will she visit the stadium in my constituency to meet them in person?

Lisa Nandy: I would be delighted to support my hon. Friend as she continues to fight the good fight for football fans in her constituency. Like her, I was appalled by the Leader of the Opposition’s comments. The independent football regulator began life under the last Government; it was in the Conservative manifesto, it was in our manifesto, and we were elected to deliver it on behalf of millions of football fans. I very much hope that the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) will disassociate himself from the Leader of the Opposition’s appalling comments.

James Wild (North West Norfolk) (Con): It is a serious matter that the Sport Minister has had to apologise to people running clubs in the most popular league in the world, after writing an article saying that critics of the football regulator were “promoting untruths”. Will the Secretary of State now engage actively and constructively with the people running football, and explain why the Government have repeatedly rejected proposals in the other place to impose a growth duty on the regulator?

Lisa Nandy: Both the Sport Minister and I meet every premier league club and Premier League executives on a regular basis, and we have a very constructive relationship with them, including on pursuing the Government’s No. 1 mission, which is to grow our

economy after 14 years of stagnant economic growth and decline. I say gently to the hon. Gentleman that the Government are always happy to clarify who our comments are intended towards, as we were in this instance, but if he seriously thinks that it is acceptable for Conservative Front Benchers to extinguish the hope of millions of football fans who were made promises by his party that it never delivered on, he might want to explain that to football fans in his own constituency.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): Women's football clubs earn a small fraction of the revenue of men's teams, so the financial gap between men's and women's football continues to be a barrier to growth. After the fantastic performance by the Lionesses to beat the world champions Spain at Wembley last night, what steps is the Secretary of State taking to ensure that continued investment is available to make women's sport more established, accessible and sustainable?

Lisa Nandy: The Sport Minister has met the Football Association this week to discuss the women's game and to promote the campaign to support women's football. We, like the hon. Lady, have been absolutely inspired by the success of the Lionesses, but more importantly, it has inspired young girls in every part of this country to come forward and want to take part in football. That is why we are investing in grassroots sports facilities to make sure that they get every bit as much opportunity not just to dream big, but to have a plan to get there.

Grassroots Sport Clubs and Facilities

5. **Henry Tufnell** (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): What plans her Department has to increase access to grassroots multi-sport facilities. [902903]

12. **Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): What steps her Department is taking to help support grassroots sports clubs in London. [902911]

13. **Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to help support grassroots sports facilities. [902912]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): This Government recognise the value and importance of grassroots sports clubs in London and across the country, and the role that their facilities play in getting people active. Sport England invests more than £250 million of lottery and Government funding each year in the communities that need it most. On top of that, our multi-sport grassroots facilities programme has invested £123 million across the UK this year.

Henry Tufnell: Haverfordwest County AFC is a fantastic football club in the wonderful constituency of Mid and South Pembrokeshire. The club works with local schools to facilitate football sessions for all pupils, and it provides a healthy breakfast and lunch for participants. It also runs a fantastic walking football club. Will the Minister outline what the Labour Government are doing to support the work of our brilliant local clubs, such as Haverfordwest County AFC, in making sport more accessible? Will she join me in wishing Haverfordwest County the best of luck for the rest of the season?

Stephanie Peacock: First, I pay tribute to Haverfordwest County AFC and the many grassroots clubs across the country for their important work in making sport accessible to communities. The Government are committed to continuing to support local clubs through investment in the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme. I join my hon. Friend in wishing Haverfordwest County AFC the very best of luck with the rest of the season.

Luke Taylor: My fantastic local football club, Sutton United, provides excellent opportunities in grassroots sports through its junior, women and disabled teams, and it even has a walking football club for those of us, Mr Speaker, who need a gentler pace of play. However, it tells me that it desperately needs access to more training facilities to ensure there is year-round football for all players. The training pitch the club uses in the local park is often waterlogged and unusable. Will the Minister support Sutton United in securing a new all-weather pitch? Will she meet me and the club to discuss potential sources of funding to make that a reality?

Stephanie Peacock: Those are issues that I have heard in my own constituency. I would be delighted to meet him and will perhaps set up a meeting with the Football Foundation too.

Lee Pitcher: Last week, I met the fantastic Thorne Colliery club in my constituency of Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme, which is working with the Football Foundation on potential investment for its pitch, which is based on the Moorends welfare site. While that is a fantastic example of the support available for grassroots facilities, many clubs still face uncertainty due to governance and financial challenges. Will the Minister outline what steps are being taken to ensure that football governance reforms provide greater security for grassroots clubs and the facilities that they rely on?

Stephanie Peacock: I agree with my hon. Friend that local grassroots clubs have a crucial part to play in delivering wider societal benefits, fostering social cohesion and building a strong sense of local identity. The Football Association is responsible for good governance at this level, and its new grassroots strategy, launched in the autumn, looks to set clubs up for success.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): We should be supporting sports facilities across the United Kingdom. The last Conservative Government provided the Scottish Football Association with more than £20 million to build and improve football facilities between 2021 and 2025. Do the Government have any plans to invest further in grassroots football in Scotland?

Stephanie Peacock: I have outlined the funding that this Government are investing. I look forward to visiting Scotland very soon, and I meet my counterpart there regularly.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): One year ago today, I announced that the Conservative Government were investing a further £120 million into the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme for that year, building on the £186 million we had already invested over three

years. Today, the Minister has claimed that it is this Government who are making that same investment. In reality, this Government are scrapping the £57 million opening school facilities programme, and uncertainty remains around more than half a billion pounds of funding from the primary school PE and sport premium, the holiday activities fund and the school games organiser network. Will the Minister tell us what the Labour Government are actually doing to support grassroots sport?

Stephanie Peacock: As I have stated, £123 million has been invested across the UK this year. That has led to the building or upgrading of 637 facilities to date.

Creative Industries

6. **Dr Jeevun Sandher** (Loughborough) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to help support creative industries in Loughborough constituency. [902904]

7. **Anna Dixon** (Shipley) (Lab): What steps her Department has taken to help support creative industries in Bradford. [902905]

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): The creative industries are one of the industrial strategy's eight priority sectors, and they play a critical role in driving growth across the country. In January, we named West Yorkshire as a creative industries priority region, with funding to be devolved to support growth in the region. That is a sign of our belief in West Yorkshire and the role that it has played, and will continue to play, in the heritage, culture, arts and cultural life of our nation.

Dr Sandher: Local theatres, art centres and galleries enrich our lives and our local economies. Each job in the creative sector creates two elsewhere in our local economy. In my constituency of Loughborough, we are building the Generator, an arts and community hub, restoring a disused building to do so. I could not be prouder of the people who have made that happen, including Jill Vincent, a local alderwoman and former councillor; Jonathan Hale; the late Kev Ryan; and many others. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating them on getting the project going, and will she come and visit me when the Generator opens later this year? If she does come, I will buy her a pint—I have about 60 left on my tour.

Lisa Nandy: Mr Speaker, you will know that I have never willingly turned down a pint, so my hon. Friend tempts me with his offer. I congratulate him on the work that he is doing to support cultural life in his constituency. Last week, we announced the Arts Everywhere fund in memory of the legacy of Jennie Lee, who was the first ever Arts Minister; 60 years ago this year, she published the UK's first ever arts White Paper. We have provided £85 million for precisely the infrastructure that my hon. Friend describes. It was left to crumble under the last Government, but we are determined to support it.

Anna Dixon: I thank the Secretary of State for her earlier response. This year, Bradford is the UK city of culture. This is a fantastic opportunity to show off the

creative talent of our wider district, including the Shipley constituency, and it could be the springboard for unleashing the economic potential of our city and area, which for too long has been unrecognised. Can the Secretary of State assure me that the Government will help to secure the legacy of Bradford 2025 and support our creative industries to fuel economic growth?

Lisa Nandy: May I say to my hon. Friend what a delight it was to visit her constituency with her, and to celebrate Bradford being the city of culture with Mayor Tracy Brabin and others recently in Bradford? My hon. Friend will know that we have committed £15 million for Bradford 2025. As part of that, we expect 6,000 training opportunities and 6,500 jobs to be created. I am sick and tired of seeing jobs created in parts of the country where children just down the road can no more dream of going to the moon than of getting those jobs. That is why we are investing in young people and the next generation so that they can become the storytellers of the next chapter of this country.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): In a statement released two months ago, the Government claimed that Bradford city of culture will generate £700 million of growth for the district by 2030, and that 6,500 new jobs will be created. About £40 million of taxpayers' money has already been allocated to Bradford city of culture. Forty million pounds is, of course, the same as the financial black hole that Bradford council faces as it cuts services to children with special educational needs and sells off local assets. The Centre for Cities says that the Government have massively overstated the economic benefit that being the city of culture brings. In the interests of transparency, will the Secretary of State release the impact assessment that was made to reach the £700 million figure and the job growth that they say will be created?

Lisa Nandy: As the hon. Gentleman should know, the impact assessment was done under the last Government. I am slightly confused: is he against the city of culture, or does he just think that Bradford does not have a full contribution to make to this country's cultural life? We believe in Bradford. We believe in its people, its history, its heritage and what it can contribute to the UK in the future.

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

Much like Loughborough and Bradford, Chichester is a city that punches well above its weight with its creative and cultural offering. Much of the local authority funding that supports organisations in my constituency—such as Chichester festival theatre, the Pallant House gallery and the Novium museum—comes via the district council. Local government reorganisation puts such funding streams at risk, especially when combined with an authority that is struggling with the cost of, for example, social care and highways. What will the Secretary of State do to ensure that these vital organisations are protected during this reorganisation?

Lisa Nandy: We are in touch with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that we are absolutely joined up in our approach. Earlier

this week, I met mayors from across the city regions and I also recently met the Local Government Association to ensure that every part of the country, including the hon. Member's incredible city, receives the full benefits of the work we are doing in government.

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Secretary of State.

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con): Artificial intelligence is a significant innovation, but our media and creators are innovators, too. Almost the entirety of those in the creative sector say that Government proposals are not fit for purpose. They would allow AI companies to scrape content without creators getting paid. UKAI has said that Labour's plans would damage public confidence in the AI industry and hinder the industry. In that light, will the Secretary of State admit that the Government's approach to AI and copyright is a mess and that Government proposals are not fit for purpose? Is she as disappointed as I am that the Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology admitted on the radio this morning that he has not even met those in the creative sectors?

Lisa Nandy: I can tell the shadow Secretary of State that I and my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore (Chris Bryant), who is also a joint Minister in the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology, meet those in the creative industries regularly. We are crystal clear that the creative industries have been powering the British economy for decades, and as our future economy moves towards high consumption, the creative industries will be even more critical to our future success.

I also say gently to the shadow Secretary of State that this is an issue his Government failed to grip for a long time. We are delivering certainty through a copyright regime that provides creators with real control and transparency, and that helps them to license their content, while supporting AI developers to access high-quality material so that they can train leading AI models in the UK. We are working with our fantastic creative industries to get that balance right. We are not prepared to do what his Government did for 14 years, which was to leave this country with uncertainty, drift and low economic growth.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): Touring performers contribute hugely to the creative industries, but, sadly, Best for Britain estimates that, since Brexit, the number of UK performers touring in the EU has fallen by a third. Elton John and David Furnish back the Cut the Red Tape campaign, which asks for an exemption to the trade and co-operation agreement. Touring performers are "still standing", but they should not be asked to make a sacrifice imposed by the previous Government's failed Brexit deal. Will Ministers show me that they do not have "a cold, cold heart" by agreeing to meet me and representatives of the campaign, and will they promise me that it will not be "a long, long time" before touring performers get the support they deserve? I am pleading with Ministers: "Don't go breaking my heart".

Lisa Nandy: All I can say is that the hon. Member is lucky that I am answering this question, not my hon. Friend the Member for Rhondda and Ogmore, or we

would be here for several hours. My hon. Friend met the EU commissioner on precisely this issue yesterday. We firmly believe that closer co-operation with our friends and allies across the European Union is not just in our interests, but in their interests, and we are seeking closer agreement on this issue.

Small Theatres and Performing Arts Venues

9. **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to support small theatres and performing arts venues. [902907]

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): We are absolutely committed to supporting small and large theatres across the UK. It is one reason why we have specifically announced capital funding, as the Secretary of State has said, of £85 million for theatre and other cultural infrastructure across the UK.

Josh Newbury: I thank the Minister for that response. In my constituency, formerly represented by the great Jennie Lee, the council-owned theatre and museum are due to close in just two months' time. Passionate members of our community have come together to form the Cannock Chase Theatre Trust and the Chase Heritage CIC to save these precious venues. Will the Minister join me in thanking those groups for all their efforts, and will he set out how the Government are supporting such community groups to take on culture and heritage venues at risk?

Chris Bryant: I commend my hon. Friend and all those who have engaged as volunteers to try to take over the theatre and run it in an effective way. I look forward to the first production; after all, "The play's the thing"—I saw "Hamlet" last week, and "Richard II" twice. The most important thing is that we try to ensure that young people have an opportunity to act and have a creative education in their school, and that there are local theatres and other venues where they are able to see really high-quality live entertainment, such as in the theatre he is talking about. I am very happy to ensure that officials meet his volunteers.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): On Monday, I met the director of Salisbury playhouse. She warmly welcomed the £85 million creative foundations fund, which she thought would be highly applicable to Salisbury playhouse, one of the few producing theatres in the south-west. She also told me about the 5,600 local children who were given subsidised tickets up to Christmas, and about her commitment to go out and raise funds from local investors in the arts. Will the Minister ensure that the value of the £85 million is maximised by combining it with visionary leaders like Rosa Corbishley at Salisbury playhouse, who will go out and get more money for the arts in our community?

Chris Bryant: The right hon. Gentleman used to be in the Treasury, so he is very good at making financial bids and I think he has just made a bid on behalf of Salisbury's theatre. We warmly commend the work it is doing. As I have said, it is brilliant if we can get lots of kids coming into theatres. I want every single child, as part of their education, to be able to see live theatre and live music, because that is a part of what stirs their

creative opportunities in life. Yes, we are looking at whether there are other ways of bringing in not only commercial money but philanthropic money to try to match-fund the funding that can come from government.

Formula 1: 75th Anniversary

10. **Greg Smith** (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): Whether her Department plans to commemorate the 75th anniversary of Formula 1. [902908]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on Formula 1 and motor sport, the hon. Member is a keen supporter of motor sport in the UK, and I pay tribute to him for all his work. Last month, I met with Formula 1, and I congratulate it on its 75th anniversary.

Greg Smith: Formula 1 is a world championship, but it is a predominantly British success story. Would the best way for the Government to join its 75th anniversary celebrations not be to get behind the efforts of Susie Wolff and others to get more women into the sport, and to back the Hamilton Commission in getting more people from more diverse backgrounds to participate in motor sport at all levels?

Stephanie Peacock: I pay tribute again to the hon. Gentleman for all his work. The milestone provides an excellent opportunity to reflect on the sport's long history in the UK and the huge contribution that it makes. I echo and agree with his comments about diversity. F1 also has a significant economic impact. Seven out of 10 Formula 1 teams are based in the UK, collectively generating £1.9 billion in turnover in 2022.

Topical Questions

T1. [902915] **Torcuil Crichton** (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): Since the House last met, we have been delighted to announce £270 million of funding to breathe life into our arts, culture and heritage institutions across the country. We have made significant progress on the Football Governance Bill in the other place, which is bringing hope to millions of football fans. We are celebrating a wealth of British talent, from the BAFTAs to the Brits, and we will shortly announce the biggest national conversation with young people in every part of the country, which will inform the first national youth strategy in over a decade.

Torcuil Crichton: May I tempt the Minister on a voyage to a far-off island? St Kilda is almost 50 miles off the coast of Lewis, and it comes within my constituency and within the Minister's remit as one of those rare things, a UNESCO double world heritage site. Will the Minister meet me and representatives of the Uig community in Lewis who want to build a global interpretation centre, a template for remote viewing these vulnerable sites? The meeting could be here in Whitehall, in Uig in Lewis, or on St Kilda.

The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant): I would be absolutely delighted to come to St Kilda. I think there are quite a lot of Members who would quite like to send me to St Kilda for a very prolonged period. [HON. MEMBERS: "Hear, hear!"] It is nice to unite the House, isn't it? You're so cruel!

My hon. Friend makes a very important point. The archipelago of St Kilda is unique. Since the last 36 people left in 1930, it has been run by the National Trust. As he says, it is a double UNESCO world heritage site and we want to ensure that we make the best of it—

Mr Speaker: It is topicals folks, thank you. I call the shadow Minister.

Mr Louie French (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): At the end of last year, the Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, the hon. Member for Barnsley South (Stephanie Peacock) stated the importance of greyhound racing to the nation's culture and economy, but last week Labour in Wales announced its intention to ban greyhound racing as soon as practicably possible. Will the Secretary of State tell us who she agrees with, her Sport Minister or the Deputy First Minister, and will she make clear whether she is planning to ban greyhound racing across the UK?

Lisa Nandy: I can answer the hon. Gentleman's question directly: I agree with the Sports Minister. We have absolutely no plans whatsoever to ban greyhound racing. We appreciate the joy it brings to many, many people in our country and the economic contribution it makes.

T2. [902916] **Douglas McAllister** (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): Dumbarton football club in my constituency is now in administration. Founded in 1872, it is in the Scottish first division and is at the heart of our community in Dumbarton. The club, players, staff, the Sons' Supporters Trust and local businesses are all pulling together to keep our historic football club alive. What help can the Minister and our Government offer to improve financial sustainability for lower league football clubs across the UK?

Lisa Nandy: Having been through my own club, Wigan Athletic, going into administration in recent years, my heart absolutely goes out to my hon. Friend and all the fans working together to try to save a social asset that means so much to people in the community. I wish him every success. He will know that sport is a devolved matter and that the football regulator will apply only to English clubs, but we will work with the Scottish Government on best practice to help, support and sustain clubs across the United Kingdom. Unlike the previous Government, we seek a respectful and constructive relationship with the Scottish Government—we think that is in the interests of his constituents.

T3. [902917] **Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Swim England has an opportunity to allocate an underspend in the swimming pool support fund to project-ready pools such as Eastbourne Sovereign Centre, where I learned to swim. However, it has said that the current policy of two interventions per site is preventing it from doing so. Will the Secretary of State meet me to discuss changing this policy before the fund expires this year, so that the Sovereign Centre is in with a shot?

Lisa Nandy: We would be happy to look at the hon. Gentleman's specific case, if he wants to supply the Department with details. The maximum of two interventions is an important principle to ensure that the maximum number of communities feels the benefit of the funding we are able to award. He will know that the Sovereign Centre in Eastbourne has been awarded £91,000 in funding as part of phase 2 of our swimming pool support fund. If he sends me the details, I will ensure that we take that seriously.

T6. [902920] **Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): Alongside our theatre and museum, which I mentioned earlier, Cannock also has brilliant small music venues, such as The Station, all of which give our budding actors, museum curators and musicians a foot on the ladder. However, we still long for the opportunities that are open to children in other parts of the country. Will the Minister set out what discussions he has had with colleagues on routes into creative sectors for our young people?

Chris Bryant: Yesterday I met people from LIVE, and we are still very keen on trying to ensure that there is a levy on arena tickets to make provision for small music venues across the UK. That is where most young people will have their first experience of live music. We are determined to get there as soon as possible.

I would just like to correct the record, Mr Speaker. I said earlier that the £85 million would apply across the whole of the UK. I was wrong, of course—it is only England.

Mr Speaker: More money for us.

T4. [902918] **Wendy Chamberlain** (North East Fife) (LD): Four years ago, the StAnza poetry festival experienced difficulties bringing EU creatives over to perform in St Andrews, and those issues still exist. I note the Secretary of State's response to my hon. Friend the Member for Cheltenham (Max Wilkinson), but more than warm words are needed. When will we see a timescale on improving the situation?

Chris Bryant: As the Secretary of State referred to, I had that conversation yesterday, and I think a lot of people in the European Union and Commission are keen to reset their relationship with the UK, in particular in this regard. I will not name the European Minister, but when I sat down opposite him and asked, "What's the most important thing I can do for you?", he replied, "Get me tickets for Oasis." I think it is very important that people are able to see our great musicians touring across the whole of Europe.

T7. [902921] **Dr Rupa Huq** (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): One thousand musical acts from Annie Lennox to Zero 7 have released an album of blank tracks, which is where they feel the text and data mining exception is leading. Will my right hon. and hon. Friends look into this, so that Great British creativity is not replaced with AI butchery?

Chris Bryant: I think Kate Bush was running up that hill, too. Look, the truth of the matter is, as I have said many times, that we will not progress in this area unless we are absolutely certain that we will secure more

licensing of content by British creatives, rather than less. That is absolutely key to what would be success for us. I hope that people will take us at face value on that.

T5. [902919] **Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Mr Speaker, I am afraid that I do not have a song title to go with this question. [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh, no!"] Bath council's spending on youth services has declined by 82% since 2010, according to a recent YMCA report. With the cancellation of the National Citizen Service, can the Minister tell us whether the money will be reallocated to support new services in areas such as mine?

Lisa Nandy: We were astonished when we took office back in July to discover that there was no national youth strategy to help shape and grip the challenges facing a generation. We are determined to change that. We have moved at pace to set up the youth steering group that is imminently launching a consultation. It will be the biggest conversation that we have ever had with this nation's young people. We are also allocating more than £85 million-worth of capital funding to create welcoming spaces for young people through the new Better Youth Spaces fund. I can assure the hon. Lady that the young people remain our top priority.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order! Look, I cannot get people in. I have all these people who wish to ask a question.

T8. [902922] **Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): Football clubs are far more than 90 minutes of entertainment on match day; they are also powerful engines of community outreach, which provide a lifeline for vulnerable people. In the Buckingham and Bletchley constituency, Milton Keynes Dons Sport and Education Trust offers a variety of programmes for those battling dementia or who have suffered from brain trauma or stroke. Can the Secretary of State explain to the House how the Football Governance Bill will help the ability of clubs to continue providing those programmes?

Lisa Nandy: May I say how grateful I am to my hon. Friend for his support not just for his local club, but for the Football Governance Bill that this Government have introduced? The Bill will ensure financial sustainability in the game, put fans back at the heart of decisions that are made about their own clubs, and ensure that fit and proper owners are in charge of these vital social assets.

Mr Speaker: Final question.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): We heard about the financial crisis facing football earlier, but there is also one facing Rugby Football Union. No one likes the RFU, not least because of the whopping bonuses that it hands out. Can the Secretary of State please let me know what conversations she is having internally about the crisis facing English rugby in this country?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend the sports Minister has recently met representatives from the Rugby Football Union. We appreciate that there are serious challenges in this area and we are determined to grip them.

Mr Speaker: I am sorry, that is all that we can get in. I suggest that Members get on to the Government, because I really think that, with so many people wanting to contribute, we need an hour for these questions.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Rural Parishes

1. **Charlie Dewhirst** (Bridlington and The Wolds) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of the contribution of rural parishes. [902885]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): The Church of England has more than 10,000 churches in our towns and villages in rural areas. In addition to their regular processes of prayer and worship, parish churches play an important role in the life of our rural communities.

Charlie Dewhirst: In my constituency of Bridlington and The Wolds, rural parishes face huge financial pressures to maintain their historic church buildings. Their costs often run into tens of thousands, yet they receive no funding from the Church of England or the Government. The Church of England's buildings comprise more than 50% of the country's listed buildings, but all the money needed to maintain them has to be raised locally. This maintenance will soon be beyond the ability of our local churches in rural areas, so will the hon. Lady make representations to the Church of England to ensure that there is more financial support for local churches so that we save this wonderful part of our heritage?

Marsha De Cordova: I congratulate the hon. Member on being a true champion for his constituency and also for the need for additional resources that will ensure that our churches can truly stand the test of time. I shall certainly raise these issues and write to him about what steps he can take at a local level. It is also worth pointing out that representing rural communities and dioceses, bishops do meet regularly on a quarterly basis to look at best practice and other ways that they can support their diocese better.

Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme

2. **Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): What discussions the Church has had with the Government on the extension of the listed places of worship grant scheme. [902886]

5. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What assessment the Church has made of the potential implications for its policies of the level of funding available from the listed places of worship grant scheme in 2025-26. [902889]

Marsha De Cordova: As I set out in Church Commissioner questions in January, the listed places of worship scheme is an effective way to deliver transformational benefits to local communities. The Government's extension of

the scheme is very welcome, but there are a number of unanswered questions about the impact of the changes to the scheme.

Blake Stephenson: The extension of the scheme will be welcome news to those involved with churches such as St Botolph's in Aspley Guise in Mid Bedfordshire. People there have told me of their concern about the lack of certainty for longer-term projects that may need support beyond 12 months. Will the Church Commissioner join me and other colleagues in pressing the Chancellor to provide longer-term funding certainty?

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Member has raised this issue at Church Commissioner questions previously, and he is right to continue to do so. Although the scheme is being extended until March 2026, we do not have a long-term plan or solution. It is only right that the Government should set out their plans. We know that in larger-scale projects costing over £125,000, not all the VAT can be returned. It is important that the Department for Culture, Media and Sport comes up with a solution to ensure that the listed places of worship scheme can continue.

Jack Rankin: Holy Trinity church in Sunningdale has served the parish for 185 years. It wants to build on that legacy with a community hub, complete with new facilities, including a volunteer-run café for the wider community. The £25,000 cap on VAT relief may be enough to sustain smaller projects, but this one will cost well over £1 million; that means that another £250,000 in donations will be needed, which cannot stretch that far. I understand that the Government are encouraging churches to apply for lottery funding, but Rev. Jon Hutchinson has raised the fact that the scope of that funding is too narrow to cover the project. Will the Second Church Estates Commissioner meet me to discuss how we can get this project over the line?

Marsha De Cordova: The hon. Member makes an important point, and raises an issue that affects many churches. The £25,000 cap works for smaller projects, but it will not go far enough for larger projects, such as the one in his constituency. The church that I attend, Holy Trinity in Clapham, is experiencing similar challenges. I am happy to meet him.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The capping of the listed places of worship grant scheme has left many churches in physical ruin, such as the Belfrey in York, which will lose £1.5 million, even though it has done everything that was expected of it. Clearly, we need to find a solution, and the suggestions from Government have been insufficient. Will my hon. Friend ensure that the Church Commissioners co-ordinate a meeting of all churches that are mid-project, to ensure that they can complete the works that they have undertaken?

Marsha De Cordova: I will take my hon. Friend's question back to see if we can set up a meeting. As she highlighted, many churches will be missing out on vital funds to carry out necessary repairs, particularly those that have already started work. If that work extends beyond the March 2026 deadline, they will not be able to reclaim any VAT. It is important that we find a long-term solution. I will be happy to take that forward.

HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Portcullis House

3. **John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): What steps the Commission is taking to ensure that Portcullis House is functioning effectively. [902887]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney) (Lab): Officials are working to ensure that Portcullis House continues to function effectively. Projects and maintenance are under way on heating, cooling and ventilation, and to upgrade equipment that is reaching the end of its life. There is planned maintenance of toilets and will be more regular cleaning of them, and there will be refurbishment of lifts and escalators, and improvements to lighting and blinds in Members' offices. Work is also under way on a longer-term solution for the PCH roof.

John Lamont: Lifts that do not work, toilets that do not flush, taps that do not work, leaks in the roof, heating that leaves rooms either too hot or cold, and escalators that break down—by any standard, Portcullis House is not working as it should. My concern is not for right hon. and hon. Members, but the staff who work for us in Portcullis House. It is clear that it is no longer fit for purpose. Can we have a further update from the House of Commons Commission on its work to make Portcullis House fit for the 21st century?

Nick Smith: I am really glad that the hon. Member has shone light on this important topic. There is much wear and tear in Portcullis House. On Tuesday of this week, the Administration Committee toured Portcullis House, looking at the nuts and the bolts holding the building together. We have asked officers to please come forward with a plan of action for the Commission to consider, in order to improve services in that lovely building in both the short and long term and make it a much better place for us all to work in. I will come back to him on his question.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Cathedrals: Local Economic Contribution

4. **John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): What recent estimate the Church has made of the contribution of its cathedrals to local economies. [902888]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): The right hon. Member is a true champion of cathedrals, and particularly the one in his constituency. It was a pleasure to meet him to explore issues that he has raised. Research by the Association of English Cathedrals has shown that cathedrals' 9.5 million visitors contributed around £235 million in additional expenditure to cathedrals and local businesses. I understand that Salisbury cathedral, in the right hon. Gentleman's constituency, featured in nearly nine in 10 visits by tourists to Salisbury.

John Glen: I thank the hon. Lady for her reply. I want to make her aware of a cross-party group that has been set up in Parliament, supported by the hon. Member for St Albans (Daisy Cooper), the hon. Member for Chester North and Neston (Samantha Dixon), and others who represent cathedral cities. We want to help the Second Church Estates Commissioner by providing greater evidence of the economic contribution of cathedrals. The first world war centenary cathedral repairs fund helped many cathedrals, including Salisbury. I hope that she will consider making representations for the creation of something similar to support our cathedrals in future.

Marsha De Cordova: Nobody can deny that working cross-party is one of the best ways to get things done, so I am happy to support the right hon. Member and others in their endeavours. I am also happy to meet the group.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Newcastle's beautiful cathedral is an important part of our economic life, as well as our cultural and religious life, but it receives very little funding from the Church of England and does not benefit from any significant endowments or property ownership, unlike other cathedrals. With 80% of England's cathedrals predicted to post budget deficits, what discussions has the Second Church Estates Commissioner had with the Church of England regarding the financial sustainability of cathedrals?

Marsha De Cordova: As I say, the Church of England meets regularly to look at the impact of costs on cathedrals, and I am happy to write to my hon. Friend about the issue.

Church of Scotland: Declining Congregations

6. **Christine Jardine** (Edinburgh West) (LD): If the commissioners will have discussions with their counterparts in the Church of Scotland on support for places of worship with declining congregations. [902890]

Marsha De Cordova: The pastoral and closed churches department of the Church Commissioners has recently consulted with the Church of Scotland on the experience of managing parishes and small congregations.

Christine Jardine: Scotland's Churches Trust estimates that the Church of Scotland could lose 30% of its churches in the coming years. St Andrew's in Clermiston in my constituency could be one of them. It celebrated its 70th anniversary this year, but could face closure because of declining congregations and lower incomes. That threatens a valuable community space that is particularly used by vulnerable and elderly people. Can the Second Church Estates Commissioner outline how the Church of England could work with the Church of Scotland to share best practice on managing churches with smaller congregations to preserve those valuable community spaces?

Marsha De Cordova: The National Church Institutions and the Church of Scotland signed the Columba declaration, committing to joint dialogue on a range of issues. I understand that they meet regularly to discuss these issues. It might be useful for her to reach out to the Church of Scotland on that, and if she is unable to do so, I am happy to put her in touch with it.

Diocese of Jerusalem

7. Kate Osamor (Edmonton and Winchmore Hill) (Lab/Co-op): What support the Church is providing to the diocese of Jerusalem, in the context of the situation in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. [902891]

Marsha De Cordova: The situation in Gaza and the west bank is devastating, and the Church continues to support the diocese of Jerusalem through prayer, financial assistance and advocacy. The archbishop's appeal for the diocese continues to provide much-needed support for Church organisations and bodies, whether that is in Gaza or the west bank.

Kate Osamor: On the west bank and in Jerusalem, the security situation and the economic conditions are worsening, with increasing violence and a decline in the number of pilgrims visiting. That has led to a rising level of emigration, as many Christians leave the Holy Land, where generations before them had lived. Will my hon. Friend outline the work the Church is doing to assist the diocese in supporting its dwindling congregations in these difficult times?

Marsha De Cordova: There is no safe place on the west bank, including in East Jerusalem, for Palestinians. The attacks on the Christian community there are focused on seizing land and property, and have been increasing in recent months, with Armenian churches bearing the brunt. The Christian community faces a co-ordinated and aggressive move to drive these living stones of our faith to leave the region. Bishops have frequently visited the region over the past 16 months; they have regularly met the Archbishop of Jerusalem to discuss how best they can help the diocese to respond to the many appalling attacks. It is important that we hold up the people of Palestine in prayer for their safety and security. Violence is not the answer to any of this.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): A year and a half ago, I met the Archbishop of Jerusalem. He outlined some of the things the Church was doing on education, jobs, and opportunities for young people to do apprenticeships. Those things can only happen if there is money available. What discussions has the Church Commissioner had with the Archbishop and the Church on helping to retain young people in Jerusalem?

Marsha De Cordova: I mentioned funds in my response to my hon. Friend the Member for Edmonton and Winchmore Hill (Kate Osamor). I can certainly write to the hon. Gentleman about the discussions that have taken place with the Archbishop of Jerusalem, if he would find that helpful.

Church Organs: Legislative Protection

8. Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): Whether the Church has made an assessment of the potential merits of specific legislative protections for significant church organs. [902892]

Marsha De Cordova: My hon. Friend will know that I do not answer for the Church of Scotland, and that heritage and culture is a devolved matter, but when a

parish church is to close, the Church of England tries to secure a new home for its instruments, working with local authorities, the diocese and national heritage bodies. I believe that the Church of Scotland is taking similar steps.

Patricia Ferguson: St Margaret's, Church of Scotland, in Knightswood in my constituency is closing, much to the detriment of its congregation and the wider area. The church is home to a significant pipe organ, built by the renowned maker Henry Willis. In some countries in Europe, there are protections in law for historical instruments such as that one, to prevent them from being destroyed or abandoned when a church becomes redundant. Does my hon. Friend agree that such a scheme should be established in the UK?

Marsha De Cordova: Again, my hon. Friend highlights the importance and significance of preserving instruments, particularly the one at St Margaret's. I would be happy to write to her to suggest organisations that may be able to help the congregation. I would also be happy to put her in touch with the Church of Scotland to see how it can best take the matter forward with her.

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the Restoration and Renewal Client Board, was asked—

Cost Drivers

9. Tom Collins (Worcester) (Lab): What the key cost drivers are for the programme. [902893]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): The restoration and renewal programme is in the preparatory stage. To date, key cost drivers have included design work and programme and project management costs for surveys. On delivering the work for the Palace, three delivery options are being developed, along with their costs, and the intention is to publish that information before the end of the year.

Tom Collins: The three options for delivery works seem to represent various degrees of compromise between shortened timescales, the associated reduced overall costs, and the continued presence and functioning of Parliament within the Palace of Westminster. It is wise to seek ways to negate the need for such a compromise. What possibilities for decantation into Westminster Hall might yet be explored? Would the Minister meet me and members of the project team to discuss those possibilities?

Nick Smith: My hon. Friend's professional background offers him insight into the choices that we will have to make. I understand that the possible use of Westminster Hall as a host for the Chamber has been considered, but there were concerns about the impact on the oldest part of the palace. The northern estate is the favoured location. I will ask senior officers of the restoration and renewal team about his idea, which I am happy to discuss further with him.

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

The right hon. and learned Member for Kenilworth and Southam, representing the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission, was asked—

Strategy and Policy Statement

10. **Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): What discussions he has had with the Electoral Commission on the arrangements for the publication of the first strategy and policy statement. [902894]

Sir Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam): The first and current strategy and policy statement for the Electoral Commission was published by the previous Government in February last year. The commission passed its report to the Speaker's Committee on the Electoral Commission this week, setting out how it has had regard to the statement as required by law. The commission will publish that report in due course.

Joe Powell: The Elections Act 2022 passed by the previous Government imposed a strategy and policy statement on the Electoral Commission, undermining its independence for some confected agenda about voter fraud, and eroding trust and confidence in the commission. Does the right hon. and learned Gentleman agree that the best course of action would be not to publish a further strategy and policy statement until such a time as the legislation can be reviewed?

Sir Jeremy Wright: I can tell the hon. Gentleman that that is the commission's view. He will know that the commission remains opposed to the principle of a strategy and policy statement, and views such a mechanism as inconsistent with its independent role.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): It is estimated that only 3% of the 3.5 million British citizens abroad participated in the last general election. What action can the Electoral Commission and my right hon. and learned Friend take to ensure that people who are eligible to vote can do so in future general elections?

Sir Jeremy Wright: My hon. Friend is right that more can always be done to ensure that all those eligible for the franchise, which now includes a substantial number of overseas voters, understand what they are entitled to, and that we offer them all the assistance we can to participate in the process.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The hon. Member for Battersea, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Archbishop of Canterbury Appointment

11. **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): What progress the Church has made on appointing a new Archbishop of Canterbury. [902895]

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Marsha De Cordova): The Crown Nominations Commission, chaired by Lord Evans, will oversee the appointment of

a new archbishop. A public consultation is under way—I encourage all hon. Members to submit their thoughts; they have until 28 March to do so—and an announcement is expected before the end of the year.

Rosie Duffield: Recent headlines about safeguarding failures have badly eroded trust in the Church. The former Archbishop of Canterbury, with whom I have had the pleasure of working closely, resigned his position in recognition of that so that the Church could move forward. I congratulate the Second Church Estates Commissioner on her powerful speech at the most recent Synod. Does she agree that those selecting our next archbishop must not be implicated in safeguarding failures of any kind?

Marsha De Cordova: I thank my hon. Friend for her fantastic and poignant question. Historical and recent safeguarding failures have eroded trust in the Church. To rebuild and restore that trust, the Church must show that it is serious about keeping people safe. That must include holding to account those who are responsible for failures—no one, no matter how senior, can be above scrutiny and accountability.

I agree that those responsible for selecting the next archbishop must inspire confidence and trust, both among the public and among victims and survivors, who have been so badly let down. Next Monday's Adjournment debate will be on safeguarding in the Church of England. There will also be a question and answer session on safeguarding with the Archbishop of York and other senior members of the Church. I am pleased that that will take place, and I encourage hon. Members from across the House to go along to those sessions.

RESTORATION AND RENEWAL CLIENT BOARD

The hon. Member for Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney, representing the Restoration and Renewal Client Board, was asked—

Parliamentary Staff Engagement

12. **Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): What steps the client board is taking to engage with parliamentary staff on the restoration of the Palace of Westminster. [902896]

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent and Rhymney): The restoration and renewal programme has engaged extensively with staff of both Houses. There is a legal duty to do so under the Parliamentary Buildings (Restoration and Renewal) Act 2019. In the past two years alone, the programme has held over 420 workshops with parliamentary subject experts, engaged over 1,200 staff in group briefings, and taken over 700 staff members on R&R tours of the palace. That includes staff who work for Members, in addition to those who work for both Houses. Enabling staff to engage is vital, and the programme team will continue to ensure that there are opportunities to do so.

Olly Glover: I thank the hon. Member for his answer. As he says, there are 7,000 staff working here who support 650 Members of this House and 836 in the other place. As he recognises, it is essential that the needs, wisdom and experience of the people who make

the estate a success are heard and fully considered. Will he commit to continuing to run that full consultation and maximising efforts to do so in a way that will ensure the strongest attendance and the best engagement?

Nick Smith: The hon. Member makes an important point: the whole Westminster village needs to be engaged in this important topic, which affects all of our workplace.

Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): The best way that we can support staff in this building is to ensure that their health and safety is

paramount. The three options that are being proposed have radically different health and safety implications. When those options come to the House, will my hon. Friend ensure that the health and safety information is categorically laid out, and can he confirm when the House will vote on those options?

Nick Smith: Our timetable says that we remain on track to bring the proposals forward by the end of 2025. Those proposals will detail costs, timescales, risks and benefits, and of course my hon. Friend's point about safety will be foremost in our minds.

Gaza: BBC Coverage

10.36 am

Stuart Andrew (Daventry) (Con) (*Urgent Question*): To ask the Secretary of State if she will make a statement on the coverage of Gaza by the BBC.

The Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Lisa Nandy): As the House will be aware, Hamas is a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK. It is my view and the view of this Government—I hope it is shared across the whole House—that Hamas is a terrorist organisation guilty of heinous acts of terrorism over many years, including the appalling terrorist and antisemitic attacks carried out on 7 October 2023. That is a position I set out clearly in public in the media this week.

That tragic day and the conflict that followed have had real-life impacts on communities across the UK, playing out on our streets and overseas, and every one of us has a duty to take the utmost care not to exacerbate the situation. That is why I have discussed editorial guidelines with the BBC director general in recent days. The BBC has clear editorial guidelines to report Hamas as a terror organisation proscribed by the UK Government. That was its policy under the last Government, and that remains its policy now.

I held discussions with the BBC director general earlier this week at my request in order to seek urgent answers about the checks and due diligence that should have been carried out ahead of the screening of a recent documentary on Gaza, and about the commissioning, the payment and the use of licence fee payers' money. I also sought cast-iron assurances that no money paid has fallen into the hands of Hamas and that the utmost care was taken to ensure that that was the case. I expect to be kept informed about the findings of the internal BBC investigation, and I will be happy to update the right hon. Member for Daventry (Stuart Andrew) and colleagues across the House on its progress.

Across all the issues on which the BBC may report, the BBC's operational and editorial independence from the Government is an important principle that we intend to uphold. As a former Minister at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport, the right hon. Member will be aware that it is for Ofcom as the independent regulator to ensure the BBC fulfils its obligations under the charter and broadcasting code. Nevertheless, as I have set out publicly, it is essential that the BBC maintains the highest standards of reporting and governance, as the public rightly expect. I have made those views clear to the BBC. That is crucial to ensure that the BBC retains the confidence of the public.

Stuart Andrew: I am grateful to the Secretary of State for that answer. The documentary "Gaza: How to Survive a Warzone" was broadcast by the BBC on 17 February. It purported to show what everyday life was like for people in Gaza—a topic of huge sensitivity. As the UK's public broadcaster, the BBC has a duty to provide accurate and impartial news and information, which is particularly important when it comes to coverage of highly sensitive events. In this case, it is clear that the BBC has fallen far short of those standards.

Shortly after it aired, reports emerged that the documentary was narrated by the son of a senior Hamas figure. Initially, the BBC defended the programme as an "invaluable testament" to the conflict and kept it available

on iPlayer. Only after a significant public backlash did the BBC decide to withdraw it. Then we learned that on at least five occasions, the words "Yahud" and "Yahudy"—Arabic for "Jew" and "Jews"—were changed to "Israel" and "Israeli forces", or were removed from the documentary; and then we learned that up to £400,000 in public funds might have indirectly supported a terrorist organisation.

However, I regret to say that the Government's response to these allegations has been just as concerning. On Monday the Secretary of State refused to say whether Hamas, a proscribed terrorist organisation, should be described as such by the BBC, but I was glad to hear her comments today. On Tuesday the Home Secretary, the Minister responsible for addressing threats related to terrorism, said that she did not "know the details" surrounding this case, despite allegations that £400,000 in public funds may have indirectly supported this organisation. For that reason, the Leader of the Opposition wrote to the director general of the BBC requesting a full independent inquiry to consider this and wider allegations of systemic bias against Israel.

I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her response to my correspondence on this matter. I understood from her letter that she had raised these concerns about the documentary with the director general—and she has just confirmed that—and it was right that she did so, but I must press her further on the letter's contents. Did she make it clear that, in this case, the BBC has fallen far short of the standards expected of the UK's public broadcaster? Did she receive any assurances from the BBC that taxpayers' money has not been funnelled to Hamas? Did she support our calls for a full independent inquiry into the documentary? What commitment did she receive from the BBC that this will never happen again, and if a criminal investigation has to take place, what will happen?

Mr Speaker: Order. That should have been two minutes. Please will everyone measure how long they have? It is unfair, because we have a lot of business to get through.

Lisa Nandy: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter to the House, and also for raising it with me. As he knows, I have a long history of taking antisemitism extremely seriously—for instance, when it poisoned my own party—and I will always speak out without fear or favour when I see it raise its ugly head. I am, however, deeply disappointed by his attempts to pretend that the Government have been anything other than robust on this. He will know that in the media interviews to which he referred, I made it crystal clear that the UK Government and I believe, and have believed for a long time, that Hamas is not only a proscribed terrorist organisation in the UK but a terrorist organisation, and we will continue to describe it as such. He will also know that in one of those interviews I made it clear that I had requested a meeting with the director general of the BBC to discuss the matter.

"Of course, the BBC is not there as an instrument of Government. Ministers seeking to interfere with editorial decisions or the day-to-day running of the organisation would be in nobody's interests, in seeking to build the trust that is so fundamental to its core purpose."—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2024; Vol. 746, c. 103WH.]

Those are not my words but the words of the last media Minister, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), whom the right hon. Gentleman served alongside. He was a Minister in that Government. The hon.

[Lisa Nandy]

Lady is now the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Leader of the Opposition. If he disagrees with her, I suggest that he take that up with her, but this is far too important an issue to be treated as a political football.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Along with several other Members, I visited Israel and the occupied west bank last week, but there was no access to Gaza for us. In fact, the closest we got to it was viewing the utter devastation of Gaza City through a telescope. Over the last year during the war, according to the Committee to Protect Journalists, at least 162 Palestinian journalists have been killed in Gaza, and the BBC and other journalists have had no access to Gaza whatsoever. Does the Secretary of State agree that that is as unacceptable as any attacks on the independence of the BBC?

Lisa Nandy: Yes. The duty to report on what is happening to people in Gaza is absolutely fundamental, and my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has raised the issue of journalists, access and protection and safety a number of times. That is why the Government believe that the BBC and others have the utmost duty to exercise care and due diligence in the way in which they report on this conflict. It is in no one's interests for the public not to have confidence in the information that they are receiving.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Max Wilkinson (Cheltenham) (LD): I commend the Secretary of State for her response to the urgent question; we agree with the position being taken. I cannot imagine what it must be like to be a Palestinian child in Gaza. In the first six months of the war alone, 2% of the child population was killed or injured, and tens of thousands more will have been orphaned or left homeless. Given this humanitarian catastrophe, many in this House today will find it deeply disappointing that, due to errors made in the production of this documentary, we are instead discussing why it was pulled, rather than the pressing matter at hand. Many of us will share the regret that we have ended up in this situation. Clearly, innocent Palestinian children have suffered terribly over the past 16 months. Does the Secretary of State agree that, regardless of today's discussion, it is vital to shine an ongoing, credible and sustained spotlight on the plight of children in Gaza?

Lisa Nandy: Yes, and I thank the hon. Gentleman for his careful and considered words on this. In the last year I met with the British families of some of the children in Gaza and the stories are absolutely horrifying. We have a duty to ensure that those stories are told, and that people can have confidence in what they are being told.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for getting to grips with this issue so quickly and acknowledging that what happened on 7 October and what happened subsequently in Gaza is of huge significance; her understanding gives me hope. Will she commit to coming back to this Chamber and updating us on the outcome of whatever happens with the BBC investigation?

Lisa Nandy: I am happy to say to my hon. Friend, who has a long-standing interest and has been a real champion for children in Gaza for many years, that

I will be more than happy to keep colleagues updated as this progresses and to update the whole House at the earliest opportunity.

Mr Speaker: I call the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee.

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): The BBC has definitely got questions to answer here, not just on the dealings over this film but on the wider concerns about the representation and reporting of the Gaza conflict. As the Secretary of State said, Hamas are a proscribed terrorist organisation yet they are referred to as such in just 7.7% of instances of reporting by the BBC. It took four days after broadcast for this programme to be taken off iPlayer, and at that point the BBC said there had to be further due diligence with the production company. It is not the first time that the BBC has had issues with its due diligence, but in subject matters as sensitive and incendiary as this, language matters, and treating issues like this with detail, sensitivity and impartiality matters especially. The BBC board is meeting today. How confident is the Secretary of State that the board is providing the necessary challenge to executives to maintain that due diligence and to maintain the trust in the organisation?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Lady is absolutely right that the BBC board plays the critical role in ensuring that the BBC reaches the highest possible standards, which she and I, and indeed all Members of this House, expect. They will have heard her words and mine loud and clear: we expect them to play that role. They must do that, and part of my job is to hold them to account for what they do and do not do in relation to this.

Josh Fenton-Glynn (Calder Valley) (Lab): I welcome this statement because I think it is important that we talk about our tone in public life. I worry that sometimes the public outside the Chamber do not see this House as being the best arbiter of appropriate tone. In fact, in recent days I have heard jokes about suicide, I have seen sexism and so much more. Does the Secretary of State agree that we should lead from the front and set a good example in this House on how we police our own boundaries and language?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend, as always, has taken care to strike the right tone, and I thank him very much for raising that. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The question was not relevant to what we are discussing; that is the problem.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): I listened carefully to what the Secretary of State said and welcome her clear criticism of this documentary, but may I return to some of the—at best—mistranslation that happened during the documentary that my right hon. Friend the shadow Secretary of State referenced? Instances of the Arabic words for “Jews” were changed to “Israeli” and, possibly worst of all, one interviewee praised the Hamas leader for his “Jihad against the Jews”, yet the BBC translated that to “fighting Israeli forces”. That is not an error in Google Translate; it is clearly a deliberate attempt to completely misinterpret the approach towards Hamas and the situation in the middle east. Can she

give me an assurance that she will be robust in challenging those translations, because those terms are clearly antisemitic and take a pro-Hamas, pro-terrorist viewpoint?

Lisa Nandy: I am more than happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. I discussed the precise use of language with the BBC director general earlier this week. On the question asked by the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage), I also discussed the use of the full term “a proscribed terror organisation” by the UK Government and the frequency with which that term is used by the BBC. I made it clear that I, as the Secretary of State, believe that it is incredibly important that the BBC adheres to its own guidelines.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): Hamas are a proscribed organisation and that is as it should be. The Israeli military has banned international journalists from Gaza and at least 162 Palestinian journalists have been killed in Gaza in the last 500 days. Does the Secretary of State agree that BBC and all media coverage of Gaza can only benefit from journalists being allowed in to report on the ground, a point raised with me by some constituents in the past few weeks? Does she further agree that journalists must be protected from harm, in line with international law?

Lisa Nandy: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done over many years, including as the director of Medical Aid for Palestinians. She knows better than anyone in this House what is happening in Gaza—I think she may be the only Member of the House who has recently been in Gaza to see the conditions that many hon. Members have described. I very much agree with her point about journalistic access and safety. I also agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn) that us setting the right tone in this House is essential.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): I am sure that Members across the House all agree that the most important issue is the maintenance of the ceasefire. Hostages need to go home, aid needs to get in and a peaceful future needs to be built. What more can this Government do to ensure that the stories of those affected are heard, to continue the international determination for the maintenance of the ceasefire?

Lisa Nandy: When I met British Palestinians whose family members are in Gaza and when I met the families whose loved ones had been taken hostage by Hamas, and had been held or continue to be held in Gaza, I made a commitment to them that, in opposition and in government, we would continue to use every opportunity to shine a spotlight on what is happening to them. I think they will be very encouraged by the words of the hon. Lady. It is a particular tribute to the House that Members from every political party are raising these issues and ensuring that we continue to tell those stories.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): Since the Hamas atrocities of 7 October, tens of thousands of Gazans have been killed by Israeli forces, and hundreds of thousands more have been subject to unimaginable suffering. It is essential that their stories be told and it is unacceptable that the BBC should have chosen to tell them through those connected

to Hamas. We understand that the BBC is not allowed into Gaza, so will the Secretary of State confirm where this programme was subcontracted and to whom? On the issue of translation, does the BBC not have a translation guide? Is that publicly available? If not, should it be? Finally, when Israeli Ministers and others call for the ethnic cleansing of Gaza or for the elimination of the Palestinian people, surely that must be reported in a way that highlights that that is illegal and the cause of immense distress to many in this country?

Lisa Nandy: My hon. Friend speaks powerfully about the careful use of language and the way in which we all have a responsibility to uphold the highest standards on that. On her specific question, having had discussions with the BBC, I can confirm that this was not a BBC programme; it was commissioned by an external organisation.¹ That in no way absolves the BBC from the responsibility to undertake due diligence on a programme that it airs. When it is aired by our national broadcaster, it is granted the legitimacy of our national broadcaster, and that is why these standards matter. I will take away her suggestion about a publicly available translation guide, which might help to assuage some of the concerns raised by the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), and discuss that with the BBC.

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): It is essential that the editorial independence of the BBC is protected at home and abroad. Will the Secretary of State tell the House whether she or anyone in her Department had contact, formally or informally, with the Israeli embassy about the documentary before it was pulled from iPlayer? And will she say when contact was first made between her and the BBC, between the programme being airing and then being pulled from iPlayer?

Lisa Nandy: No.

Yuan Yang (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her very clear statement. The bigger picture that the Opposition are missing here is that the British media at large have greatly suffered from a lack of access in Gaza during the deadliest war on record for journalists. My former colleagues have variously been denied entry and had unnecessarily prolonged and risky exits, and our Palestinian contributors have been stuck in a living nightmare. Will the Secretary of State ensure that she continues to safeguard British media interests and their reporting abroad and work with Foreign Office colleagues to enlarge access for journalists in Gaza?

Lisa Nandy: I am very happy to give my hon. Friend that assurance. As I said in answer to an earlier question, my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has raised this issue, and he and I are working very closely together on it. My hon. Friend will be aware that the BBC World Service plays a critical role in ensuring that free and fair information is available all over the world, which is why we rightly expect the highest standards from the BBC.

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s robust view on the BBC. However, the problem is that the BBC does not refer to Hamas as a terrorist organisation, as it should. Indeed, the problem is that David Collier, an investigative journalist, could

1. [Official Report, 4 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 8WC.] (Correction)

[Bob Blackman]

actually go through the documentary and identify all the errors that were made while sitting at his computer. If the BBC cannot do that, something is seriously wrong, particularly when it is in the position of commissioning this documentary, not doing it internally. Can the Secretary of State make sure that when she talks to the BBC, it makes extra efforts to ensure that if it commissions these sorts of documentaries, they are actually accurate and not using terrorists and potentially funnelling money to terrorists?

Lisa Nandy: I am happy to give the hon. Gentleman that assurance. That was part of the discussions I had with the BBC director general earlier this week. I would expect an organisation like the BBC already to have robust systems in place on that, and I have been assured that that is part of the internal review.

Rachel Hopkins (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): Does the Secretary of State agree that across all the issues that the BBC may report on, its operational and editorial independence from Government is an important principle that should be upheld?

Lisa Nandy: Yes, I very much agree with my hon. Friend, not least because it is the role of broadcasters to hold a mirror up not just to society, but to the Government, and to hold us to account. That is why I very much agree with the words of the media Minister in the previous Government, the hon. Member for Hornchurch and Upminster (Julia Lopez), who said that the BBC is not

“an instrument of Government. Ministers seeking to interfere with editorial decisions or the day-to-day running of the organisation would be in nobody’s interests”.—[*Official Report*, 27 February 2024; Vol. 746, c. 103WH.]

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Once again, the BBC has got it badly wrong, since 7 October, with its treatment and description of Hamas as a terrorist organisation. Once again, we are told that lessons will be learned. Does the Secretary of State think that the BBC is incompetent, negligent or just riddled with antisemitism?

Lisa Nandy: I have been absolutely clear with this House that I think the BBC has serious questions to answer. The director general was very clear with me earlier this week that it has serious questions to answer and that it intends to answer them in full, and I will make sure that is the case.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): It is quite clear that the BBC has not shown the standards of journalistic integrity that we expect of it in the case of this documentary or through its coverage of the 7 October attacks and the war that followed. Danny Cohen, the former BBC director of television, says that the BBC is “institutionally hostile to Israel”. Can we have an inquiry into not only this incident, but the BBC’s relationship with Hamas, the independence of its reporters in Gaza from Hamas and its wider coverage of Israel? If there is evidence of BBC funds reaching a proscribed terrorist organisation, will the Secretary of State join me in saying that there should be a full criminal investigation?

Lisa Nandy: Ensuring that no money has fallen into the hands of Hamas is the duty of all of us. The last Government were very clear about that in relation to the aid budget, and we are very clear about that too. The BBC needs to be as clear, or there must be consequences.

I also reassure the hon. Gentleman that in December I convened a roundtable with the Jewish community to discuss antisemitism in the arts and the creative industries more generally. I was appalled by what I heard at that meeting, which was convened by Lord Mann and the Board of Deputies of British Jews. We are working very closely together to stamp out the many unacceptable practices that we have seen creep not just into the BBC, but across broadcasting and the arts more generally since this appalling conflict began.

Iqbal Mohamed (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for her answer to the urgent question. We all agree that the genuine inaccuracies and misrepresentations in this documentary, and in all reporting, must be addressed, and that steps must be taken to prevent them from reoccurring. We also all agree that there is no place for antisemitism or any other racism anywhere.

The BBC has been accused by more than 100 of its staff of giving Israel favourable coverage in its reporting of the war on Gaza, and criticised for its lack of accurate, evidence-based journalism. The letter, sent to the BBC’s director general and chief executive officer, said:

“Basic journalistic tenets have been lacking when it comes to holding Israel to account for its actions.”

Its signatories included more than 100 anonymous BBC staff and more than 200 people from the media industry. The letter also said:

“The consequences of inadequate coverage are significant. Every television report, article and radio interview that has failed to robustly challenge Israeli claims has systematically dehumanised Palestinians.”

What steps—

Mr Speaker: Order. We have got to get to the question, please.

Iqbal Mohamed: My apologies, Mr Speaker. What steps is the Secretary of State taking to investigate and address the unacceptable and biased anti-Palestinian and pro-Israel reporting by the BBC since 7 October, so that it can be trusted by those in this House and by the licence fee payers who fund its existence?

Lisa Nandy: The views that the hon. Gentleman has expressed show what a contested and difficult area this is to report on. While this Government believe it is essential that we shine a spotlight on what is happening to people—particularly children—in Gaza, there is no excuse for antisemitism, or for the sorts of practices that have been alleged against the BBC in recent weeks in relation to this documentary.

Jack Rankin (Windsor) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s robust response from the Dispatch Box today, and thank her for it. This is an egregious example, but the problem is the pattern of behaviour; for example, the BBC has spent £330,000 of taxpayers’ money on legal fees to cover up the 2004 Balen report into coverage of this conflict. Does the Secretary of State agree that there are valid questions as to why the BBC has refused

to submit to an independent inquiry? Does she agree that the findings of the Balen report have been suppressed, and will the Government urge the BBC to publish that report?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Gentleman is right that there are valid questions to answer. The BBC is a treasured national broadcaster; it plays an important role in our public life and, indeed, in the whole ecosystem of the creative industries in this country. That is why we are determined to hold it to the highest possible standards, and we expect that it will do nothing less itself.

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. We all agree that the BBC's impartiality is imperative and that antisemitism is abhorrent, but is it not enough that we have stood by as 48,900 Gazans have been killed, including 17,400 Gazan children? Is it not enough that we have stood by as 320 aid workers and 162 journalists have been killed? Does the Secretary of State agree that children, and the narrator of this show specifically, cannot be held accountable for the actions of their parents, or is this just an extension of Netanyahu's policy of collective punishment of the Gazan people?

Lisa Nandy: Of course I agree with the hon. Gentleman that children cannot be held responsible for relationships that they have but, to be clear, if the child in question is related to senior Hamas officials, that is important context for viewers to understand. Not to inform the public about that context falls way short of the standards we would expect of our national broadcasters.

Can I also say to the hon. Gentleman that we as a country have not stood aside while over 47,000 people have been killed in Gaza? My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary has made this his top priority—he has been in the region several times in recent months—and just a few weeks ago, my right hon. Friend the Minister for Development announced £17 million in humanitarian funding for Gaza to ensure that we support its people.

Notwithstanding the very difficult decision that the Prime Minister announced at this Dispatch Box on Tuesday, we are committed to continuing to support the people of Gaza.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): The days when people gained their news from the BBC and ITV are long gone. We now have a whole range of media outlets, many of which do not have the same editorial standards as we expect from our national broadcaster, so does the Secretary of State agree that it is vital that we can trust our national broadcaster and that it maintains the highest possible standards?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Member makes an important point, which I do not think anybody has made yet in this debate, which is that we expect more from the BBC, because it is our treasured national broadcaster. There is a media landscape out there, and we have got to make sure that all our broadcasters meet the highest standards, especially when it comes to this conflict.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for her answers to the urgent question. The BBC has publicly funded status and therefore has an obligation to report impartially, but that has been called into question since the 7 October atrocities. Will the Minister act to hold the BBC cameraman and the staff accountable for their failings? Furthermore, what measures will be introduced to ensure that the BBC's editorial standards are raised to prevent the dissemination of misleading, biased and unverified content?

Lisa Nandy: The hon. Member will have heard that I raised a number of issues around this particular documentary and the reporting of this conflict more generally when I met the BBC director general. I expect the highest possible standards. I heard from the director general that he expects the highest possible standards as well and that the review will cover all the areas that the hon. Member rightly raises.

Business of the House

11.6 am

Mr Speaker: I call the shadow Leader of the House.

Jesse Norman (Hereford and South Herefordshire) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—[*Interruption.*]

Mr Speaker: Bad start.

Jesse Norman: Touché, Mr Speaker. Will the Leader of the House give us the forthcoming business?

The Leader of the House of Commons (Lucy Powell): I say to the gorgeous and brilliant Mr Speaker that I will.

The business for next week is as follows:

MONDAY 3 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Finance Bill.

TUESDAY 4 MARCH—Consideration of an allocation of time motion, followed by all stages of the Church of Scotland (Lord High Commissioner) Bill.

WEDNESDAY 5 MARCH—Estimates day (first allotted day). There will be debates on estimates relating to the Department of Health and Social Care; the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office; and the Department for Business and Trade. At 7 pm the House will be asked to agree all outstanding estimates.

THURSDAY 6 MARCH—Proceedings on the Supply and Appropriation (Anticipation and Adjustments) Bill, followed by general debate on International Women's Day, followed by a debate on a motion on political finance rules. The subjects for these debates were determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 7 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

The provisional business for the week commencing 10 March will include:

MONDAY 10 MARCH—Second Reading of the Crime and Policing Bill.

TUESDAY 11 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Employment Rights Bill (day one).

WEDNESDAY 12 MARCH—Remaining stages of the Employment Rights Bill (day two).

THURSDAY 13 MARCH—Business to be determined by the Backbench Business Committee.

FRIDAY 14 MARCH—Private Members' Bills.

Jesse Norman: Mr Speaker, I am not quite sure what mental obfuscation is filling my head this morning, but I thank you again. It is my happy task to open by saying that today sees the retirement of Dawn, a stalwart of the Tea Room. I am sure that I speak for the whole House in wishing her a very happy retirement.

On a very different note, this week also marks the third anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. We wish the Prime Minister every success in his meetings at the White House today. The Government have come in for some fairly punishing criticism from me at the Dispatch Box in recent months, and rightly so. They came to power loudly advertising their virtue and careful planning, but instead, as the House will know, we have seen a series of entirely avoidable resignations, blunders and mishaps. The Government have talked about growth, but their decisions have managed to reduce the Bank of England's forecast from 2% to 0.75% growth for this year.

It is little wonder when one considers the £25 billion increase in national insurance contributions and the imposition of an Employment Rights Bill with an up-front cost estimated at £5 billion, among much else.

Most bizarre of all has been the lack of foresight in financial planning. The Chancellor talked grandly in her Mais lecture last year about "securonomics"—whatever that is—and the importance of economic security, but as many commentators have noticed, her fiscal rules and other decisions have left her very little room for manoeuvre. After all, it was obvious in the autumn that there could be tariffs on trade and, as Ministers have since acknowledged, an inevitable rise in defence spending. It is almost as though Labour never imagined, or perhaps never wanted to believe, that President Trump would be re-elected. As a result, the Government may be forced to have a mini-Budget next month and then a spending review, which has been so delayed that they will have gone a full year from their election without having any settled spending plans. Meanwhile, they prefer to import oil and gas from abroad, rather than use less expensive domestic energy supplies. Forget securonomics; this is a recipe for insecurity, as well as increasing carbon emissions.

However, it is important to give credit where credit is due. I reported in December that genuine signs of reality were starting to break through in the Government's so-called plan for change. In it, the Prime Minister said:

"In 2010, the incoming government inherited public finances in desperate need of repair."

He said that the UK needed

"a profound cultural shift away from a declinist mentality, which has become so comfortable with failure".

Finally, and most notably, he said that

"we cannot tax our way to prosperity or spend our way to better public services."

The Prime Minister was right on all three counts, and he is right now to increase defence spending. It is not untrue to say that he is visibly becoming more conservative before our eyes.

Unfortunately, the real numbers in the defence statement were in fact half what he claimed, as the Institute for Fiscal Studies quickly made clear, and I am sorry to say that the statement was insulting in other ways to this House. It appears to have been leaked to the media, who ran the headline before the Prime Minister had even stood up. Perish the thought that the statement was deliberately redacted so that MPs would be kept in the dark and could not hold the Government to account. The Prime Minister has emphasised all the planning that was involved in this decision. Even so, he was repeatedly unable to answer the simple "yes or no" question of whether funding for the Chagos Islands deal was included in the total.

What is worse is that, in his statement, the Prime Minister tried to aggregate the intelligence services budget into the defence budget. That is grossly misleading, because those budgets are, and have long been, kept separate. What is worse still is that the Prime Minister's claim that the combination of the two budgets would be 2.6% of GDP seems to imply a cut, not a rise, in the budget for the intelligence services, which currently stands at over 0.15% of GDP. This cannot be correct. Even if the Leader of the House cannot address my question now, I would be grateful if she could write to me with the details in order to answer it for the record and for the benefit of this House.

Lucy Powell: May I, too, welcome the retirement of Dawn from the Tea Room and wish her well? Let me also say that we have had an excellent couple of ten-minute rule Bills this week—first from the shadow Leader of the House, who brought forward a very important Bill on cleaning up the River Wye, which I know is of real importance to his constituents, and then from my brilliant Parliamentary Private Secretary, my hon. Friend the Member for West Bromwich (Sarah Coombes), who introduced a Bill to crack down on ghost number plates on cars, which is a very important issue. They are in good company with each other this week.

As the Prime Minister attends a very important meeting with President Trump today, I know that he has the support of the whole House behind him in the national interest. The peace and security that we have enjoyed in recent generations has shifted significantly in the last few years, not least because of Russia's aggression and its illegal invasion of Ukraine. The Prime Minister has shown determined leadership on the world stage to ensure that our national security is protected in the long term.

The whole House has also come together once again this week to show our unity and strength in supporting Ukraine. Three years since Russia's full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine, we stand in solidarity with its people. We support their bravery and their democratically elected President, and we stand firm for their sovereignty and lasting security, free from threats from Russia. The cross-party unity on display this week, which I know will be on display again this afternoon, shows this House at its best and gives the Prime Minister great strength in his negotiations and discussions.

As the shadow Leader of the House said, the Prime Minister also announced this week—to Parliament first—that to respond to the changing and growing threats we face, defence spending will increase to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 and grow to 3% in the next Parliament. This marks the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war, going further than commitments we made in our manifesto. It is vital not just for our own capabilities, but for maintaining peace and security beyond our shores. Other European countries must also step up at this crucial juncture. I was really pleased that the announcement of the increase to 2.5% was universally welcomed across the House.

The right hon. Gentleman yet again raised the Government's economic record. Let us have a look at that record once again, shall we? Interest rates have come down three times in a row, mortgage rates are also going down, wages are going up, and the lowest-paid will receive a big pay rise from 1 April. He may not be interested in pay and work as dignity and security, but this party is, and we are not ashamed to say so. He talked about energy prices, and he will know that this country, under his Government, was uniquely and specifically exposed to global energy markets. The only way for us to get lower bills in the long term—sustainable lower bills—is to make sure that we have clean energy generated in this country, and that is what this Government are embarking on.

Unfortunately, the right hon. Gentleman wants to open up a difference on defence spending, but I gently remind him that the last time we spent 2.5% on defence was under the last Labour Government. His Government made promise after promise on the never-never, but it never happened and it was not a credible plan, so I gently remind him of that.

It is another week of business questions, and another week that the shadow Leader of the House has failed to say anything supportive about his own leader. I keep giving him ample opportunity to do so at these sessions each week. I thought he might want to highlight some of the recent speeches and interventions she has made, given that they have had so little coverage. She advised us to stop hiding behind “vapid statements”. I am not sure that we are making vapid statements; I think that may be her. Was he not taken with her claim that only the “Conservatives are the guardians of Western civilisation”?

I know he takes his history very seriously, so what does he make of that claim?

Did the right hon. Gentleman not want to take the opportunity to restate the claim that the Prime Minister's big moves this week were all down to a letter he received from the Leader of the Opposition, or does he, like the rest of us, realise that that is obviously absurd? What about her suggestion that her leadership stint is akin to that of Donald Trump in his second term? I mean, come on! I think we can all see that it is not quite going the way the Conservatives hoped. I am not sure whether the right hon. Gentleman is a card player, but I am sure he agrees with me that they are not really holding the Trump card, but more of a busted flush.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): Unaccountable power carries significant risk, as we have seen in this place and across our public services, but when it is in the NHS it can lead to the death of patients. The complaints systems in the NHS are not functioning: they are defensive and they are not trying to solve the issues. Can we have a debate about NHS complaints to keep our constituents safe?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for raising this important matter. As constituency MPs, I am sure we all recognise the point she has made. I have heard the Health Secretary speak about these issues many times, and I know he is committed to ensuring that the NHS is accountable and responsive, takes complaints very seriously and does not in any way try to cover up or hide problems in the service.

Mr Speaker: I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

Marie Goldman (Chelmsford) (LD): The Climate Change Committee has published advice in its seventh carbon budget that sets out a new pathway to decarbonisation, including on how the UK can meet the legally binding target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050. The Climate Change Committee has already reported that the UK is behind in meeting its climate targets, and it has criticised the Government's decisions to go ahead with the coalmine in Cumbria and oil and gas fields in the North sea.

On top of that, Ofgem has taken the decision to increase the cap for the price of energy bills by 6.4% in April 2025, which is higher than the 5% increase that even those in the sector expected. This is the third increase since October 2024. The latest price rise means that households will be forced to pay about £600 a year more for their gas and electricity than before Russia's invasion of Ukraine three years ago.

The Liberal Democrats have been gravely concerned about the Government's delays to tackling poorly insulated homes over this winter and to implementing the new future homes standard. As a result, an estimated 6 million households are still in fuel poverty.

[Marie Goldman]

It is clear that to tackle the joint issues of climate change and ever-increasing energy prices, the Government must be bold. The Liberal Democrats want a 10-year emergency upgrade programme to make homes warmer and cheaper to heat, including free insulation and heat pumps for those on low incomes. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time to discuss what more can be done to support those struggling to stay warm, in a way that also supports decarbonisation?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Lady for that important question and contribution. I know that she and her party take this issue as seriously as the Government, and I welcome her raising it here today. She is absolutely right that energy bills and the soaring costs of energy over recent years are a huge worry to people and are unaffordable for many. That is why we have a mission to become a clean energy superpower by 2030, which will not only help to keep bills lower for longer, but drive growth and tackle the climate crisis. She will know, I am sure, that this country was particularly and uniquely exposed to global energy prices, and that is still affecting the energy price cap this year.

I am sure hon. Lady will agree that the only way to tackle the issue is to ensure that we have home-grown, cheaper renewable power and that we reduce demand, as she says, by the better insulation of our homes, which account for a huge amount of our energy use. Household energy prices are lower than they were last year, but we need to go further and faster. We announced an extension of the warm home discount scheme, which means an extra £150 for nearly 3 million additional people, and we have committed £3.4 billion over the next three years for home insulation. We will continue to go further and faster, and I will ensure that she and the House are kept updated.

Liam Conlon (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): Recently, a burst Thames Water pipe left thousands of my constituents in Anerley, Crystal Palace and Penge without water for up to five days. The response from Thames Water has been completely unacceptable: it put in only one bottled water station, which was an hour away for some residents; it failed to deliver water to people on the priority services register; and its complete lack of communication has left my constituents in the dark. To make matters worse, the only thing it communicated effectively to residents that week was an increase in water bills. I have called on Thames Water to give me clear answers on the compensation it will pay my constituents. Will the Leader of the House join me in urging Thames Water to provide clarity on that, and agree to a debate on changes to the compensation scheme?

Lucy Powell: I thank my hon. Friend for that question and I welcome him to his first outing at business questions. He raises serious issues with the performance of and services provided by Thames Water. They are raised with me many times during these sessions and elsewhere in the House. Frankly, some of its actions have been unacceptable and it needs to be brought to account. That is one of the reasons why we brought in the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025, but we also have an independent commission on water governance looking at these issues at the moment. I will ensure that he and the House are kept fully up to date.

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

Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): I thank the Leader of the House for announcing the business. We had 11 applications, covering nine Departments, for the estimates day debates. All of them could have been chosen, but we had the difficult decision of choosing three. We will try to accommodate those that were not chosen when we have the main estimates day debates in May. May I ask the Leader of the House to provide the date of those estimates day debates as early as possible, so that we can facilitate them?

In addition to the business the Leader of the House has announced, on Thursday 13 March in the Chamber, there will be a debate on the future of farming, followed by a debate on mental health support in educational settings, and on Thursday 20 March, if we are given that date, there will be a debate on knife crime among children and young people, followed by a debate on coastal communities. In Westminster Hall, on Tuesday 4 March, there will be a debate on the cultural heritage of market towns, and on Thursday 6 March, there will be a debate on the financial sustainability and governance of English football, followed by one on ambulance service response times. There will be debates in Westminster Hall on Tuesday 11 March on the governance of English rugby union, and on Thursday 13 March on educational opportunities for young carers.

Yesterday, the International Atomic Energy Agency announced that Iran is getting very, very close to having enriched uranium, which will enable it to have an atomic weapon. This is obviously a direct threat to peace in the middle east, British interests and those across the world. The Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary are currently in the United States, but I hope we can have a statement next week on the actions the Government will take to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and to confirm that snapback arrangements will, if necessary, be put in place, with the necessary implication of ensuring that Iran does not acquire nuclear weapons, as it would destabilise the entirety of the middle east and beyond if it did.

Lucy Powell: I thank the Chair of the Backbench Business Committee for announcing a number of debates that will be widely welcomed. Many of those issues get raised with me in these sessions, so I am glad his Committee has accommodated them. I would say, however, that I am sure you would be a lot happier, Mr Speaker, with a debate on rugby league, rather than rugby union—perhaps the hon. Gentleman could bear that in mind next time.

The hon. Gentleman raises the important issue of the continued threat that we face—not just in this country, but to our near neighbours and around the world—from Iran and its increasing aggression and actions. The Government are taking this matter very seriously and are taking action; there will, I am hoping, be a statement on this matter imminently. I will let the hon. Gentleman know.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Mr Speaker: Just to warn the House, business questions will finish at 12.25 pm. I do not want a repeat of last week, when Members of Parliament were complaining

to the front office—it is not acceptable. My deputies are doing their job. I do not expect complaints today. You are all aware of the time, so help each other out. Let's have a good example from Leigh Ingham.

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): In my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, residents of Parkside in Marston Grange are at a complete standstill. Years of roadworks have completely overwhelmed their roads; my constituents' children cannot get to school safely because of dangerous crossings, and businesses are losing business daily. They were told that roadworks were going to finish this spring, then summer, and now autumn. I am not the first Staffordshire MP to raise the lack of adequate communication from Staffordshire county council—my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) raised it just before recess. Can we have a statement on what steps the Government are taking to hold to account councils like mine that refuse to communicate with their residents?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely; my hon. Friend the Member for Tamworth (Sarah Edwards) did raise this matter with me before recess. As I said then, I know that when roadworks are constantly delayed and are not delivered, it can have a huge impact on local people and on local businesses, schools and hospitals. I reiterate what I said before: Staffordshire county council is clearly making a mess of this issue. It needs to get a grip, get it sorted and get these roadworks cleared, so that the businesses and people in my hon. Friends' constituencies can get back to work.

Sir Roger Gale (Herne Bay and Sandwich) (Con): I understand that the Home Secretary is visiting Calais today. I hope that she will not only see the beaches from which illegal immigrants depart for the United Kingdom, but visit the facility that I saw myself a week ago today, with Michael Keohan and Jack Valpy from BBC South East, where we discovered some 800 migrants from Sudan living in total squalor, with no sanitation of any kind. I hope that the Home Secretary will have raised this matter with the Mayor of Calais, with the député for Calais, and with her counterpart, the Interior Minister of France. I appreciate that Monday is likely to be a busy day, with the Prime Minister returning from Washington, but will the Leader of the House ask the Home Secretary to come to the House at the earliest opportunity to make a statement on what she has found?

Lucy Powell: The right hon. Member is absolutely right: the situation in relation to the small boat crossings continues to be intolerable in many regards. This country cannot sustain what we are seeing. The situation in Calais, including the steps that are being taken, or not, is not acceptable either. That is why we have brought forward the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill and are working very closely with France not just on what is happening in Calais but further upstream, to ensure that those migrants do not arrive in Calais and then on these shores in the first place. The right hon. Member makes a very good point about ensuring that the House is kept up to date. I know that the Home Secretary takes that incredibly seriously, and that she is very forthcoming on these matters. None the less, I will certainly ensure that she has heard what he has said.

Catherine Atkinson (Derby North) (Lab): I really enjoyed having a kick-about with Derby County women and the Sport Minister at our fantastic new football facilities at the Derby racecourse hub. Next week, the hub will host 14 Derby schools that are taking part in the biggest ever football session aimed at expanding football opportunities for girls across the country. Does the Leader of the House agree that women's football is going from strength to strength, so can we have a debate about supporting grassroots football for women and girls?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. Women's football is going from strength to strength. What we have seen from the Lionesses in recent years has inspired a whole new generation. It is great to hear what is happening at Derby racecourse, which is in her constituency, and I am keen to support her in that. I am not a great player of football myself, although I think I am a pretty good tackler in some regards, but I agree that this would make a very good topic for a debate.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I recently visited Bath's Roman Boxing Gym—anybody who wants to see my amazing right-hand swing can watch it on social media. More seriously. In connection with the question that the Leader of the House has just answered, how can we support community organisations, such as the Roman Boxing Gym, which provide incredible opportunities for young people to compete internationally and nationally, and also provide important diversionary activities? Can we have debate in Government time on all these activities that are so powerful in our communities?

Lucy Powell: I will take a look at the hon. Lady's left hook—or right hook; however handed she is, I am sure she packs a powerful punch! She makes a really good point. I know from my own constituency how important boxing, boxing clubs and sport activities are in general. That is why this Government are committed to a curriculum review, to ensure that schools and organisations, such as Bath's Roman Boxing Gym, are able to provide young people with these kind of opportunities. It is also why we are giving local government the biggest boost to funding that it has had in many years, because many of these organisations rely on local government funding. None the less, she is absolutely right: we need to do more to ensure that young people, such as those in her constituency, have the opportunity to access sport, culture and other activities. I am sure that it would make a good topic for debate.

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): When the right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) was Chancellor, he said that he had diverted public money away from deprived urban areas. In Ilford South, our local Redbridge council has been ranked among the most cost-effective council in the country, yet my neighbours are still suffering from the inequality of the politically motivated Conservative funding formula. Will the Leader of the House consider a debate on local government funding formulas to ensure that all areas receive their fair share of funding to deliver for local people?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is absolutely right: the previous Government did change the funding formula, taking funding away from some of the high-needs local authorities in our country. That is why we are looking

[Lucy Powell]

again at those funding formulas, why we will be doing three-year settlements for local government, and why we have given local government the biggest funding boost that it has had for many years, but we need to go further on these matters, and it is important that we do so. We regularly have debates on local government funding, but I will ensure that there is one coming up.

Mr Speaker: I call Nick Timothy.

Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker. That was a pleasant surprise after my brief admonishment.

Mr Speaker: I can spoil it if you want.

Nick Timothy: In Suffolk, we are moving towards a unitary council as part of local government reforms. I put on record my discomfort that our local elections, which were due this year, have been postponed. The danger of the reforms, however, is that power will be taken further away from local residents. I want parish and town councils to be empowered to take responsibility for problems such as speeding and road safety. Can we have a debate on how we empower towns and villages to get things done directly for local residents?

Lucy Powell: Although I hear the hon. Gentleman's worry about the elections—the delay is only by a year, so that in areas such as his, we do not hold unnecessary elections this year ahead of mayoral elections next year—this is about devolving a huge number of powers to local areas, and those local areas have to be of a size to cope with those powers. I know from my own area in Manchester that, ward by ward, that is being felt. The devolution revolution is having a huge positive impact in my area, and I am sure that it will in his as well.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Before the recess, thanks to the Backbench Business Committee, I led an excellent debate on coalfield communities. It was subject to a time limit, being immediately oversubscribed, and I had no time to wind up. With that in mind, will the Leader of the House allow a debate in Government time for us to further unpick how we can secure the investment, seize the opportunities and deliver the change that coalfield communities such as mine in Newcastle-under-Lyme and those up and down our country desperately deserve?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that coalfield communities make a huge contribution to this country. This Government have supported them very quickly in a number of ways just in our first few months in office. I understand that his debate was oversubscribed, and I am sure that there would be a great appetite for a further debate, so I will consider carefully his question.

Clive Jones (Wokingham) (LD): ADHD assessment waiting times are too long, leaving patients and families in limbo as they are left without crucial treatments. Alongside existing medication shortages, that undermines the right to choose. Not requiring improvements in local NHS provision of ADHD assessments would be incredibly shortsighted. Will the Leader of the House

hold a debate in Government time on the crisis in ADHD services, and will she ask her colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care to write to me to confirm that there will be no deterioration in waiting times in Wokingham and across England?

Lucy Powell: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising this matter, which is raised with me regularly. I am sure that he will appreciate that we inherited a broken system for ADHD assessments. There are currently unacceptable delays, as he outlined. I understand that NHS England has established a cross-sector taskforce to look at the ADHD service provision. As soon as that is ready to report with recommendations, I will ensure that it comes to this House for proper scrutiny.

Anneliese Midgley (Knowsley) (Lab): Constituents in Kirkby have endured a foul stench from Simonswood industrial estate in west Lancashire for years, making some physically sick. My constituent Gina Griffiths says that it is giving her child a persistent sore throat, while Joanne Day and her husband are having breathing problems because of the Simonswood stink. Enforcement from Lancashire county council and the Environment Agency, which are responsible for the site, has been unacceptable, despite repeated efforts by Shevington's Labour councillors, MPs and Knowsley council. Can we have a debate on tackling lack of enforcement for waste management plants?

Lucy Powell: I am disappointed to hear that this awful matter is taking so long to be resolved, despite representations from my hon. Friend and her colleagues. She is absolutely right that the Environment Agency has the powers that it needs, and it should take all necessary regulatory steps to ensure that such operations comply with permit conditions. I encourage it to do so at pace, and I will write to her with an update.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): This week, farmers from across the UK, including from my constituency, were in London for the National Farmers Union conference. I am sure that many of us saw the thought-provoking display of toy tractors very close to this place—a stark reminder that the farm tax could destroy farms and farming futures. Without farmers, there is no food. At a time of such global uncertainty, when we should be actively supporting our farmers and not driving them out of production, can we have a debate, please, on the importance of improving and increasing UK food security?

Lucy Powell: This Government are very committed both to farming and to providing food security. That is why we are investing a huge and record amount of £5 billion in the farming budget, whereas the Government that the right hon. Lady served under underspent the farming budget by £300 million. We have set out a 25-year farming roadmap, which the National Farmers' Union has welcomed as long overdue, and we are taking other steps, such as extending the seasonal worker visa route for five more years, which has also been welcomed. I noted that the official Opposition had an Opposition day this week and they chose not to make one of the debates on farming, so she might want to take that up with her Front Benchers.

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): My question is slightly different from that of my hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), but it speaks to the NHS. The *Financial Times* reported that there has been a 92% increase in whistleblowing cases between 2015 and 2023, including in the NHS. My constituency has in it the headquarters of the Bradford teaching hospitals NHS foundation trust, whose former chair Dr Max Mclean, a decorated police officer, maintains that he has been forced to take legal action after being removed from his position following a decision to raise concerns about governance and patient safety. The trust argues that chairs, non-executive directors and governors are not workers under whistleblowing legislation, potentially leaving them without the same protection as other NHS staff when reporting patient safety and governance concerns. Given the serious implications for NHS transparency and accountability, will the Government commit to reviewing the issue and provide clarity to the court, as well as allocating time for Parliament to debate better protections for whistleblowers?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend raises important issues around whistleblowers and how their complaints should be taken very seriously. I support and welcome her in that, as I am sure the whole House does. As I said in answer to a previous question, I know that the Health Secretary takes such matters incredibly seriously. I also point my hon. Friend to the fact that we are bringing forward a piece of legislation on duty of candour later this year, which will support that agenda.

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): This morning, I had the pleasure of attending Department for Culture, Media and Sport questions, because I was hoping to highlight two important issues to my constituents. I wanted to express my gratitude to the team at NK Theatre Arts, who empower young people and help them amplify their voice at Romiley's Forum theatre. There are worries, though, about the long-term future of the theatre because there is reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete in the roof. I was also cheekily seeking a bit of support for my campaign to make Marple locks a world heritage site. At the end of the session, however, many Members were left without an opportunity to ask their question. I am sure that the Leader of the House agrees about the importance of culture, media and sport, both to our constituents and to the House. Will she consider extending the time for future questions sessions so that more issues can be raised?

Lucy Powell: May I, first of all, support the hon. Lady's work around the theatre in Romiley? I know it well—I think I went there as a brownie, when I was a youngster, to see a pantomime—and it is a very good example of a regional theatre. Marple locks are also a great tourist attraction in our region as well, and I support her in that campaign.

The hon. Lady makes a good point. In my time as the shadow Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, I felt strongly about those matters too. We keep under constant review the allocation of oral questions with Mr Speaker and the most appropriate division of that, so I will certainly take on board what she says.

Mr Speaker: In fairness, I have never been asked. In my personal view, I would give an hour to culture, media and sport. I just say that. Let us see where we can go.

Paul Waugh (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): Colleagues will be aware that I am a former journalist. Old habits die hard, so I have some breaking news to announce: Rochdale has this morning been announced as Greater Manchester's town of culture for 2025-26. Starting from April, the year of events will celebrate our international reputation as the birthplace of co-operation and the home to 35 thriving arts organisations. I know that the Leader of the House is a culture vulture, so will she congratulate everyone involved in the winning bid and maybe pop up the road to see our magnificently restored town hall and partake of the Rochdale renaissance?

Lucy Powell: I very much look forward to taking up my hon. Friend's invitation, and I join him in congratulating Rochdale on becoming Greater Manchester's town of culture. It has a fantastic cultural heritage, and I am sure that he and everybody across Rochdale will seize the opportunity to showcase what a brilliant town it is.

David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): The increased pace of Government decision making on refugee applications is discharging growing numbers of people into the responsibility of local authorities. On top of that, my constituents in the London borough of Hillingdon face an additional £1.2 million council tax cost to support Chagossians displaced to the UK by the uncertainty created through the Government's stance on the Chagos islands. Will the Leader of the House make Government time available for a debate on the impact of asylum, refugee and border policy on our local authorities?

Lucy Powell: I gently say to the hon. Gentleman that the asylum backlog that the Government inherited was absolutely shocking and appalling. It was a huge backlog, and no one could be processed, so the backlog built up more and more. We were paying to house more people in asylum hotels, which I know he would have found unacceptable for his constituents, as I did for mine. We are taking steps to deal with that backlog. We have record numbers of returns; that did not happen under his Government. I am confused about what he is saying about Chagos. Does he want long-term certainty about British activity in Chagos or not? If he does, I am sure that he will welcome and support the plans that we have taken forward to ensure that.

Mr Bayo Alaba (Southend East and Rochford) (Lab): I have had the pleasure of meeting my constituent Mark Hughes, who kindly shared his experience of a terminal diagnosis. Would the Leader of the House join me in commending Mark on his hard work on his successful "Scrap 6 Months" campaign? As a result of that campaign, those who receive a terminal diagnosis of 12 months or less to live can now have their benefits application fast-tracked. Additionally, will she assist in arranging a meeting between the Department for Work and Pensions and Mark Hughes to discuss next steps in supporting anyone with a terminal diagnosis?

Lucy Powell: I echo my hon. Friend's admiration and thanks to Mark Hughes for a brilliant campaign for a measure that has come into effect, and which ensures that those with a terminal illness that gives them 12 months or less to live get their benefits fast-tracked. I will ensure that he gets a meeting, or a response from the Minister.

John Glen (Salisbury) (Con): On 4 February, I met Janet Williams and Emma Murphy from the national valproate campaign, In-FACT, the Independent Fetal Anti-convulsant Trust. Later that week, the hon. Members for Rushcliffe (James Naish), and for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale (David Mundell) raised these matters at business questions. It is a year since the publication of the patient safety commissioner's Hughes report, which highlighted the devastating impact of valproate and pelvic mesh on thousands of women and children. Given my experience of the infected blood compensation scheme, and what I learned from the right hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull North and Cottingham (Dame Diana Johnson) when she was in opposition, please can we have some time to discuss the matter? Further delays would cause not only enormous additional anxiety, but expense to the taxpayer. We must move on this matter.

Lucy Powell: I respect the right hon. Member's work on the infected blood scheme—he has a great deal of experience to offer on these matters. He mentions an important issue to do with the Hughes report and the valproate and pelvic mesh scandal, which was a big issue in the last Parliament. As he said, colleagues raised that with me before the recess. I know that the Minister has met families and is considering the report in great depth. I will ensure that the House is given a full update on those matters at the earliest opportunity, but I look forward to him continuing to raise the matter with me from the Back Benches if that does not happen.

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): Constituents driving to Hastings down St Helen's Park Road are confronted by the sight of a dilapidated London double-decker bus that has been left by the side of the road for years because local councils have refused to do anything about it. Some residents of St Helen's Road are forced to live opposite that monstrosity. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on Hastings borough council and East Sussex county council to knock heads together, grasp the nettle and get that bus moved?

Lucy Powell: I know how unsightly and disturbing such things can be for the people who live around them, so I join my hon. Friend in those calls. Hastings borough council is run by the Green party. There are no Green Members present, but perhaps they could pull their finger out and get the bus moved.

Tom Gordon (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (LD): I recently met volunteers who run the Harrogate Competitive Festival for Music, Speech and Drama, a charity that has been going for almost 90 years. It has over 250 different classes and categories, 800 entries to its competitions, and more than 1,300 children taking part every year. I heard about how it gives confidence, and boosts people's skills and ability to speak and perform in front of large audiences. The charity used to receive funding from the local authority, but that has been stopped since 2016. Will the Leader of the House allow for a debate in Government time on the importance of supporting the performing arts?

Lucy Powell: I know how important festivals such as the Harrogate festival that the hon. Gentleman describes are for young people, giving them the opportunity to try

out their performing arts skills and be assessed. As he says, many of those festivals are funded by local government, which has seen its budget stripped to the core in recent years. That is why we boosted local government funding in the recent Budget, and why we are looking at three-year settlements, which will give local government the chance to fund such things. We are also considering how we can support culture and the creative curriculum for young people. I am sure that he welcomes that.

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): This House has rightly marked the three-year anniversary of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, and we are all steadfast in our support for the Ukrainian people. Last weekend, I spent a morning with Ukrainian refugees settled in my town of Redditch, at their regular breakfast event. I spoke with parents and children who were forced to leave their home because of the fighting about the impact that that has had on their mental health. Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the Redditch residents who have opened their homes, offered support, and harboured in safety the people who needed it the most, in their biggest time of need?

Lucy Powell: As we mark the three-year anniversary of the awful illegal invasion of Ukraine, the whole House agrees that the Homes for Ukraine scheme is one of the proudest contributions that this country has made. I support the work that my hon. Friend has been doing with Ukrainians in his Redditch constituency.

Bradley Thomas (Bromsgrove) (Con): The Leader of the House will recall that after many months of non-committal communications with the Government, I came to business questions on 23 January to raise the case tragic case of John Cross, a Bromsgrove pharmacist who very sadly took his own life after complications arising from the covid vaccine. I would like to put on the record that John was a pharmacist and believed in the importance of vaccines. John's family believe that he took one for the team, and have been seeking justice in his memory. I am grateful to the Leader of the House for her correspondence with me immediately afterwards, but although she promised on the Floor of the House a meeting with the Cross family, my subsequent correspondence with Government has promised only a meeting with me. The Cross family desperately want to meet Government, so that they can see justice delivered in John's name. It is disappointing that I have to come here; it is a little embarrassing for the Government; and, frankly, it is cruel for the Cross family to have their anguish drawn out. I believe the Leader of the House to be a very honourable Member, and I hope that she will agree to a meeting with the Cross family and make it a priority today.

Lucy Powell: I am very sorry that the hon. Gentleman has struggled to get the meeting that I hoped he would get, and which the family of John Cross deserve. I will take that forward after this question time. At the very least, I will meet them myself, but I hope that a Health Minister will meet them, which would be the most appropriate thing.

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): This week, I was contacted by a constituent who had received the phone call that every parent dreads. Her son had been

hit by a car as he got off the bus on his way home from Caldicot school. Fortunately, he was not seriously hurt; thank goodness it is still a 20 mph road. The council had been asked to review the limit, but decided to keep it at 20 mph for that road, which is commendable, because otherwise things could have been so much worse. The Undy and Caldicot school community are determined to push for a crossing to be installed on that stretch of road, which I will, of course, support. Will the Leader of the House agree to a debate on road safety for young people, particularly at entrances to villages, for example, where speed limits can suddenly change?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of my hon. Friend's constituent being involved in a road traffic accident. As she says, that is the phone call that any parent dreads receiving, but I am glad to hear that things were not as serious as they might have been. She is right to use this session to raise the issue of speeding, the need for crossings and other matters in her constituency, and I think a debate on this topic would be very popular and well attended.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Last week I visited the owners of a local business, who expressed their concerns about the pEPR regulations—the Producer Responsibility Obligations (Packaging and Packaging Waste) Regulations 2024. These regulations shift the cost of managing packaging waste from local authorities to producers. That represents yet another burden on businesses at a time when they face no end of other increased costs. Could the Leader of the House ensure that the appropriate Minister comes to the House and explains what assessment has been made of the impact of these regulations?

Lucy Powell: I pride myself on knowing about most things the Government are doing, but I have to say that I am not that familiar with the pEPR regulations, though I will certainly find out about them. This Government are taking steps to ensure that we have a circular economy, and that packaging waste is kept to a minimum. I know the Minister has been to the House a few times to debate some of these matters, but I will ensure that the hon. Member gets a detailed response about that.

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House join me in paying tribute to the emergency services crews from Warwickshire Fire and Rescue Service, Warwickshire police and West Midlands Ambulance Service, who this week attended a tragic and fatal fire in my constituency? Public servants such as these rush towards their fellow citizens in their time of need, and often rush towards danger. They show professionalism, compassion and often bravery, and so deserve our appreciation and continuing support.

Lucy Powell: I am sorry to hear about the tragic fire in my hon. Friend's constituency. I join him in commending the amazing work that our emergency services do, and the professionalism and bravery with which they do it, putting their own lives at risk in doing so.

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I am sure that the whole House will want to join me in wishing my constituent Philip Jackson a very happy 100th birthday.

In a very varied life so far, Philip joined the Royal Army Service Corps during the second world war and was involved in the liberation of Cherbourg, but perhaps one of his most harrowing contributions during his period in service was being one of the first to enter the notorious Nazi Bergen-Belsen concentration camp when it was liberated in 1945. Can we have a debate in Government time to celebrate those from our veterans community who have gone above and beyond throughout their life in the name of peace and freedom for us all?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Member in wishing Philip Jackson a very happy birthday. What an amazing 100 years. He is right in what he points out. As we enter the 80th anniversary of VE Day, and of the liberation and freedom that came about from those who first went into Auschwitz and other places, we are reminded that that generation will not long be with us. It is good that Philip is still with us, so that we can hear his stories, and thank him for all his amazing work and the life he has lived.

Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): The Leader of the House will be surprised that I am not talking about Doncaster Sheffield airport today; I would instead like to land some terrific news about primary schools in my area. First, Crookesbroom primary academy has ranked first among the schools in Doncaster for its English and maths results. Secondly, I visited Wroot Travis school on Monday and heard the children read their letters, which made my heart melt. Thirdly, I am really chuffed to hear that Bawtry Mayflower primary school has been selected as one of the first of the 750 schools to offer breakfast clubs as part of the Government's new scheme. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating those outstanding primary schools, and acknowledge the significance of the breakfast club programme?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. My hon. Friend still managed to get Doncaster airport into his question, and I congratulate him on having secured an Adjournment debate on the airport, so he still has the title of Mr Doncaster Airport as far as the House is concerned. I join him in commending the outstanding work of primary schools in his constituency and the new breakfast club programme unveiled this week by the Education Secretary.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): If we keep the questions pithy, I will get everybody in.

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Will the Leader of the House allow time for a debate about the importance of keeping our roads and highways clear of litter and rubbish? I recently spent time with Ronnie and Darren from Scottish Borders council, who do a tremendous job emptying bins and keeping the A1 in Berwickshire clean and tidy. They are supported by many volunteers, including Candy Philip and Alison Currie from the Berwickshire Anti Litter Group, who spend many hours a week cleaning litter from lay-bys and grass verges. Will the Leader of the House join me in thanking Ronnie, Darren and the volunteers who do this important work keeping our countryside clean and tidy?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating Ronnie, Darren, Candy and Alison on keeping his area's countryside safe. He is right that it should not be up to volunteers to have to deal with and tackle littering. It should be a responsibility of every good citizen to make sure that they do not litter our countryside in the way that they seem to be doing in his.

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): The Loughborough Rotary Club does brilliant work in my constituency, as I know the Rotary Club does across this country. In my community it has provided more than 200 warm coats and 500 boxes to families being rehomed. Will the Minister please put on record her thanks to the Loughborough Rotary Club in my constituency and Rotary Clubs across the nation?

Lucy Powell: I join my hon. Friend in thanking Loughborough Rotary Club and all the Rotary Clubs around the country for the work they do and their amazing volunteering work, in his case supporting people with coats and homeless people.

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): On Saturday I joined the 1st Newbold Verdon Scouts group for part of their celebration of 70 years of scouting. They chose 22 February because it commemorates the birth of Robert Baden-Powell, the founder of the Scouts. It was a testament to the Scouts to see the kids there delivering speeches and the strength of character that they have learned through the Scouts. May we have a debate to celebrate the 70 years of the Scouts and to thank the volunteers—the likes of Steve Dowell and his team—who give up their time to support young people in getting the skills they need for future life?

Lucy Powell: I join the hon. Gentleman in congratulating the scouting movement for the amazing work it has done over 70 years. It provides a great opportunity for young people, and many of us in this House will have been through that movement. I just want to put on record that I do not think I am related to the Baden-Powells, but I might be; maybe I will have a look into it.

Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab): The recent announcement that Prudhoe community high school will be closed for a lengthy period due to cracks in the building's infrastructure is deeply concerning, particularly given that the building was only recently opened, in 2016. Students have already experienced vast disruption due to the covid pandemic and they deserve stability in their education experience; I am deeply concerned for their welfare. Can the Leader of the House help me secure a meeting with an Education Minister to discuss how the students can receive the best support to ensure their education and upcoming exams receive minimal disruption and they can continue their education in peace?

Lucy Powell: I am really sorry to hear of the closure of Prudhoe community high school. That is absolutely devastating for young people in my hon. Friend's constituency who will be missing out on education and all that time in school brings. The Department for Education is working closely with those responsible for the building, but I will absolutely ensure that he gets a ministerial meeting.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): UK food resilience is more delicate than ever. The country's ability to withstand future crises has been brought into question by the National Preparedness Commission's recent report, yet family farms that support the provision of the nation's food security, including the several hundred in Glastonbury and Somerton, are, in the words of the National Farmers Union president, "taking a battering". May we have a debate in Government time about national preparedness, food security and resilience?

Lucy Powell: This Government are committed to food security, farming and our rural communities. We are putting in extra money—£5 billion over two years—to support farmers, and we have a 25-year farming road map and a new deal for farmers. So there are a whole range of measures, but food security underpins our farming plans, and I will ensure the hon. Lady is updated on these important matters.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The Leader of the House may be aware of the ongoing tribunal case of Sandie Peggie, a nurse at my local hospital in Kirkcaldy. Women's sex-based rights are hard fought and we give them up at our peril. The UK Health Secretary is right to support the need for single-sex spaces and sex-based rights for women in the NHS. Of course, every citizen must be afforded safety, respect and dignity in the work place. While the Leader of the House may not want to comment on an ongoing tribunal, does she agree with me that single-sex spaces must be protected, and will she make time for a debate on how we can best do that?

Lucy Powell: My hon. Friend is right that I will not comment on this particular case, but I absolutely support what she says about the importance of single-sex spaces. This Government are clear that everybody deserves to feel safe and treated with respect at their workplace, including in the NHS. Although health is a devolved matter, the Equality Act 2010 applies to Scotland and is very clear about rights and protections for women.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): In the past two months, there have been an increasing number of attacks in the Democratic Republic of the Congo. In the Lubero territory, 70 Christians, including women, children and the elderly, were found dead, bound and beheaded in a Protestant church. They were captured from their homes, before being killed by suspected Allied Democratic Forces militants, linked to Islamic State terror groups, who have displayed explicit animosity towards Christians. Since last Christmas, attacks by Islamic State Central Africa Province, the March 23 Movement and CODECO have killed hundreds, and militants are moving swiftly across the country. Will the Leader of the House press the relevant Minister for immediate and long-term interventions, so that the UK Government and international stakeholders can work together to prevent further extremist-led massacres, while ensuring sustainable security and humanitarian support in that region?

Lucy Powell: The Government remain deeply concerned by the Daesh-affiliated group the Allied Democratic Forces, which continues to increase attacks in the Democratic

Republic of the Congo. We will ensure that those messages are relayed very strongly and that the Minister updates the hon. Gentleman on these matters.

Patricia Ferguson (Glasgow West) (Lab): The visit to Scotland by the Prime Minister within 48 hours of the general election was widely welcomed. That priority for Scotland stands in stark contrast with the actions of the Leader of the Opposition, who after 116 days in post has still not ventured north of the border, leaving Scots confused as to whether they should be dismayed or relieved. Will the Leader of the House allocate time for a debate to discuss which party in this House truly stands up for Scotland and for the Union?

Lucy Powell: Constituents, including those of my hon. Friend, should probably be relieved that the Leader of the Opposition has not yet visited Scotland. I am not sure we need a debate about which party stands up for the interests of Scotland: we are all very clear that it is the Labour party.

Amanda Hack (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): Last week, Ashby netball club, in my constituency, completed 75 hours of non-stop netball at Ivanhoe school, a feat that is well worth applauding on its own, but the club also raised £54,000 for Kids' Village, a charity that provides care and respite holidays for children with critical illnesses. It also broke two world records and set an entirely new one. Will the Leader of the House join me in congratulating Ashby netball club and its players, who come from the surrounding community, for those incredible accomplishments?

Lucy Powell: When my hon. Friend told me about this incredible act of charity fundraising by Ashby netball club, I could not believe that they had played continuously for 75 hours—that is a remarkable achievement. I join her in congratulating the players and I wish them the very best in their efforts.

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): Last month, along with approximately 20 local employers, I attended Cumbernauld academy's world of work event, where I was able to engage with more than 100 13-year-olds about the skills needed to be an elected politician and how to work for one. It was a crucial part of their preparation for choosing which subjects they wanted to take at national 4 and national 5 level. I really got put through my paces on all that, and it was an absolutely fantastic event; I commend the school on doing that. It is important that we further debate the importance of careers advice for young people.

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. I support my hon. Friend in that endeavour and on giving young people careers advice. I am not sure that I would necessarily join her in advising young people to want a career in elected politics, but perhaps she could give some of her colleagues the training session that she gave there.

Douglas McAllister (West Dunbartonshire) (Lab): On this day 125 years ago, the Labour party was founded by Keir Hardie to be the political wing of the trade

union movement and the voice of working-class people in this Parliament. Labour has transformed the lives of millions of people since. Does the Leader of the House agree that we have another Keir who is transforming lives for working people today, 125 years on from 27 February 1900? Will she pay tribute to all of our fellow activists over the years?

Lucy Powell: What a lovely question. I absolutely support everything that my hon. Friend says. The Prime Minister was named after Keir Hardie, and I think he is absolutely living up to his namesake.

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): Last month I met with Colin, who runs The Toaster, a fantastic local café on South Street in Bishop's Stortford. Colin's business has been plagued for three and a half years by a pothole on the street outside. Rainwater collects in the pothole and is then splashed on to his business—just this week, he has had to clean his shopfront four times. Will the Leader of the House join me in calling on Hertfordshire county council to take full advantage of the £35 million provided by this Government to fix potholes across Hertfordshire, including in Hertford and Stortford, as well as the pothole plaguing Colin's business?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. My hon. Friend describes how awful potholes can be and the impact that they have on businesses such as Colin's. I join him in imploring Hertfordshire county council to use the money that the Government have now given it to fix potholes such as that one.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): The last question goes to the ever-present and most patient Mark Swards.

Mark Swards (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

We know that mass transit systems have enormous benefits for local economies. In Nottingham, a tram line was able to generate £100 million in investment for local businesses. That is why I am so pleased that the Government have indicated their support for a mass transit system in West Yorkshire and in Leeds, because we have been waiting far too long for one. Will the Leader of the House grant a debate in Government time on the urgent need to get that mass transit system built so that we can have investment in our businesses and benefit from economic growth across our region?

Lucy Powell: Absolutely. As an MP for and resident of Manchester, I know how vital mass transit schemes are for growth, for providing job opportunities and for boosting tourism—everything that Leeds deserves to have. I am really pleased that the Chancellor has indicated her support for that. We have set aside some funding, and we are working with the West Yorkshire combined authority to make sure that those plans become a reality.

Backbench Business

War in Ukraine: Third Anniversary

12.13 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the third anniversary of the war in Ukraine.

I have been working on Ukraine with many colleagues in all parts of the House for a considerable time—we have shared that work. The reality in this Chamber, which may mark us out slightly from other countries, is that we have been completely united in our support for Ukraine and the people of Ukraine, who are fighting for their freedom as we have had to do in the past. We therefore recognise their sacrifices and the risk that they have taken. To anybody who assumes that that is of no relevance, I say that the only relevant issue that pervades this debate is that we should always be on the side of those who believe in freedom and democracy. That is what we exist for.

I recently came back from another trip to Ukraine. I have done a few trips there, helped by a charity called HopeFull. What it has done is quite remarkable and is another example of how people in Britain see things sometimes slightly differently from the rest of the world. When Russia invaded Ukraine and there was a serious danger of it taking Kyiv in those early weeks, the charity—which had been working in Scotland, in the area around Dundee, helping to support people in difficulty and in poorer circumstances—upped sticks and decided that its real cause was now to help those fleeing from the Russians at the border of Poland, which it did. In fact, the charity turned up two weeks earlier than even Oxfam managed, simply by getting trucks and driving across. That is a very British way of doing things.

Eventually the charity crossed over the border, and over the past three years it has supplied many people, organisations, towns and cities with food. The way in which it has done that is to take pizzas in pizza trucks to feed them.

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab) *indicated assent*.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: The hon. Gentleman is nodding because he and I were recently cooking those pizzas close to the front. That charity has fed more than 2.5 million Ukrainians in that time, using charitable money and support from other countries, which is quite remarkable.

The charity has now turned its attention to the other huge issue of combat stress and the disaster post-war that will haunt Ukrainians, for those who will suffer internally and externally, and I will come to that in a few minutes. I am therefore proud that people from the charity are in the Gallery today to watch the debate—I know that we should not normally refer to the Gallery, but in this instance it is quite relevant. Of its own accord, the charity has launched a rehabilitation programme in Ukraine, where it is trying to set up treatment for those with serious combat stress, and then trying to multiply that out by teaching other veterans to help people

through programmes all across Ukraine. We have a lot to learn from Ukraine on the scale of that and from what they are seeing at the moment, and the figures are absolutely staggering. That addresses the psychological and physical needs and the moral injuries, which are huge—on a scale that we have not seen since the second world war.

It is worth looking at a couple of pieces on this subject. Apart from combat stress, the scale of the damage is quite interesting. There are 5 million veterans in Ukraine. Some 50,000 of those veterans and young people now need prosthetics. I will repeat that figure—50,000 Ukrainians are waiting to get prosthetics. They have lost legs and arms through the mines, the shells and the shellfire. Civilians have been treated just like soldiers; they have been attacked by the Russians, who bombard hospitals. I have been to hospitals—the military hospital in Kharkiv, which I visited, was shelled regularly and deliberately. Who shells hospitals deliberately? They did.

On my last visit, I visited a wonderful children's hospital in Kyiv. I think the hon. Member for Macclesfield (Tim Roca) may have been with me on that visit. The children's hospital had received a direct hit from a ballistic missile. We do not get misfires on ballistic missiles; they are targeted to within a yard of their destination point. That was deliberate, and it tried to blow apart the work that the hospital was doing to help children suffering from cancer and all the ailments of war. That is the real horror of how Russia has fought this war. The very fact that it fought the war and invaded Ukraine is bad enough, but it has not stuck to all the usual rules that apply to those who fight. Civilians should be left out of it as far as possible, but Russia targets them.

I went to the prosthetics labs to see this, and we in this country have a lot to learn from the Ukrainians. They are making advances in prosthetics that we simply could not have believed was feasible. I say to the Government that we really need to be sending people over there to look at what they are doing and bring it back, because it could be applied to civilian injuries in this country. All of the work that the charity HopeFull is doing is aimed at helping those people, and I salute it for that.

There are those who say that Ukraine was somehow guilty of causing the war. I have been to Ukraine with other Members, and one need only see the sheer brutality of what has been happening on the ground to recognise how wrong such statements are. Russia's aggression was not caused by anybody else; it was caused by Russia's greed, its avarice, and its wrong-headed idea that it can recreate Greater Russia along the old Soviet Union lines. That is what is driving this war. That is what has led to probably over 800,000 dead and injured Russians, whose families will never see them again. Many, of course, will never see their bodies, because Russia systematically cremates them, so that there will not be a series of funerals in Russia, which could cause problems at home—that shows the cynicism of the country. We therefore need to remind everybody—we did not think that we did—that Ukraine is fighting a war of defence, not of aggression. It is Russia that has created the problem.

Because of all the things that have been going on and milling around in the air, and all the rows that have been taking place, I also want to say that we need to take a pace back. This is not about pointing fingers at anybody; it is about trying to correct some of what has been said. I have to say straight off that peace is not just the

absence of war—if it is just the absence of war, it becomes a ceasefire; an intolerable ceasefire that will break down. For peace to be durable and long-lasting, we need it to contain freedom and justice. There can be no real peace without justice for those who have been fighting for their country and for peace. That has to apply to us in NATO—in America and in Europe. We need to recognise that there can be no peace unless there is justice in that peace for those who have suffered most.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): My right hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Factually, the article 5 mutual defence clause of the Washington treaty has only ever been invoked once in its history. That was by the United States after 9/11, when President Bush ruled that America had been attacked and NATO in Europe—particularly Britain—came to its aid. Does my right hon. Friend think it is worth bearing that in mind as these very important discussions take place in Washington?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Of course it is. Article 5 has been the reason that western Europe has been able to grow and settle, and America has also been able to pursue its own ends because of the mutual defence pact that exists between us. I remember that Sir Tony Blair, who was the Prime Minister at that stage, did not waste any time; he came out immediately to support America, so much so that he was able to get into the debate that took place in the Congress and was welcomed as a friend, which was quite right. The reality is that the UK was the first to push for article 5 to be invoked, and George Robertson was the head of NATO at the time and moved it for the first time. That was very much the right thing to do, and that is what underpins this.

Before I continue, I want to come back to some of the after-effects. I went to see those who are looking after, and are responsible for, prisoners of war in Kyiv. What is fascinating is that the abuses that are taking place in Russia trash the Geneva convention on support for prisoners of war. Russia spends its time moving Ukrainian prisoners of war around and does not allow the Red Cross full access at any stage. That is against the convention, and the Red Cross has complained—although I do not think it has said it loudly enough—that some Ukrainian prisoners of war are being used as human shields. Some are being used to clear mines in certain areas, which is also against the rules.

We also know that in a number of cases, after serious interrogation of those prisoners of war, which is also illegal, their families in Ukraine are being bullied and threatened. They are told that unless they start spying or carrying out damaging acts in Ukraine, their loved one—their husband, son or daughter—in the prisoner of war camp, if such a thing exists, will be tortured and dealt with. This is going on quite regularly now and has been discovered by the Ukrainians. It is illegal under the Geneva convention, and I urge the Government to speak seriously to the Red Cross about making a much more public statement about how prisoners of war are being treated, because it really is quite shocking. There is a lack of accountability on this and the Red Cross needs to do much more.

We must not underestimate the fact that there has been a change of regime in the United States, and that President Trump has made it very clear that he wants the war to end and that we have to drive to that. I think

all of us in this House would support that position; we want to see an end to war. In fact, the Ukrainians want to see an end to war. Nobody wants to carry on fighting if there is a possibility of a good peace deal that, as I have said, contains justice and freedom for the Ukrainians. However, President Trump sees this as a sideshow; he says that he is more focused on China, Taiwan and other issues, and I think he wants to make savings on the United States' spending in some of these areas, which is reasonable.

However, the problem is that, for all our support for Ukraine, the reason why this war has gone on for three years is that we, the allies, quite honestly have dragged our feet on supplying the weapons and equipment that Ukraine needed from day one. In fact, there was a period in 2023 when Russia was on the rack and having real problems. It was short of munitions, it had lost territory to the Ukrainians—certainly in the east, around Kharkiv—and that was the moment at which Ukraine might well have been able to deal properly with Russia and push it back.

Strangely enough, at that stage two things seem to have happened. First, I do not believe that the attack on Israel by Hamas was just a stand-alone item; I think that Iran, China and others had realised that Russia needed a distraction. The Americans, of course, immediately moved to support Israel—which is what they will do—and supplied arms to the Israelis. I was in the Congress around that time, looking to see whether America could get the money through. Some of the Republicans did not agree with the Bill and were blocking it. We did manage to persuade a few and they did push it forward, but my point is that they said, “The war in Israel is our war; Ukraine is your war, not ours; and we are keenly concerned about Taiwan.”

The point I made to those Republicans, which I make again now, is that, in reality, we cannot separate Taiwan from Ukraine, or in a way from Israel. My personal view is that China's hand is in all of this, and that distraction—that moving of equipment—has meant that Russia has been able to regain its strength and reach a rapprochement with North Korea. Interestingly enough, the scale of weapons that North Korea is now supplying is breathtaking—I think that well over 5 million artillery shells have been supplied since it signed the agreement with Russia. It now has thousands of troops in Russia who are defending the Russian position, and it is planning to supply even more weapons and missiles. This is a chain of totalitarian states that is working to support each other, and we are losing on this, because we ourselves do not focus on that linkage between Iran, Russia, China and North Korea.

I give one small warning. It is something the Americans need to face, and I hope that the Government will raise it with them. It is simply this: Russia in reply is giving significant technology to the North Koreans, particularly for submarine-launched ballistic missiles. The security services here know about that, but it is a serious and significant shift. If the North Koreans have that technology, they will be able to take their nuclear weapons out to sea, which will bring all the American continent directly under target from those missiles. That will change the whole nature of the Pacific in terms of how we see geostrategic defence. It is a major change, and Russia has been giving the North Koreans that technology. It would be useful for the Government to say that this

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

matter is not separable. Ukraine is the reason for that move. The road to Taiwan runs right through Ukraine, and we cannot and must not separate them.

I make the simple point that when we speak about the money, it is a huge amount. I know that the Chair of the Select Committee, the right hon. Member for Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North (Liam Byrne) will want to speak on this, but the reality is that we have had debates before on the huge amounts of money we have sitting here. Those are assets belonging to Russians—not just the oligarchs, but also the state. Some \$300 billion of Russian assets are frozen within the G7 and the EU. Some \$25 billion of Central Bank of Russia reserves are frozen in the UK alone. That is managed by Euroclear, and there is Euroclear money in Canada and other countries.

The Government said the other day that they are prepared to use the money earned from that capital for Ukraine. I argue that if they are to use the money earned from the capital, they also have a right to use the capital. We should not just freeze the capital sitting in the banks, but seize it and use it for reparations, damage repair and the work that is necessary. I think we would see a major change immediately.

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Can the right hon. Member explain why there seems to be a certain reluctance among western leaders to use this capital—the \$300 billion or so of Russian state assets in western banks? It could be powerful as part of potential peace negotiations.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I agree. I can understand that reluctance. I think it is twofold. Those who have financial services markets are worried that if they leap out and do this without full agreement, all those other countries will say, “That is the last time we will ever invest money in that capital market. We will move it to the other countries that do not do that.” I can understand from the Government’s standpoint that it has to be agreed across at least the G7, as its members controls most of those capital markets. That would mean there would not be any country for an oligarch or totalitarian leader to go to.

We have had a long time to get this right. Canada has made the strongest statement of all. I am told that America was okay under the last Administration. I am not sure now, but I would hope that President Trump realises this money is there. We should make this agreement as fast as possible. There can be no peace deal without money attached to it, and that money is necessary for Ukraine and must be used for Ukraine, and it is a huge sum. If we think we can use the earnings from the capital, we can use the capital too, because there is no definition or delineation between them. If we own the earnings, we own the capital.

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman and I have organised debates on this topic in the past. Does he share my view that we now need to get a lot faster in seizing this money, not only to pay for the munitions needed to win the war, but crucially, then to win the peace in Ukraine, making good the horrific scale of damage that Russia has inflicted on that great country?

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I cannot put a piece of paper between the two of us. The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He now has the capability to push the Government over this issue through his Select Committee. Whatever he chooses to do, I assure him that Opposition Members will support him in that pursuit.

We need to get these decisions made now, because that will put pressure on Russia. If we make the decision to seize this money, Russia will then be under pressure to reach a reasonable agreement, because the Russians do not want to lose all this money in the meantime. There is a whole line of pressure that we should be bringing to bear on the Russians.

We have allowed certain things to take place, and I do not blame just this Government, because it also happened under the last Government. The Foreign Office is always slightly reluctant to pursue sanctions with quite the aggressive nature that I would want. We recognise that. Everything has always got to be, “Well, Minister, you know, we must take into consideration a huge number of factors here, such as, ‘Why, when and who?’ These need papers, Minister.” I would say to them, “Forget the papers, let’s get to the facts.”

The fact is that we have been allowing a shadow fleet carrying liquefied natural gas to come from Russia—even in the past few months—and deliver to the UK and other countries. How can it do that? The answer is simple, and I have raised this with the Government previously. The Americans have stepped in and said that any country that takes this gas will be sanctioned, and that stopped it overnight, but we could have stopped it, because we have the major marine insurers in this country. It was British companies that were insuring this shadow fleet to take Russian gas elsewhere. In what world do people sit there, watching that, and string out questions about what they should do?

All we had to do was to say that we would sanction any marine insurer that insured one of those vessels. That would have been the end of it, because the marine insurer market is here in the UK. It would have killed that practice stone dead. America has now moved on this, and we can see some of these ships anchored off such places as India and even China, because they dare not take the gas, because of the sanctions.

I urge the Government to drive their civil servants to be quicker, faster and more determined to follow the money and to stop it. As I say, that is not a criticism alone of the present Government; it is also a criticism of the Government of my party that was in power before.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): There are many things we have to address in this debate, one of which is the atrocities that the Russian forces carried out against Ukrainians where they butchered, maimed, raped, abused and burned alive. Those things cannot be forgotten about, because the families still want justice. They want those who carried those atrocities out to be accountable. As this process of peace moves forward, that justice has to be part of the peace process, as it was in Northern Ireland.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. That justice will take time, but part of the point that I made is that we cannot have a peace, if it is a peace without justice. Justice has to prevail, because if it does not, we encourage everyone else to think,

“Whatever we do, we will get away with it next time, because they do not have the courage to pursue the justice angle of peace.” We know that, and we have known that over the past 60 or 70 years. It is what the Nuremberg trials were all about, where the idea was for the first time to pursue the aggressors. That stands in the hon. Gentleman’s case. I served in Northern Ireland, as he knows, and I lost good friends. I still wonder what happened to them, even to this day. Justice for Ukraine will take a long while, and I accept that.

The most interesting thing about the sanctions is that some of the LNG shipments were done by UK firms. I see that Shell was involved, which made it peculiar why we did not step in earlier.

I will bring my speech to a close, because I know that others wish to speak. The problem is that there is an incorrect view and assumption about the importance of defending Ukraine that has got lost in the back-and-forth row that took place over the past week and a half. The idea that just meeting Putin’s demand for territory that he may or may not have at the moment will somehow appease him and satisfy his requirements is completely wrong. I note that in the telephone call between President Trump and Putin, that is what President Trump said was important. The truth is that Putin is an ex-KGB man. Once KGB, always KGB. He is not interested in territory; he is interested in sovereignty, which is a key difference.

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his powerful speech. I am originally from West Germany, as most people know, and I remind everybody that I would not be here without the US presence in Germany. Is it not a shame that, despite living memory, people seem to have forgotten the powerful status of the US in western Europe? We need to remind the American President of that.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: I think President Trump is being reminded of that now in America, because arguments are taking place about this issue, but I do not think that he has forgotten. What we have to get lined up is the real nature of what Putin wants. It is not territory, but sovereignty. We know that he has always wanted to recreate the full borders of the old Soviet Union in a greater Russia. The war with Ukraine is not about getting 20% of its territory. For him, it is about getting all of Ukraine. If we have a peace deal that is not stable, he will be back. He will build up his armed forces, which he can do quite quickly now with the support of countries like North Korea, and he will be back in double-quick time.

Who is to say that Ukraine will be in any fit state to be able to defend itself? It was only able to defend itself because in the period between the seizure of Crimea in 2014 and the war, we and the Americans set out about training and arming Ukrainian troops in a way that made them much better when the Russians came in the next time round, which is why they did not take Kyiv and were driven back. That was because we had got ahead of the game with the Ukrainians, who had much better armed forces than they did when Russia walked into Crimea.

The reality for us is that there need to be guarantees on anything that happens, and I do not think that we can separate the Americans from the guarantees. As the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) says, America

is the ultimate guarantor at the end of the day. By the way, I agree with the Americans that the west has ridden on the coat tails of the United States for far too long—we have been guilty of that. We have lived a life that has allowed us to say, “We’ll claim that defence spending is this amount,” but it is not really. That is one of the reasons why President Trump is angry about the idea that the Americans should be expected to take on this matter, so we have to step up.

I am pleased that the Prime Minister has started the process, and I wish him all the best in Washington, but increased defence spending absolutely has to happen. The last time we spoke, I pointed out to him that we faced the greatest threat that we have ever faced when the Soviet Union put SS-20 missiles in Europe. It was Reagan and Thatcher, supported by Helmut Kohl and others, who helped lead western Europe to take the tough decision to put Pershing and cruise missiles in order to counter the threat. That was a brave decision by the leadership, and it centred on the UK and the US. The Prime Minister needs to remind President Trump that when the UK and the US come together for a just cause, the world is a safer place. When we are divided, it is less safe—I do not care what anybody else says. That relationship is critical to peace and justice in the world, and I hope that he succeeds in achieving that.

We know that President Putin is keen only on sovereignty, and the reality is that this is critical for our understanding of what peace would amount to. We must not lose sight of the fact that Ukraine is important. It is important to the Americans in a way that sometimes I do not think they fully understand. I spoke earlier about the road to Taiwan and the threats to Taiwan. The war in Ukraine has damaged the global economy, at a cost of about \$1 trillion, but any seizure of Taiwan would cost the economy nearer \$10 trillion. To those who say, “Why should we in this country be worried about Taiwan?”, I say that 72% of everything produced in the world today is made in the area around Taiwan. People cannot tell me that Taiwan is not as important as Kent is to the United Kingdom—it is exactly the same.

Why does the road to Taiwan run through Ukraine? It is because if we fail Ukraine and it gets a terrible deal, China will look at the situation and say, “Do you know what? They’re never going to step in here, because it’s too far away. They won’t do it—they never do. They fell out of Afghanistan. They didn’t do anything when Crimea was taken. They’ve given in completely over Ukraine, and they will do the same over Taiwan.” That is why the road goes to Taiwan, and we will be left behind, because we will not have taken the right decision.

I hope the Prime Minister reminds President Trump that if we fail on Ukraine, it will open up the world again to the rule of totalitarian states, which will come again and again. As Churchill said, the “bitter cup...will be proffered to us”

again and again. Every time we fail, and every time we do not stand up for those who struggle for freedom, democracy or justice, they will take that and move on. We have learned this lesson so many times, but we seem to forget it and have to learn it again.

We must stand with the brave Ukrainian men and women, who have lost so much and are going to lose even more. If we are not with them and do not find a way for Ukraine to remain a free nation of free people

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

and of choice, we are not worth the thousands of years of experience that we have gained from the fights that we have put up previously. All will become naught, because totalitarianism will rule the day.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani): Order. As you can see, quite a few people wish to contribute, so I will have to put in place a time limit of five minutes to begin with.

12.46 pm

Linsey Farnsworth (Amber Valley) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and his team for securing this important debate. I know that he has long been a champion of Ukraine's fight against Russia.

Members on both sides of the House have loudly supported the Ukrainian cause and have made excellent contributions in debates prior to today, and I look forward to hearing their contributions in this debate. I know that many Members have recently returned from the country and have seen at first hand the horror that has been inflicted on the Ukrainian people. Having visited the country in September, I vividly remember my experience. The cardiology hospital in Kyiv had been hit while children were on the operating table. I visited the cellar of a school in Chernihiv oblast, where over 300 villagers, including women and children, were rounded up and held captive in March 2022. Valery, a former captive held at the school, will forever be haunted by what he saw and experienced. Over 100 people were stuffed into a room so crowded that people were gasping for air, including a baby who was less than two months old. I asked Valery how he had the strength to go back there and revisit the site with us. He said that the story had to be told, and that people needed to understand the Russian soldiers' lack of humanity. That school will forever be a marker of the Russians' brief occupation of the village.

It is remarkable that three years after the start of the full-scale invasion, civilians can still sit in cafés and restaurants in Ukrainian cities, where life appears normal—that is, until the air raid siren sounds. It is a haunting reminder that the Ukrainians are sacrificing a great deal not just for themselves but for us, our values and our freedoms.

Regardless of whether it is our predecessors standing with Churchill or the creation of NATO under the stewardship of Ernest Bevin, the Labour party's record on defence has stood the test of time. I am so proud to live in a country that has stood up and stood tall in the face of Russian tyranny and imperialism—not only through supporting the Ukrainian military, but through our welcoming those fleeing the war. The United Kingdom has welcomed over 218,000 people who fled the conflict through the Ukraine family scheme and the Homes for Ukraine sponsorship scheme. In the east midlands, we have taken in 8,739 Ukrainians, with my local authority of Amber Valley welcoming nearly 250.

I do not want to spend more time restating the words and sentiments of those across this House who are supporting Ukraine. I am sure that many on the frontlines are not paying much attention to our platitudes and tributes while waves of Russian assaults pummel them,

and nor will those in cities sheltering from what, only a few days ago, was the largest drone attack of the war be comforted by words alone. No matter how beautiful our rhetoric, Ukrainians do not sleep any better at night for those words.

I welcome the decision to bring forward the 2.5% spending commitment to 2027, and this money cannot come soon enough for the people I met in Ukraine. I also welcome the further money allocated to our intelligence agencies to protect this country from the various threats Russia poses, including cyber-attacks. I welcome the Government leading the way, whether with the latest round of sanctions announced by the Foreign Secretary on Monday—the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned that—or the Defence Secretary chairing the Ukraine defence contact group at NATO a few weeks ago. There is of course much more that we can do, and I urge the Government to consider how the abducted children, who were also mentioned, can be returned from Russia.

12.51 pm

Dame Caroline Dinenage (Gosport) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for calling this debate. I was very pleased to support his application to the Backbench Business Committee.

Before I start the speech that I have written, I want to say something about the Ukrainian people. No one, least of all Vladimir Putin when he launched his illegal invasion three years ago, understood what they were taking on with the Ukrainian people. With their spirit, ingenuity and incredible ability to innovate and make the most of every single asset at their disposal, they have faced up to a new form of warfare. At the same time, they have faced not only the old school of tanks, trenches and almost hand-to-hand combat but the high tech of drones, digital and modern equipment. It shows beyond doubt—a cautionary tale for others who may be thinking of invading a sovereign nation—how far people will go and how hard they will fight for their friends, neighbours and families, and how desperately they will defend their homeland, independence, language and identity. We should all take a moment to reflect on that, and we should pay tribute to them for their incredible bravery.

I also pay tribute to the British people, who have reacted to this dreadful situation with so much warmth, and of course to the Government. Our Government and the Opposition were united, and we acted very swiftly in the first days of the unprovoked and illegal invasion. Prime Minister Johnson led from the front in his defence of Ukraine, and of the Ukrainians' right to sovereignty and independence. He set the pace for other European countries to follow, and he had the backing of the British people, who care about this. We care about this in my area of Gosport because we have skin in the game. It is an area with a very proud history of serving our armed forces, particularly the Royal Navy.

It was so typical of the generosity of spirit of Gosport people that so many Ukrainians made Gosport their home. I must declare an interest, because one of those homes was, and still is, mine. I saw the Russian tanks rolling into Donbas and towards Kyiv, and I could not stand by and do nothing, so my husband and I joined the Homes for Ukraine scheme. I have never spoken

publicly about that before. Gosport welcomed over 300 Ukrainians to our area, and a few weeks after we signed up to the Homes for Ukraine scheme, my family and I were boosted by two women. They are still with us, and I now refer to them as my Ukrainian wife and my Ukrainian daughter. They and many others have been in the UK for almost three years.

Wera Hobhouse: Many of the refugees that the hon. Lady describes have three-year visas, but those visas are running out. Is she worried, as I am, that the Government need to look at the extension scheme, and ensure that all the Ukrainians we have welcomed have the ability to plan for the long term?

Dame Caroline Dinenage: It is almost as if the hon. Member had read what I wrote on my bit of paper. It is miraculous. I want to know her lottery numbers for next week. She is exactly right. My own Ukrainian family—and I call them family, because they are now part of my family—have made lives for themselves in this country, and they have become an asset to our community.

In the event of a sustainable peace deal, Ukraine will of course want and need its brightest and best to return to rebuild the country, but so many of them simply do not have anything to go back to, such is the devastation that has been wrought by Russia in destroying 167,000 civilian buildings. UNESCO says that almost 500 cultural sites have also been lost as a result of Russia's attempt to erase Ukrainian heritage, and so many of the communities that Ukrainians have fled just will not be the same. They will not have anything to go back to, and they will miss the familiar landmarks, meeting places and, most importantly and most sadly, the people they wanted to go back to.

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): On the point that the hon. Member and the hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) made about visas for Ukrainian refugees, do they recognise that the Government have already extended the visa scheme by 18 months? That decision was made this month, and it has been welcomed at least by the Ukrainian refugees in my constituency.

Dame Caroline Dinenage: Yes, that is very welcome. A lot of people from the Ukrainian community want certainty about what to expect and about the security of the world around them.

To follow on from an earlier comment, we hear a lot about planning for the war, but I want to know a little more about the Government's planning for the peace and working towards a day when many Ukrainians will be able to return to their home country. What about those here under the scheme who have made homes, relationships and jobs here and are contributing to the economies and communities in which they live? Will they be able to stay indefinitely? People are beginning to ask that question, and as much as we understand that Ukraine will want its brightest and best back, there are some who simply do not have anything to go back to.

To conclude, contrary to the messaging coming out of the Munich security conference, there are values that we all share as European countries, which we must now pay to defend. However, we must not just use words; we must show action and we must show solidarity. I suppose I want to give the Minister, who I know cares about this

very deeply, the opportunity to affirm the Government's commitment that, as the geopolitical weathers change, our dedication as a nation—and as a Government and an Opposition—to Ukraine, its incredible and indefatigable people, and their democratically elected President, will never waver.

12.58 pm

Tim Roca (Macclesfield) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for calling this debate. I was proud to support his application. I was with him on the trip to Ukraine a few weeks ago, with that fantastic charity, HopeFull, which he mentioned. If someone had told me a year ago, "A year later you will be stood with the Conservative Sir Iain Duncan Smith in the snow, cooking pizzas, in Ukraine," I would never have believed them. It was a fascinating visit and an important one.

The visit highlighted the cross-party nature of the support for Ukraine that the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage)—I will call her my hon. Friend—has pointed out. It is so important, particularly in comparison with other countries. There is also a role for Back Benchers across the parties to put pressure on our respective Front Benchers to ensure that we work together on this issue into the future.

We are marking the three-year point of this absolutely terrible war, started by Vladimir Putin. It is an illegal war, and one of brutality and barbarism, and a conflict in which Ukraine is literally fighting for its life—for its existence as a free and independent nation state. However, as the first line of the national anthem of Ukraine says:

"The glory and freedom of Ukraine have not yet perished", despite the best efforts of the dictator Vladimir Putin.

We heard earlier about the scale of the war and the destruction it has wrought. We have heard about the hundreds of thousands of deaths of young men and women on all sides of the conflict; the thousands of civilians—women, girls and boys—killed and the many millions injured; and the almost 7 million Ukrainian refugees, and many more internally displaced people. The longer they are away from their home, the less likely it is that they will return. Civilian casualties rose by 30% in the last year of the war. Russia has increased its use of aerial bombs, drones, missiles and loitering munitions.

We heard about the Ukrainian hospital in Kyiv—their version of Great Ormond Street hospital—which has been visited by many hon. Members. What kind of a regime deliberately targets a hospital? Landmines now contaminate 139,000 sq km of Ukraine, posing a real risk to civilians and the future of the country. In the last 12 months, there were 306 attacks on medical facilities and 576 attacks on schools—nearly double the number in the previous year.

We talked about the rules of war not being followed by Vladimir Putin's armed forces. Disgracefully, the UN has recorded an alarming spike in the number of Ukrainian soldiers executed by Russian armed forces. There are credible allegations of at least 81 executed in the past six months. People made reference to Ukrainian prisoners of war who are subjected to appalling crimes—torture, sexual violence, and much, much more.

Then there are the children. Vladimir Putin faces a warrant from the International Criminal Court for abducting thousands of children. The Yale School of

[Tim Roca]

Public Health humanitarian research lab says, conservatively, that there are at least 6,000 children held at camps in Russia at the moment. There has also been the incredible spectre of North Korean troops fighting on this continent for a terrible dictatorship.

I want to talk—very briefly, because time is short—about the security guarantees that Ukraine needs. As the discussion about peace in Ukraine develops, one of my concerns is the way that Vladimir Putin suggests that there should be limits on the Ukrainian armed forces after a peace. The best security guarantee is the one operating at the moment: a well-equipped, well-armed Ukrainian armed force—the brave men and women of Ukraine who have held back Vladimir Putin’s evil army. The first principle in any discussion of security guarantees or peace is “Nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine”. A further principle in those negotiations has to be the need to understand the character of the man we are dealing with. He is a compulsive liar who breaks his word at every opportunity. That is why the guarantees are so incredibly important.

After Munich, and the destabilising comments made by some characters in foreign Governments, it is natural to be cautious in this place. We should be hard-headed, and should talk realistically about what Britain needs to do.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: Does the hon. Gentleman find it ironic that the conference at Munich seemed like the shadow of a previous conference at Munich, at which the Sudetenland was given away, and which made it certain that the second world war would take place? Does he think that we may end up in the same position, if we are not careful?

Tim Roca: I do. One interesting thing to note after Munich and recent discussions is that some of this stuff is not new. The United States has been telling Europe to pay for its own defence and to step up for many, many years. If the commitment to 2%, made in Wales in 2014, had been kept by all the countries that signed up to it, we would have spent another £800 billion on our collective defence since that time. Countries need to step up and ensure that they meet their commitments.

We need to be realistic about our role. We are a leading European partner, a leading member of NATO, and a leading ally of the United States. I worry that in the past two weeks, some people have been very quick to throw out 80 years of important transatlantic alliance, but it is crucial for the security of this country, and the security of our continent.

Wera Hobhouse: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that comment. Does he agree that talking about the end of NATO is a very dangerous way of putting things? We in Europe cannot continue with NATO without the United States in it, and it is important to remind the United States of that.

Tim Roca: I completely agree, and that is why I have been reassured by the Government talking about our having a NATO-first defence policy; the Prime Minister reaffirmed that this week. Given all the drama in the past couple of weeks, it has been reassuring to see the

steady hand and leadership that the Prime Minister, the Defence Secretary and the Government as a whole have shown on these issues. They have reacted calmly and coolly to the challenge that has been posed. Yesterday we saw the whole House give the Prime Minister its good wishes, and offer him good luck with his urgent task of convincing President Trump of the importance of Ukraine to the security of the United States and Europe. There is also the very important link, referred to earlier, with dictatorships across the world; we should not allow the principle of “might is right” to succeed, because then we go down a very dangerous road indeed.

When this country was fighting for its life—there is a dangerous tendency for British politicians to always refer back to that time; I am going to fall into that trap—Harry Hopkins, President Roosevelt’s great personal friend, was here in the UK. He gave a speech in Glasgow, to reassure Churchill in those dark days of December 1940, which he finished with a quote from the Book of Ruth:

“Whither thou goest, I will go and where thou lodgest I will lodge. Thy people shall be my people...’ Even to the end.”

That should be the attitude of Britain, Europe and the United States to Ukraine—solidarity, unyielding support, and remembering that the glory and freedom of Ukraine has not yet perished.

1.5 pm

James MacCleary (Lewes) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing the debate, and for giving me the opportunity to support it.

The third anniversary of Russia’s latest full-scale invasion of Ukraine is a point at which we must all reflect not just on the war, but on what is at stake for all of us. Last week, I attended a gathering in my constituency, where I met Ukrainians who, I am happy to say, have found a home in Lewes and across Sussex. Many of them arrived in the UK fleeing war, but they have done far more than rebuild their life. They have formed support networks, kept Ukrainian culture alive—their singing is really beautiful— and sent aid back home, including Christmas presents for children in Ukrainian hospitals, children whose lives have been shattered by Russian bombs.

I often think of the children still in Ukraine, children just like mine. Three years ago, they would have gone to school in the morning, come home and played with their friends and siblings, had a bit of dinner and gone to bed, only to be woken up in the night by air raid sirens and their parents rushing them to underground bomb shelters, where they will have listened to Russian missiles smash into their homes above their heads. That is the reality of this war for innocent people—families and children whose only crime was living in a country that Putin decided to target. As we can all see, Ukrainian resistance has been nothing short of heroic. For three years, against the odds, the Ukrainian people have proudly stood their ground, fighting not just for their own freedom, but for the kind of world we all want to live in.

Britain must be clear: we stand with Ukraine. From day one, the UK has not only provided military aid and training, but put economic pressure on Russia. British families have opened their homes to Ukrainian refugees. Today, however, the west’s commitment is being tested in ways I never thought I would witness.

With President Trump peddling Russian propaganda directly from the White House, the future of US support is uncertain. Let me be clear: if America wavers, then Britain and Europe must step up. That entails action, not just words. Ukraine must have the necessary weapons, economic support and long-term investment to not only survive, but win. That means going even further, defrosting and seizing the billions in frozen Russian assets stashed in London, Paris, Berlin and elsewhere, and converting them into a financial lifeline for Ukraine.

The threat is not limited to Ukraine. The right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green mentioned Taiwan and how heavily that part of the world is affected by this situation, but I draw attention to Russia's hybrid warfare closer to home. It is targeting and destabilising countries such as Georgia, Moldova, Romania and Belarus. Kremlin-backed elites such as Belarus dictator Aleksandr Lukashenko and Georgian oligarch Bidzina Ivanishvili are working to undermine democracy and pull their countries back into Moscow's orbit. Britain cannot allow Putin's cronies to operate unchecked. We must follow the US and the European Parliament in sanctioning those enabling his war machine.

If Putin is allowed to win in Ukraine, he will not stop there. He will redraw Europe's borders by force, and other tyrants will be watching. This is not just about defending Ukraine's sovereignty; it is about defending the liberal, rules-based international order that safeguards us all, an order our nation helped to build to constrain great powers from exploiting the less powerful by, for instance, extracting valuable raw materials at the point of a gun. Some say Britain should step back, abandon our allies and retreat from global leadership, but history will judge the choices we make now. Do we appease aggression, or do we stand firm in the face of tyranny? As previously mentioned, we all wish the Prime Minister well in his discussions on these issues with the US President today. There is no middle ground: either we let Putin tighten his grip on Europe, or we push back.

Looking to the future, any peace deal must be just that, and not a temporary ceasefire that allows Putin's forces to rest, rearm and go again. It must be backed with real security guarantees and clearly state that Russia started this war, and that it bears responsibility for the consequences. Some speak about picking sides in the new geopolitical landscape, but there is only one side that the UK can back: the side of freedom, the rule of law and the liberal international order—the side that reflects the values of this country and, I believe, this House.

So, as I said, there is no middle ground: either we let Putin tighten his grip on Europe, or we push back. We must push back by arming Ukraine, crippling Russia's war economy and standing unwavering in our commitment to Ukraine's victory, because its fight is our fight, too. This is a battle for freedom and justice, and a battle we cannot afford to lose.

1.10 pm

Johanna Baxter (Paisley and Renfrewshire South) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for bringing forward this debate. I am happy to support it.

Like some colleagues in the Chamber, I spent Sunday evening in an underground bomb shelter in Kyiv as Russia launched a massive drone attack on the city and

many others across Ukraine. While it was a terrifying experience, I was proud to join the UK's cross-party delegation to Ukraine to mark the third anniversary of Putin's illegal invasion. It is, of course, a grim milestone in a conflict that has claimed the lives of thousands of innocent Ukrainian civilians and displaced many, many more.

As the only female MP on the delegation, it would be remiss of me not to tell the House about the vital role that Ukrainian women are playing in this conflict. As James Brown once said, it's a man's world, but it would be nothing without a woman. Strength and bravery take many forms, and Ukrainian women have shown extraordinary resilience in not just defending Ukraine against Russian aggression, but rebuilding a nation that refuses to be broken.

As the House will know, when Russian forces invaded Ukraine on 24 February 2022, President Zelensky ordered that all able-bodied men aged 18 to 60 were to remain in the country to bolster Ukraine's defences, but Ukrainian women also stepped up. Today, more than 50,000 women are signed up to the Ukrainian army. One in 10 of those women holds a senior position, and more than 4,000 are engaged directly in frontline combat. This week, I had the pleasure of meeting some of the women who have served on the frontline. There was no mandatory conscription for Ukrainian women, meaning that every single woman who has signed up has done so voluntarily, driven by their immovable resolve to defend their home.

However, women are also playing a vital role off the battlefield, and have been vital in sustaining the economy against Putin's war machine. Ukraine has changed the law so that women can fill labour gaps in mining, transportation, logistics and agriculture, ensuring those critical sectors continue to function in the face of bombardment and destruction from Putin's forces. Today, one in every two new businesses started in Ukraine is started by a woman. I met women this week who are camped out in drone factories, making the kit that is being sent to the frontline. Ukrainian women are doing all this while many of them have lost their fathers, brothers and husbands.

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): The hon. Lady makes a very powerful point. There are times in this place when it is very difficult to keep one's composure when speaking—she is doing a fantastic job. All our hearts go out to those Ukrainian people, and they certainly deserve all our support.

Johanna Baxter: I thank the right hon. Lady for her intervention.

While those Ukrainian women are fighting and sustaining their country, they are also the mothers to the 19,546 children who have been kidnapped by Russia. I want to tell the House why the fourth point of President Zelensky's peace formula is so vital to ensuring a just end to this war. When Russian forces invaded the eastern oblasts in Ukraine, they deported and forcibly removed children from Ukraine to Russia. This is genocide in international law as we know it. In one case, a child only eight months old was taken by Russian forces. His new name and date of birth are unknown. Russia has consistently denied the existence of this child and thousands of others. Some of these children end up in Russia's youth military, conscripted to fight a war against the country they

[Johanna Baxter]

were born in. This is a war crime. Before any ceasefire, the 19,546 stolen children of Ukraine must be returned home.

Talk of tanks, bullets, drones and machine guns is unlikely to move the minds of people who live so far from Ukraine. It is the stories of the women who are playing an essential role in this war that will move those minds—it is their story, their fight for survival and their fight for the values of democracy that we in this House hold so dear, and must support with all our might. Slava Ukraini.

1.16 pm

Dr Neil Shastri-Hurst (Solihull West and Shirley) (Con): I start by congratulating my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this important debate, and saluting him for the incredible work he has done in leading on this issue. As always, it is hugely heartening to see so many colleagues from across the House in the Chamber. It serves as a timely reminder of the united approach that we have taken on this issue and of our resolute and undiminished support for the Ukrainian people. In my constituency, we have welcomed many Ukrainian families, and I am always touched and moved by their stories of resilience in the face of the greatest hardship.

Many Members have spoken before me—not just in this debate, but through the course of the week—about the importance of the Government's welcome announcement of increased defence spending and the need for our allies also to step up to the plate. While I do not intend to repeat those arguments today, I will add that we alone do not determine our defence spending: it is our enemies too, but it is also our allies. With the United States announcing a potential step back from their support for Ukraine, it is clear that we as a nation have an overriding obligation not only to Ukraine but to our citizens and the wider world to step up and keep Putin's war machine at bay. If we fail to do so, we will be opening the gates to totalitarian regimes across the world. The reality is that the United Kingdom has armed forces that are fit for peace. However, over the past eight months or so, we have entered a much more dangerous arena, and we need to be ready for any outcome.

In the time available to me, I want to raise two further points. First, I reiterate the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green on the increasingly pressing need to release the \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets to aid the Ukrainian Government in the rebuilding of their country. Secondly, I want to pick up on my right hon. Friend's comments about what we can and must learn as an armed forces from this conflict and from the heroic efforts of the Ukrainian military, with many making the ultimate sacrifice in defence of the sovereignty of their country.

The war has shown a clear shift in the nature of warfare and in the nature of each serving person's working realities. War is now in a much more hybrid state, fought not only in traditional land and maritime realms, but back in bases in remote locations, yet we still follow traditional medical guidelines setting out who can serve and who does not have the opportunity to do so. This where I feel we can learn from Ukraine, which, very early on in the conflict, amended and

adjusted many of the medical requirements for its serving personnel. In our military, there is often a mindset of "soldier first", which may well exempt someone who has suffered a knee injury while playing sport at school, anyone with Raynaud's phenomenon, for example, or anyone wearing glasses over a certain prescription.

Rather than making a generic medical exemption list for the whole force, I invite the Minister at least to consider tailoring the medical requirements to the position being applied for. For example, what are the chances of a person's glasses being blown off if they are operating from a chair in a drone centre hundreds of miles away? What is the reality of an intelligence officer in a remote location looking at satellite information losing the feeling in their fingers due to the cold because of Raynaud's phenomenon? What are the chances of a Royal Navy dental officer not being able to complete a check-up because of pain in his knee? We need to be much more flexible. Although I accept that there is a certain degree of hyperbole in my argument, the point I am making is a serious one. If we are to turn the tide on our recruitment policy and difficulties in this country, we need to tailor the medical requirements to the specific role.

We must become more versatile and adaptive as a fighting force—like our friends in Ukraine. As a country, we are often guilty of preparing for the war that we have had, rather than the war that we will face in the future. As we reflect on the three years since Putin's illegal invasion, I say to the Government that we should not waste any more time or waste what we have learned at the cost of so many thousand Ukrainian lives.

1.21 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham Hodge Hill and Solihull North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) on securing this debate and all those who have spoken today.

It was Václav Havel who said that the best defence against tyranny is to live in truth. On this third anniversary, we have the opportunity to repeat some truths to this House—that Ukraine is a democracy, that democracies need defending, and that the best way to defend democracies is for democratic nations to come together with a unity of purpose around our values. We should not have to remind the world that Ukraine is a democracy, but some have impugned that. We in this House know that, at times, all democracies face challenges. Let us be honest, this country once had to suspend elections during the height of world war two. Gosh, I am even old enough to remember when thousands of people invaded the United States Congress because they wanted to overturn a democratic election and nullify the result and the election of President Biden.

Let us send a clear message from this House that we do not regard President Zelensky as a dictator. We regard him as a hero of democracy, and we in the west should have his back. We must also remember that, at times, democracies will need defending, especially against dictators—especially when it comes to Russia. President Zelensky is on the frontline of an effort to re-contain Russia on behalf of us all. Russia is a country that invades its neighbours time and time again. It has been invading its neighbours since the days of Ivan the Terrible. It has invaded its neighbours on eight different occasions since 1945—on average, that is once every decade since the end of the second world war.

Faced with that threat, why on earth would we make concessions now? Some 700,000 people have been lost in this war in Russia. Russia now faces a NATO that is bigger and stronger. Russia will run out of T-80 tanks in April, and it has lost more artillery systems in the past year than in the previous two years put together. Russia, at the height of the war, controlled 19.6% of Ukrainian territory; today, it controls 19.2%. In the face of that weakness, why on earth would we make concessions now to those who want to make Russia great again? We should confront them with strength, not weakness, because that is how peace is secured.

Finally, it is vital for us across the west to unite around our values, to celebrate those values and not to attack each other. I am worried that what began as political improvisation in the United States has now become, under the new President, a political project. I am worried that some of the noises that I hear sound like the report that Thucydides made of the Athenian threat all those centuries ago, which is that the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must. In this country, we know how that story ends. When we talk about the rules-based order, we do not mean the rules of the poker table, or even the rules that we set out at the end of world war two. We believe not simply in a rules-based order, but in a rights-based order. The rights that ensure our freedom were enshrined in the UN's universal declaration of human rights at the end of world war two and in the Council of Europe's European convention on human rights, co-authored by this country, based on Churchill's great vision of a great charter. Those are the rights that we should be celebrating, because they mean freedom for all of us.

Those rights, values and freedoms must be defended with strength, so the Prime Minister's decision to increase defence spending was right. This House will need reassurance that that money can be well spent, but, crucially, given the cuts that are to be made to the aid budget, we must think hard, creatively and quickly about how we now lead a great multilateral effort to increase the amount of aid spending around the world. We need to think in this 80th anniversary of the Bretton Woods institutions about how we reinvent the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund for new times, so that they are bigger and better in the world to come. That is the way that we become evangelists for the rights that are now being defended so valiantly by Ukrainian forces on the continent of Europe.

1.26 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing this important debate. I recognise that, quite rightly, the debate has focused on our responsibility to support Ukraine's war effort against Putin's unprovoked and illegal attack in Ukraine, but I wish to talk about our continued commitment to Ukrainians here, as the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) and my hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) both mentioned.

Since the start of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, more than 218,000 Ukrainians have arrived in the UK under the Ukraine family and sponsorship schemes. I am incredibly proud of my constituency of Chichester, which has taken more Ukrainian refugees than any other city in this country, and those refugees have now become a valued part of our community. Now more

than ever, we must stand firmly with our Ukrainian friends, both in defending their sovereign territory and in ensuring that those who are here can live safely and comfortably.

The original visa scheme, as the Minister will know, was for three years, and with the three-year anniversary being marked this week, many visas are now expiring. The Government have asked Ukrainians to apply for the Ukraine permission extension scheme, which will extend their visa for a further 18 months. However, they are allowed to apply for that extension scheme only when their visa has 28 days or fewer left on it. This is causing myriad difficulties for that community, including in their ability to renew employment contracts, extend leases or set up new leases on rented accommodation, or commit to education opportunities.

I had the opportunity to visit Bishop Luffa school in Chichester last month, and met a group of Ukrainian students, who have not only become well-liked by staff and students, but have excelled in their studies and are expected to finish their A-levels with high grades across the board in subjects such as mathematics and the sciences. Those students are the doctors and the scientists of the future, yet there is no clear direction from the Department for Education on how they should pursue higher education—be it via the same routes as their UK counterparts with whom they have studied, as refugees, or as international students. I have raised this matter with the Secretary of State for Education and I hope that there will be clearer guidance in the near future for students who are desperate to study in the UK.

Sarah Dyke (Glastonbury and Somerton) (LD): I have spoken to many Ukrainian families who have made their homes in Glastonbury and Somerton after fleeing Russian aggression in Ukraine. Many of them are concerned about the decision to exclude time spent in the UK under the long residence route, which is different from other schemes and could be subject to costly legal challenges. Does my hon. Friend share my concerns about this?

Jess Brown-Fuller: Absolutely, I share my hon. Friend's concerns about the fact that the time spent here is not counting towards the right to remain or settled status. As the hon. Member for Gosport mentioned, these families have found homes and built communities here in the UK, and they just want to know either way what will happen to them in the future.

The young people I was speaking about are often cared for by one parent or by grandparents, while their other family members defend Ukraine's sovereignty. Some families have reported that estate agents are requesting from these single-parent Ukrainian families a six-month up-front rental deposit. That is untenable across the country, but especially in areas such as Chichester, where the average one-bedroom flat is £1,200 a month. Employers are also asking for proof of visa status, which is causing families additional stress when they are waiting for a visa decision, sometimes just days before their visa expires. For those Ukrainians on zero-hours contracts, it is directly impacting their ability to earn money to contribute to UK society and provide a safe home for them and their dependants.

If the Ukrainians were given a 90-day window before their visas expired, as originally proposed by the Home Office, rather than the very short timeframe they are

[Jess Brown-Fuller]

being given, the situation could be vastly improved. I thank Opora, the UK charity supporting Ukrainians here in the UK, for all the support that it is giving those families who are navigating what can often be a complicated, convoluted and long process of reapplying for these schemes, and for taking the time to brief me properly on the situation that these families find themselves in.

Today's debate will rightly be dominated by what we can do for Ukraine and our steadfast support across the house, but I hope that the Minister is working closely with his Home Office colleagues so that, while we support the brave Ukrainians who are heroically defending their country, we can also continue to support the community of Ukrainians here in the UK.

1.31 pm

Ms Marie Rimmer (St Helens South and Whiston) (Lab): Yesterday I read through a speech I made three years ago, in which I said:

"Ukrainians and President Zelensky have displayed the highest level of bravery in the face of brutal Russian aggression. In the eyes of Vladimir Putin, Ukrainians have made an unforgivable choice: they decided to be an independent and democratic country. Like all dictators, Putin is terrified of losing power"—that did not fit with this plan of a great Russia again. My speech continued:

"Ukrainians have made their choice. They want to be a European country. They want to become a member of NATO. They want to be free to make their own choices. Make no mistake, Ukrainians are fighting this war on behalf of all of us who are part of the free and democratic world."

I then said:

"We must support them as if the future of our country and our way of life depends on it, because quite frankly, it does."—[*Official Report*, 15 March 2022; Vol. 710, c. 833-834.]

The world is watching the conflict. The dictators of the world have become emboldened over the past decade, in China, Russia, Iran and North Korea. Russia will push further, with Moldova seemingly next.

My speech went on to urge more action, as Ukraine was asking for help, and each day decisions were being deliberated. That should have been done much more quickly. As was said earlier, we are not fighting this properly. The world is not together. It is a big issue—it is not just a fight between two countries. It is Russia. It is Putin. He is an evil man. As the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) said, he is KGB. I thank the right hon. Member for his wonderful opening speech. Putin is inhuman.

North Korea is involved in this. China, Iran and North Korea are all working together on this. It has been planned. I agree entirely with what was said earlier. I was with some North Koreans here on Tuesday night. They are fighting—they have 100,000 at Russia's disposal in Ukraine. When they are killed or maimed, their faces and hands are burned off so that they cannot be recognised as North Koreans. That is how evil Putin is.

In 2014, Putin took Crimea without any consequences. He orchestrated the bombings that resulted in the deaths of 300 of his own people, to start a war to take power. He had his political rivals shot for opposing war. He approved poisoning on British soil, resulting in the death of a British citizen. He pre-recorded his declaration of war on Ukraine, after which he pretended to be open to diplomacy. Putin will not stop. He cannot be appeased.

I understand why NATO could not get directly involved yet, short of that, we should have been doing absolutely everything at a much speedier pace. I do not point a finger of blame at anyone, but we are not looking at this as seriously as we should. This is as much a calamity as 1945. Last week, the world was shocked. To quote Will Hutton in *The Observer* on Sunday:

"The spilled Ukrainian blood counted for nothing" as the elected president of the United States openly sided with Russia

"to achieve a peace that can only reward it for its unilateral aggression. As profoundly, the US president has launched a new era in which might is right, 'strong' men carve up the globe, and international law and multilateral institutions are eviscerated. Nor, as the former head of MI6 Alex Younger told BBC's *Newsnight*, is there any going back."

Our thoughts and support are with our Prime Minister, especially today. We wish him every success in his discussions later today. We all have to step up and be absolutely united. We have to grow up, if I may say so. We are talking about things, but we should be looking at other things now. We are at war. It is so very important for the world.

1.36 pm

Richard Tice (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): We in Reform stand united with the whole House in support of Ukraine and all brave Ukrainians against the monstrous tyranny of that most evil villain, Putin.

Melanie Ward: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Richard Tice: I have not even warmed up! I will make a little more progress.

Just over 13 months ago, I made a donation to acquire a 4x4 pick-up truck and to fill it with first aid supplies, and I drove it with other volunteers to Ukraine to give it to those brave soldiers on the frontline. I remember meeting the extraordinary technicians who were making the drones, including brilliant, bright children who were helping to develop new drone technology. Tragically, I stood in a cemetery and watched mums weep over the graves of their sons. That cemetery has almost doubled in size in just 12 months.

The maxim of peace through strength has stood the test of time—in history, today and in future. That is why in our contract at the election we had 2.5% of GDP on defence spending within three years, and 3% within six years. That is why we supported the Prime Minister earlier this week when he made those same commitments. I hope that that 3% will be a firm commitment within five or six years.

Peace through strength is vital. As others have said, we all want peace, not least the brave Ukrainians. It must be right to try for a peace deal, however difficult. Most wars and conflicts end up in some form of negotiation—however difficult, tough or tense.

Melanie Ward: Given how the hon. Gentleman started his speech, does he agree with the leader of his party, the hon. Member for Clacton (Nigel Farage), who is probably not in Clacton right now, who said in 2014 that Vladimir Putin was the global leader he most admired?

Richard Tice: Putin is a vile dictator. We all know that. My leader has also confirmed that Putin is the aggressor in this war. I was just moving on, in the time allotted, to the issue of how we get to a durable peace.

James Cartledge (South Suffolk) (Con): I respect the hon. Gentleman's personal position, but can he explain why the leader of his party thought that the priority for President Zelensky should be to set a timetable for elections, given that Winston Churchill, when facing a dictator, did not hold elections because we were under martial law?

Richard Tice: The point about elections is a good one, because any peace deal can only work if it has the support and involvement of all Ukrainians. In the second world war, we had elections in the summer of 1945, before the war had ended, which was completely appropriate then.

At some point the Ukrainians will need to be involved in supporting a peace deal, if we get there. A peace deal, however, is only durable—it only works—if it endures. That means we need the security guarantees to ensure that the aggressor will never, ever attack again. It is those security guarantees that we must focus on, all be involved in and ensure that they are a strong, robust deterrent. If we get those security guarantees right, hopefully Putin and Russia will never try such a monstrous activity and invasion ever again.

1.40 pm

David Burton-Sampson (Southend West and Leigh) (Lab): I, too, like many hon. Friends and Members across the House, returned from Ukraine only last night, after the monstrous 24-hour journey. I am mentally and physically exhausted after the experiences, and I cannot sum up in five minutes what I experienced—I could talk about it for days, really.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds Central and Headingley (Alex Sobel) and the UK Friends of Ukraine and B4NZ—Bankers for Net Zero—for the visit they organised. It was truly fantastic to be there, but also deeply emotional. I have nothing but respect and admiration for the Ukrainian people; for their stoicism and resolve in getting through this illegal war. They just keep functioning as though it is normal life. The buildings get bombed but they do not just leave them crumbled on the ground; they rebuild them. The soldiers injured on the frontline are in hospital, but telling us they want to get back there as soon as possible. Those are the ingredients for a country that is set to take on Putin and set to win this war.

I experienced two nights in an air raid shelter. The first night was with my hon. Friends. It was a little bit scary, but there was a sense of camaraderie between everyone there. I stayed on an extra night because I was heading up to Chernihiv the following day to meet the people up there. That night I was in the shelter alone, during which there was a lot of time to reflect, including on what was going on outside. The more the night went on, the more fearful I became, especially when I heard that there were not just drones but missiles potentially flying around above my head. The Ukrainians go through that every night and have been for three years. A massive mental health and post-traumatic stress disorder issue is developing among Ukrainian citizens, and we need to be there and ready to support them when they come through the conflict. It will be a really big issue for the country.

Up in Chernihiv, I had a chance to meet people who were on the frontline with Belarus and Russia. Every single day, they are impacted by the war in ways that we

cannot imagine. I met the governor, who had some statistics prepared in a presentation of how many buildings have been destroyed this year, how many people have been injured and how many have been killed. He said to me, "Oh, I am sorry, that statistic is wrong, because another building was destroyed this morning and another three people were killed." It is constantly changing.

The greatest message I got from Ukraine and its people is that they are incredibly grateful for the support that the United Kingdom has given them since day one and continues to give them today. They see us as the leader in the support to get them through this conflict, and that came from so many Ukrainians.

This war is real. I witnessed that for myself, as did my hon. Friends, with bombed out buildings everywhere and air raids taking place. That was really brought home to me on the day in Lviv, which is not massively impacted as it is close to the western border with Europe, but where there is a cemetery full of soldiers just from the city. We walked to the back of that cemetery, where there were three graves that had been filled, with three people from Lviv buried that morning. There were three further open graves that three more men from Lviv were about to go into that afternoon. That is the reality of this war, and that is why we have to continue to stand shoulder to shoulder with the Ukrainian people. They are relying on us. We have to be stoic. Slava Ukraini.

1.45 pm

Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): I want to start by paying tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for providing us with this platform to show the House at its best, coming together in the face of Russian aggression in Ukraine. It is a chance for us to stand together in solidarity.

Three years ago, the world watched in horror as Russian forces launched their brutal, full-scale illegal invasion of Ukraine. The images of tanks rolling across the border and the shelling of innocent civilians will remain seared into our minds forever. Yet, despite the Kremlin's relentless aggression, the Ukrainian people have shown extraordinary courage, determination and resilience, and we have shared some of those stories in here today. They continue to fight not just for their homeland, but for the principles that underpin our own security here: democracy, sovereignty and the rule of law.

I have had the privilege of visiting Ukraine twice, first in 2021 during my time as a Foreign Minister and again in 2023. Each visit left a very deep impression on me. In 2021, I had the honour of standing alongside Ukrainian leaders at the launch of the Crimea Platform, reaffirming the UK's commitment to Ukraine's sovereignty. When I returned in 2023 with the Westminster Foundation for Democracy, of which I am a board member—I refer to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests—the contrast was stark. I met parliamentarians, civil society leaders and local officials, many of whom had lost loved ones in the conflict. Their resilience was, and still is, unwavering; their determination is undimmed. It is that spirit of theirs that must continue to guide us in this place in our response.

The UK has led the way in supporting Ukraine. The previous Conservative Government were among the first to provide advanced weaponry, including anti-tank

[Wendy Morton]

missiles, long-range precision weapons and air defence systems. We played a key role in training Ukrainian troops and co-ordinating international military aid, so I welcome the Government's commitment to £3 billion in annual military aid until the decade's end. However, that support must continue to ensure Ukraine has the weapons and the strategic backing needed to defeat Russian aggression.

Let us be clear: this is not just about helping Ukraine. This is about our own national security. Russia's actions represent the most blatant breach of sovereignty and territorial integrity seen in Europe since the second world war. If we falter in the face of that aggression, we invite further instability. We know that Putin's ambitions do not stop at Ukraine's borders. The threat that he poses to NATO allies, including in the Baltic region, is real and growing. That is why I welcome the Government's decision to increase spending on defence to 2.5% of GDP by 2027. That is an important step, albeit overdue, and I commend the Government for recognising, as my party does, that our security requires sustained investment.

The war in Ukraine has demonstrated the power of people-to-people solidarity, as my right hon. Friend for Chingford and Romford West—I hope I got that right. [Interruption.] I am being prompted that it is Chingford and Woodford Green.

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: My hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell) would be upset by that.

Wendy Morton: He would be, actually.

Mr Francois: He is ever present.

Wendy Morton: Always present, isn't he?

The UK's Homes for Ukraine scheme has provided sanctuary to thousands of Ukrainians fleeing war. I pay tribute to the British families who have opened their homes, including those in my constituency, and the communities that have welcomed them with open arms. Their kindness reflects the very best of our country. I ask the Minister whether the Government would consider some sort of recognition scheme or way of thanking those families at the appropriate time for their kindness and generosity.

This week, as we mark this grim anniversary, we must ensure that those displaced by war continue to receive the support they need, both here and in Ukraine. We must remain resolute in holding Russia accountable, and our response must be unwavering, ensuring that we tackle all aspects of Russian aggression. Let's be clear: Ukraine's fight is our fight. If we stand by Ukraine today, we strengthen our own security for the future. If we falter, we embolden aggressors everywhere.

1.50 pm

Peter Lamb (Crawley) (Lab): As Members have said, a number of us were in Ukraine at the end of last week, and four days ago we were sat in a bomb shelter in Kyiv as the Ukrainian military worked to clear the sky of drones. Kyiv is a beautiful European city—one of the great cities of Europe—filled with a freedom-loving, well-educated population that are committed to liberating their country, and it is a place no different from our own. We were there as one of a 16-strong delegation to

the Yalta European strategy conference. Never before in the history of that conference has that city come under bombardment while European parliamentarians were present, so great did Russia consider the risk of killing members of a NATO country. Something has changed, and we all know what it is. We need to wake up.

For most of America's history, the country has been isolationist. After the first world war, it retreated back into isolationism. After the second, it would have done so were it not for the cold war. Since the end of the cold war, September 11 brought George W Bush back into the world, having been elected on a programme of isolationism. All three Democratic Presidents since the end of the cold war have in part retreated from international affairs. That is the default status of America, and we have to wake up to that reality—it is not about a single American President.

This is about the future of Europe. It is about the fact that we no longer can rely on an American security guarantee. Were we living in peaceful times, that would be worrying enough, but the fact is that Europe is at war. The arguments against appeasement have already been well made, and we know that if Ukraine falls, it would be a NATO country next and, in all possibility, a general nuclear war as part of Putin's quest to rebuild the Russian empire.

We must accept the reality that we are at war—a cold war, but a war none the less. Neutral countries do not attack UK infrastructure or test UK airspace and territorial waters. Neutral countries do not release nerve agents into the streets of Salisbury, or openly discuss in the papers, as they are doing now, that the Americans have given them licence to bomb London. Those are the actions of an enemy state. Since the announcement on Tuesday, which I greatly agree with, I have received correspondence from constituents expressing concerns about the cuts to international aid. I want to be frank that many more painful decisions will follow if we are to do what is necessary to ensure the defence of our country against an enemy power.

We must mobilise. With no American security guarantee, the only choice is a European security guarantee, of which the UK must play a central role. For us, this will be a mobilisation not of men and women, for the most part. If we must replace the total manpower of the US military, that number—one million—already exists within the Ukrainian armed forces. Ukraine does not need the people; they are already on Europe's frontlines holding back the enemy. They need our combined economic and intellectual power across the continent dedicated to our collective victory.

Speaking with those in Ukraine, not only politicians, soldiers and analysts, but the everyday residents who we met along our travels, they are determined to go on fighting however long it takes—alone if they must, hand to hand if totally necessary. We cannot allow things to come to that. Three years into the combat, why do Ukrainians still want for bullets and shells? Why do they struggle to access sufficient electronic countermeasures? Why are we training soldiers in batches in the UK and have not set up colleges in Ukraine to train them en masse? If Putin was standing on the French coast, would we have not resolved this in months, if not weeks?

We are at war. It is a war we can and must win. To do that, we must be prepared to do whatever it takes, starting today. Slava Ukraini.

1.55 pm

Olly Glover (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): I pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for his outstanding and comprehensive speech. Many people have died in this war so far, and United Nations figures suggest that at least 12,654 civilians have lost their lives and over 27,000 have been injured, with nearly 147,000 war crimes committed and 167,000 civilian buildings destroyed by Russia since the full-scale invasion began. Of course, the true death toll is likely to be far higher, as Ukraine and international bodies do not have access to Russian-occupied areas of Ukraine or areas on the frontline, most particularly the city of Mariupol, which was largely destroyed in the brutal Russian siege.

This is a tragedy that cannot continue, and yet amid so much darkness, a chink of light is how this war has shown the very best of our nation: our generosity towards Ukraine and how we have welcomed refugees and worked internationally to get co-operation against Russia. In my Oxfordshire constituency of Didcot and Wantage, the Vale of White Horse and South Oxfordshire district councils have gone a long way to welcome and help refugees, and many families have hosted them, enabled by the Homes for Ukraine scheme.

The village of North Moreton, with a population of just 350, has hosted dozens of people, earning significant media coverage for its generosity. Many families have also been hosted in the small village of Brightwell-cum-Sotwell. I want to give an example of the journey faced by one of those families. A mother and her two children, aged 17 and six when they came, had already fled Donetsk in 2014 in the first Russian aggression against Ukraine and then yet again in 2022 to the United Kingdom. The 17-year-old subsequently managed to get a place at the University of Nottingham and has started his studies. The mother took her six-year-old back to Ukraine last April, having missed her husband so much, and their UK host family are still in regular contact with her and her son.

In Didcot, Stanislav of the Help Ukraine Group Support, or HUGS, has collected enormous amounts of clothing, toiletries, tools and many other items and has sent huge pallets over to Ukraine. One place that received them was the Place of Kindness shelter for displaced families in Chernivtsi, which has helped shelter over 2,000 families, 147 orphans and 72 critically ill children. The same organisation collected and donated laptops to the Reading-based Ukrainian School Lastivka to enable children to get online and gain IT literacy.

I want to say a little about why I care so much about the Ukraine war, beyond the obvious reasons. I have a Polish mother, and Poland is a country that has also hugely suffered under Russian oppression in the past and retains a genuine fear of that nation to this day. This war matters to Ukraine and to Europe, but it also matters specifically to us. We hoped that Russia would stop after its 2008 invasion of Georgia—it did not. We hoped that Russia would stop after annexing Crimea in 2014—it did not. We hoped that Russia would stop after years of war in the Donbas—it did not. We hoped that Russia would stop after its brutal bombing of Syria in support of dictator Bashar al-Assad in the late 2010s—it did not. It is important that we learn from that and ensure that any peace we do have does not further embolden Russia.

Where do we go from here? Well, our communities and councils need long-term support to continue hosting refugees and looking after Ukrainians. Many hon. Members have already made eloquent remarks about that. We all want peace, but it has to be on Ukraine's terms. There is so much talk at the moment of peace guarantees. We should remember that there have been such guarantees before—under the 1994 Budapest memorandum, Ukraine gave up its nuclear weapons in return for supposed guarantees of its peace—so we cannot have cheap talk of guarantees now; we need to learn why previous ones did not work. Of course, we need European defence co-operation and investment in our armed forces. Many hon. Members have been optimistic that the United States will not turn permanently away from Europe, but in case that optimism is misplaced, we need to build up our defence forces and co-operate across Europe, using frozen Russian assets, so that we have the high-quality and competent defence force that our continent needs.

This war has brought huge suffering to the people of Ukraine, destroying communities, separating families and orphaning children. However, it has also shown the human spirit of justice, compassion and kindness to be a great unifying force. We must now work with our European allies to secure the freedom and prosperity of Ukraine and our continent.

2.1 pm

Dr Jeevun Sandher (Loughborough) (Lab): Keeping our nation safe and preserving Ukraine for the future means showing Putin that we and our European allies have the resolve and the resources to defeat him. Showing him that we would win any war is the best way to prevent a wider conflict. Winning wars is a matter of resources being converted to fighting forces. We lost the first battles of world war two, but we won by converting our greater resources; Lincoln did the same during the American civil war. So it is now; we must reduce Russian resources and prepare ourselves.

Russia's economy is straining at the seams. Putin's demand for war matériel is outstripping the ability of his economy to supply it; the official inflation rate stands at 10%, and we may possibly be talking about double that; three quarters of Russian firms face staff shortages; Putin is losing tanks three times more quickly than he can replace them; and his national wealth fund has been halved. However, Russia is still out-producing us in shells and fighting forces, and its armed forces will reach 1.5 million personnel. Russia can rebuild, and Putin will rebuild and come back, so we can and must do more to reduce Russia's resources.

First, we must seize central bank assets, rather than allowing Putin to use them to rebuild his fighting forces. Secondly, we must strengthen the oil price cap by making London insurance for foreign ports dependent on the proper verification of attestation documents. Thirdly, we need stronger export controls to stop western goods ending up in Russian tanks. That is what we can do right now.

Deterring Putin and defeating Putin are one and the same. Our economic power is greater: NATO's GDP in Europe is 12 times greater than Putin's in Russia. Converting that economic power into fighting forces is what we must do next. Prosperity means nothing if we do not have the forces to defend it, so, yes, this is about the percentage that we spend on defence, but for Europe as a whole it is also about so much more than that:

[Dr Jeevun Sandher]

long-term orders to build production capacity, securing strategic inputs such as steel, and the ability to scale rapidly if we must.

If we do face war, we must be prepared for it. Fighting a total war—converting an entire nation’s production to maximise fighting forces—is a problem that none of us has ever known, but that could be the economic problem before us: maximising the production of war, guns, tanks, drones. The rough outline of the answer is this: we must figure out national income, decide the maximum portion that can be allocated to war matériel production, and use taxes from those who can most afford them to transfer what is needed to the Government. If demand runs ahead of supply, it will lead to inflation. That means rationing consumption for more investment. Investment will have to go towards war matériel, so capital controls must be in place. We need import controls, and quotas to ensure that inputs such as steel are going towards war matériel. We must prepare for a financial world without lend-lease. Those are the preparations that the Treasury should be making.

We could not foresee the financial crisis or the pandemic, but we can foresee a greater war in Europe. These are the times in which we live. In the darkest days of our struggle against fascism, John Maynard Keynes wrote:

“A reluctance to face the full magnitude of our task and overcome it is a coward’s part. Yet the nation is not in this mood and only asks to be told what is necessary.”

That is where the British people are—a nation that remembers its finest hour—but where are we in this House? Are we preparing for the worst, so that we can prevent it? Are we showing that we will convert our far greater resources in order to protect Europe and ourselves? Are we ready to do what we must? Those are the questions before us.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. Before I call the next speaker, I inform the House that, as I want to get as many Members in as I can, I will immediately bring the time limit on speeches down to four minutes—and it may go lower.

2.6 pm

Chris Coghlan (Dorking and Horley) (LD): I thank the other hon. Members who took part in the visit to Ukraine for their powerful speeches. I share their emotions about the visit.

Last Saturday was particularly emotional for me because I visited a recovery centre for wounded soldiers in Ukraine. I met a soldier called Volodymyr, who had lost both his legs in a drone strike on his vehicle. His comrades had tried to rescue him four times, but each time they were turned back by drone attacks. His tourniquets held and, after nine hours, they eventually got him out. His spirit was unbroken. Hearing his story and seeing his courage was inspiring. We in Parliament and the British armed forces have enormous respect for everything that the Ukrainian armed forces have achieved.

Ukrainians continue to make an enormous sacrifice, yet every Ukrainian I met told me that they do not want Trump’s proposed ceasefire. They want to fight on, because they are fighting to win. Their choice to fight, and our choice to support their fight, is not warmongering;

rather, it is the choice to save lives. Putin breaks ceasefires. He will regroup, attack again and kill even more. The only acceptable terms are those under which Ukraine is victorious. Russia is vulnerable now; in the past six months, it has failed to retake its territory in Kursk, and has suffered over 200,000 casualties to advance just 50 km in eastern Ukraine—4,000 casualties per kilometre—largely because Ukraine is out-producing it in drones.

Ukraine has a clear path to victory. European NATO GDP alone is 10 times the size of Russia’s. However, we are not converting that economic strength into military power. Russia is still spending \$40 billion more annually on the war than Ukraine and her western allies. If we close that gap and exceed that spend by seizing the \$300 billion in frozen Russian assets, Ukraine will win. Trump’s proposed ceasefire would free up 750,000 battle-hardened Russian troops, who could crash into the Baltic states and achieve Putin’s dream of restoring the Soviet Union. It is far better to defeat Russia in Ukraine than end up directly at war. We cannot trust Trump to defend Ukraine, and we cannot trust him to defend us, so we must rearm. With article 5 in doubt, the smaller democracies, including the United Kingdom and Ukraine, must consider a new western alliance that is strong enough for us to defend ourselves together.

It was particularly moving to see Volodymyr because his sacrifice is also on our behalf. In fact, many Ukrainians reminded me that they were comparing their sacrifice to our sacrifice in 1940, when it was our country’s responsibility to defend democracy during our darkest hour. We would do well to remember that legacy as we consider the fate of not just Ukraine but the free world.

2.10 pm

Melanie Ward (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): It is a pleasure to take part in such a well-informed and passionate debate. Three years on from Putin’s illegal invasion of Ukraine, the courage of the Ukrainian people is an inspiration to all of us. I was at the Munich security conference, where it felt like the world changed around us, and significant consequences flow from it. It is clear that any settlement negotiated solely between Trump and Putin would not be a dignified and secure peace for Ukraine. As democratically elected President Zelensky has said, there can be no peace in Ukraine without Ukraine, and no peace in Europe without Europe. European leaders, including our Prime Minister and our Parliament, rightfully stand in full solidarity with him.

With its war machine in full swing, we know that Russia would not stop with Ukraine, given the opportunity, and we must be clear that this is about security for the UK, too. Our Prime Minister is doing vital work in Washington DC today, with that in mind. The dramatic divergence of US and European approaches really matters, and we have to be clear about how many other countries now have an interest in Ukraine. With 12,000 North Korean troops on the frontline, Iranian drones being used and technology being provided by China, we are not just up against Russia in Ukraine; this is about a group of states that are seeking to disrupt an already fractured global order. Securing a just and lasting peace in Ukraine has become the defining test of who our allies are in the world, and how far we are willing to go to defend the values of freedom, democracy and sovereignty that unite us.

The last three years have seen 2,236 attacks on healthcare facilities in Ukraine—the most ever recorded by the World Health Organisation in a conflict. These attacks have increased in the last year and now occur almost daily.

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that when this conflict ends, we must examine closely the potential use of chemical weapons by Vladimir Putin during this conflict, as he has previously used them in Syria and other conflicts? Some of us who were on the trip that has been discussed saw that at first hand in hospitals.

Melanie Ward: I absolutely agree; accountability is essential.

More than a decade ago, Putin tested the tactic of attacking hospitals in his operations in Syria, and the world stood by. The message about impunity spread, and we have subsequently seen the same tactics used by other forces in Gaza and Sudan, and now by Putin in Ukraine. Children should never be targeted in war, and the International Criminal Court has an arrest warrant out for Putin for his deportation of Ukrainian children to Russia.

The stability and prosperity that we have enjoyed in our part of the world for the last 80 years cannot be taken for granted. It was fought for, literally. Democracy does not just happen. We have to want it, value it, work to keep it and protect it, and we have much work to do in that regard. In my previous work in war zones across the world, I often returned home with the sense that conflict and disaster can happen anywhere. That is why we need to support our global institutions now more than ever—institutions such as the United Nations, and the framework of international law put in place after world war two. If we value those achievements, we must uphold and protect them.

Our Government are absolutely right to increase defence spending rapidly. I have seen too many times as a former aid worker what happens when Governments fail in their most basic duty: keeping their country safe. Of course, funding this increase in defence spending through the aid budget is painful, and I say to those in the international development community in this country and elsewhere that I and others feel the pain. Given the scale of external threats, we should all understand that further painful decisions of a different kind may come in the future.

I end by paying tribute to the Ukrainian refugees I met in Kirkcaldy in my constituency a few weeks ago. We owe it to those refugees, and to all who have fought for Ukraine, the UK and Europe's freedom, to now do whatever it takes to defend our shared freedom and security.

2.15 pm

Shockat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing the debate, although I do not know about the image I will have forever of him baking pizzas in the snow.

I rise today in support of the people of Ukraine. They have seen their nation invaded and devastated by bombing, their children kidnapped, their mothers and sisters raped and many of their homes, hospitals and

schools completely destroyed. In Leicester, like in the rest of this country, we have a tradition of standing up for the oppressed, the bullied and the underdog. During world war two, RAF Leicester East—now Leicester airport—was home to the US 82nd Airborne Division, which played a major role in D-day and the liberation of Europe from the Nazis.

Britain has shown its compassion since Russia invaded Ukraine three years ago, as the hon. Member for Gosport (Dame Caroline Dinenage) articulated perfectly. The British people have stood firmly and resolutely beside the Ukrainian people, and one reason for that is our nation's tradition of standing up for the underdog. Russia invaded Ukraine in the belief that Ukraine was weak and vulnerable, and that it would roll over and play dead while Putin took its land, identity and resources. What he discovered was that Ukraine is an underdog that bites back, and the British people have wholeheartedly identified with its bulldog spirit. The Ukrainian people have won our hearts and our loyalty. Their determination to fight on and to protect their homes, their families and their culture has been painful to watch, but any nation that can so effectively fight Putin's military might deserves our unwavering support and the support of our supposed allies.

What may be even harder to watch in the coming months and years is the UK and other European countries having a taste of what many smaller countries have experienced for generations: a new world order where the largest powers decide to redraw the map or steal minerals and other natural resources at the stroke of a pen, with the smaller countries facing menacing threats of much worse if they do not comply; a new world order where those who pardon insurrectionists, who try to overturn the result of a democratic election and who to this day do not accept the result of the 2020 US elections have the cheek to lecture long-standing European countries on the imperfect nature of their democracy. Our country must stand against this new gangster world dominated by a few bros in ivory, or even gold, towers, who trade the world's smaller nations between themselves like property on a Monopoly board.

That is why, despite Ukraine's troubled past, its fight is our fight, and we must work with our European partners to ensure it wins, regardless of the threats from Washington, Moscow, Pyongyang or even Beijing. Who would have thought that the future President of those brave soldiers of the 82nd Airborne Division stationed in Leicester would align himself with today's equivalent fascists, rather than with the nations and people who fought to defeat that particular evil? When Ukraine wins, the new world order that the few gangster bros are trying to establish will fail. That is why supporting Ukraine is so important and why European democracies have to step up and ensure they win.

2.19 pm

Jas Athwal (Ilford South) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing the debate. He spoke powerfully and passionately, and with knowledge.

Imperialism is violent and tragic, dividing communities, separating families, and leading to untold death and destruction. That has been the grim reality for the Ukrainian people for the last three years. I witnessed it at first hand in March 2022, when I travelled to the

[*Jas Athwal*]

Ukrainian border with Romania to personally deliver essential items generously donated by the people of Ilford. I witnessed the haunting scenes of women and children walking across the border into Romania with nothing but the clothes on their backs at 4 am, with the temperature south of minus 10°. I saw that while Putin's aggression has attempted to shatter communities and sow division, the Ukrainian people have remained united, and have shown incredible resilience, strength and perseverance.

Like many of my constituents, I was born in India, and my parents lived most of their lives in India and what is now Pakistan. My family, my neighbours and the people of Ilford South well understand the consequences of imperialism—the scars left by wars of aggression, the theft of agency and denial of self-determination—which is why, when the invasion began, thousands of local people in Ilford stood with Ukraine and donated so much that we had to hire vans and appeal for additional drivers to get the donations to the border.

This week's sombre anniversary is a reminder of the suffering in Ukraine, the tragedy of imperialism and the necessity of taking a stand—of doing what is right, and confronting aggression head-on. On Monday, the Foreign Secretary announced the largest package of sanctions against Russia since 2022. On Tuesday, the Prime Minister announced an unprecedented increase in defence spending, the biggest sustained increase since the end of the cold war. We know the evils of imperialism, and we have learned from history that appeasing aggressors does not work. We will not stand by and allow the continued assault on a democratic nation. This House must remain united in its support for right over wrong. We will always stand with Ukraine.

2.22 pm

Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): It is intolerable that the violence and bloodshed of Putin's illegal invasion, the waking nightmare of Russian aggression wrought upon the Ukrainian people, has worn on for three ghastly years. At the weekend I joined local residents, including the Ukrainian families who have found safe haven in our community, at a service of remembrance in Bishop's Stortford, organised by the Bishop's Stortford Ukrainian Guests Support Group. It was impossible not to be deeply moved as we stood for a minute's silence to remember all those who have lost their lives and suffered throughout this war, united in our shared hope that we will not have to meet again to mark a fourth year of violence in 2026.

I want to pay tribute to all of those in Hertford and Stortford who have shown their support for Ukrainian families in our community, and those who have gathered in recent days to pay tribute to the Ukrainian people in places including Bishop's Stortford and Sawbridgeworth. It is a powerful reminder that in Hertford and Stortford, as across the country, we stand firmly with the Ukrainian people in their time of need.

The Ukrainian people stand resolutely against Russian aggression and brutality, and our support for them must be unwavering. Now is the time to redouble our support for Ukraine. Successive British Governments have led on this, the defining moral issue of our time, and our solidarity with Ukraine bridges political divides

in the House. It is right that the Prime Minister now leads the international call for Ukrainian sovereignty, a long-term, secure future for its people, and a meaningful seat at the table in any future negotiation: nothing about Ukraine without Ukraine.

I welcome the landmark 100-year partnership with Ukraine to deepen security ties and build an enduring partnership for future generations, and the action that the Government are taking to step up and speed up our support for Ukraine at this critical moment. However, in a world that is more insecure and more unstable than at any time in recent decades, it is right that we do more to strengthen our security at home, and right that the Prime Minister has announced an increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by April 2027. I recognise that this decision comes with difficult but necessary sacrifices, and I hope that in the coming years the Government will chart a course towards restoring spending on international aid as soon as fiscal circumstances allow, alongside increased defence spending. Their first priority, however, must be to safeguard the British people at home in the face of what is a once-in-a-generation moment for the world, and I warmly welcome the Prime Minister's announcement this week.

Finally, I wish to put on record my admiration for the spirit and bravery of the Ukrainian people, who have endured so much—and will no doubt endure more—not just since 2022 but over the course of many years of unacceptable Russian aggression. For those Ukrainian families who have found safety in our community, I hope for a future when they are free to choose to return to rebuild homes in a peaceful, secure Ukraine, or, if they wish, to remain in Hertford and Stortford, where they will always, always be welcome.

2.25 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend and thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for setting the scene so well, and for his passion for this subject. In all the years I have known him in the Chamber—he has been here much longer than me—he has always been a stalwart, and I thank him for that. I think we all owe him a debt.

I do not much like bullies, and Putin is clearly a bully. Now that there is a bigger boy in the playground, with President Trump of the United States entering the play, Putin seems prepared to make changes and the rules are changing. Of course that is to be welcomed, but I have a real and abiding concern that memories will be deliberately short. I have a real concern that as we strive for peace—as we should—we will minimise the atrocities that the people of Ukraine have suffered over these three years, and that cannot be allowed to happen.

My mind is immediately drawn to Bucha, and while I have no desire to stir up anger and anguish, we need to ensure that we remember who and what we are dealing with, and why it is essential that our support for Ukraine is as unwavering today, during any brokerage of peace, as it was during those first few days of war. Human Rights Watch researchers who worked in Bucha between 4 and 10 April, just days after Russian forces withdrew from the area, found extensive evidence of summary executions, other unlawful killings, enforced disappearances and torture, all of which would constitute war crimes and potential crimes against humanity. Those who sanctioned this behaviour are those with whom we deal

now, and this must remain in our minds. We need accountability, so that those who carried out atrocities will be made responsible for their brutality. Girls as young as eight and women as old as 80 have been raped and abused. Russian crimes against humanity must be taken to the International Criminal Court, which must make those responsible accountable in whatever way it can. If only the death penalty were still in place, I would certainly seek that for them.

In Northern Ireland we dealt with the bare face of evil for too many years. We saw hatred overcome basic humanity as mothers and children were blown to pieces in a fish shop on a Saturday afternoon by Irish republican terrorists. No cause can justify that. We saw the face of evil when people were burned alive with a napalm-like substance in the La Mon restaurant in my constituency. We saw the face of evil when people were massacred in churches. All that reminds me very much of the atrocities suffered by the people of Ukraine as I look back on the last three years. I lived through those things in my lifetime, and they remain with me.

It grieves me that that face of evil is still at work, and that such atrocities and disregard for human life—for women and children—have been replicated in Ukraine. They were replicated in Bucha as women and children were murdered. In February, the body of a Ukrainian Orthodox priest was found in the streets of Kalanchak, in Russian-occupied Kherson. According to his bishop, Russian military forces had “tortured Fr Stepan to death”. That is the Russians, and they must be held accountable for their brutality. We hear of such evil deeds being repeated throughout Ukraine. Again, my intention is not to drag up these matters in order to cease the striving for peace; I believe that peace is needed, but I also believe that accountability is needed, and that while we work for peace we cannot allow the trauma of this war to fade into insignificance. These crimes matter and those families deserve not to be forgotten.

My thoughts now, on the third anniversary of this dreadful war, are as they ever were: that we stand with Ukraine; that we must fulfil our moral duty to them in war, or indeed in peace; and that there must be no doubt that the hand of friendship of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland remains firmly extended to those families in Ukraine at this time and in all the days ahead.

2.30 pm

Graeme Downie (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): A pile of dark brown mud next to a hole in the ground; a hole framed by planks of wood covered tightly in smooth, matt-black sheeting; four rough wooden handles jammed in as the mud hardens around them, with invisible silver shovels buried beneath—a pile of mud and four shovels in the sharp, harsh, dry cold of Lviv: that is the image that I have had in my mind for every waking minute of every day since Saturday morning. It is the picture of a newly dug grave in the cemetery of heroes in Lviv, Ukraine, as mentioned earlier by my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West and Leigh (David Burton-Sampson). For me, that image encapsulated the four-day trip from which I and other MPs from across the House returned earlier this week. It might sound an unusual thing to say, but this graveside was not simply one of sorrow, nor just of pride, nor just of memory; it was one of defiance and resolve.

That image encapsulates for me the emotions of all of the people of Ukraine. They have taken the punishment dished out by a criminal dictator-bully for three years. They have not only withstood the daily bombardments, but thrived underneath their air defence umbrella. In a position where every day represents a struggle for survival to the next, Ukraine has been able not only to fight and reach the next day, but to plan for a prosperous future. In health, education, technology, cyber-security, the scaling of innovation and in culture, the Ukrainian people are shaping their long-term future even as they take to shelters every night. This is not just “Keep calm and carry on”; this is “Keep calm, win the present and build the future.”

The Ukrainian people want peace—of course they do—but they will not accept peace at any price. We asked over and over again, “What message do you want us to deliver back to our country and our Parliament?” The answer was always this, something so simple and obvious that it is hard to believe it has to be restated: “Russia has conducted an unprovoked invasion of Ukraine—Russia is the aggressor; Ukraine the victim.”

We have had 20 years of warnings, from the murder of Alexander Litvinenko in 2006 to the first invasions of Ukraine and the public poisonings in Salisbury, and then finally the full-scale invasion of our ally.

Melanie Ward: Does my hon. Friend agree that Russia’s past behaviour, with Putin seeming to sign up to agreements but then not following them, is precisely why security guarantees for Ukraine’s future are so important?

Graeme Downie: I could not agree more. I grew up in Berlin during the cold war and could hear Russian artillery and helicopters practising on a live firing range, so that has always been present since I was very young.

We must not misunderstand the gravity of this moment. Geopolitical stability and security will be the defining issue for this generation and this Parliament. It is incumbent on us to do whatever it takes to keep British people safe at home and abroad and to support our allies. That is why I fully welcome and endorse the decision this week by the Prime Minister on defence spending increases. However, as I argued in this House in December, 2.5% and even 3% should be seen as a floor for our defence spending, not the ceiling.

This Government have already taken one difficult decision and there may well be more to take in the future. I suspect that before long the Government may conclude that they must go even further or faster, or both. If they do so, they will have my full and total support. That is not to crave the spending; it is to accept the reality of the world we live in, not the world as we would wish it to be.

While the public clearly support the increased spending on defence, it is incumbent on all of us in the House to ensure that the reality of the danger and threat that this country faces is brought home, as is the fact that this might mean even tougher decisions very soon. While a war in Ukraine might feel abstract, as I saw over the past few days, that war can very quickly come to these shores, and in a variety of ways. The mission of all sides of this House is to maintain that unity and communicate that reality and to bring the public with us on a long-term journey that will be difficult.

[Graeme Downie]

With the 100-year partnership agreement signed by this Government, we have the foundation of a long-term relationship with a country with which we share so much, and with which we are standing shoulder to shoulder. On that foundation we can build a lasting peace.

I want to end with a quote by JFK. In the same speech in which he called for peace

“not merely...in our time, but peace for all time”

he said:

“There is no single, simple key to this peace; no grand or magic formula... Genuine peace must be the product of many nations, the sum of many acts.”

Ukraine has taken several of those many acts and the UK is one of the many nations. It is incumbent on us to continue acting until we find the peace we all seek.

2.35 pm

Andrew Lewin (Welwyn Hatfield) (Lab): Ukraine is a country that never sought war. As we speak today in this House, people who were once administrators, chefs and mechanics are sacrificing their lives on the frontlines to protect their homes and families. It has been a privilege to be in the Chamber today to hear some of the speeches from hon. Members who have been in Ukraine over the last week and have told their stories so powerfully; I thank them for doing that.

The people of Ukraine have, over the past three years, defied the odds at every turn and have a President unmatched in his bravery. President Zelensky looked down a smartphone in February 2022, stared down Putin’s war machine and pledged to defend the right of his sovereign country to exist and the right of his people to be free. He has done so ever since.

Successive Prime Ministers have stood at the Dispatch Box and been absolutely right to offer British military and financial aid. The fight to protect Ukraine is a fight for democracy and for our shared values. For three years this cause has bound together Europe, the United Kingdom and the United States, but there is no doubt that we have reached a crossroads, a moment in time that will shape the future of Ukraine and Europe.

On 14 February, the vice-president of the United States made his keynote address at the Munich security conference. He said:

“The threat that I worry the most about vis-à-vis Europe is not Russia...what I worry about is the threat from within: the retreat of Europe from some of its most fundamental values.”

It was a very sad and serious spectacle: a US vice-president seeming to downplay the significance of Putin’s aggression in Europe—aggression that, as we have heard today, has led to the death of hundreds of thousands of people, with millions more driven from their homes. If his primary concern really is freedom of speech and expression, he would do well to look closer to home. Just this week, journalists from Reuters and Huffington Post were denied access to the first Cabinet meeting of the new US Administration. What I worry about is an agenda that claims to champion free speech but is actually seeking to promote favourable speech. Those are two very different concepts.

The words of the vice-president served as confirmation that a period of US history is ending. The Republican party of Eisenhower and Reagan is sleeping. It may well wake again in time, but for now it lies dormant. In Kyiv,

Brussels, Paris, Berlin and here in London, we have to respond to the world as it now is. A peace deal fully supported by the United States and Ukraine and Europe must of course remain the central objective, and our Prime Minister is absolutely right to pursue it. However, as the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) told the House, a deal cannot just mean the absence of war. Peace is what the people of Ukraine deserve, but we must never countenance a settlement that is not agreed to by President Zelensky.

Returning to Munich, there was one sentence in the speech of Vice-President Vance that I could endorse:

“To believe in democracy is to understand that each of our citizens has wisdom and has a voice.”

On that, he is right. Our citizens do have wisdom. In the United Kingdom, they have the wisdom to look to the history of our continent and see the danger of failing to stand up to aggressors until it is too late. They know that now is the time to make our voices heard, and to say loudly and in unison that we stand with Ukraine.

2.39 pm

David Taylor (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing the debate and for his bravery in going as far as Kharkiv. I admire his work and advocacy. I associate myself with everything that hon. Members have said, especially about the bravery of the men and women of Ukraine, who are standing up to Putin every day and fighting not just for their own freedom, but for our freedom.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) and I have just come back from a week in Ukraine, where we had an opportunity to speak to a number of MPs, Ministers, industry leaders and those in civil society. I will focus remarks on the need for drone technology, which is paramount to us winning in Ukraine. As many hon. Members have said, we face an existential crisis. The increase in defence spending to 2.5% of GDP is important, but it is vital that we get beyond that, to 3% and more. From my trip last week and from my previous visit, it is clear that Putin is not going to stop at Ukraine’s borders. If Ukraine falls, then NATO countries, and Baltic countries in particular, are in the firing line. It is important that our constituents understand that this war is not about other people; it is a war about us as well.

Turning to drone technology, in a meeting with Deputy Defence Minister Sergiy Boyev, I was told:

“Ukraine needs a fleet of drones that possess the same characteristics as the Kalashnikov.”

What he meant by that, as was reflected back to me by the chair of the Ukrainian Economic Affairs Committee, Dmytro Natalukha MP, who I know other hon. Members have met, was that Ukraine needs something like a Kalashnikov—a flying Kalashnikov, if you will—because it is standard issue, easy to manufacture, reliant on available common parts and comparatively cheap. Such technology alone will not match the existential crisis we all face, but it could play a vital role in the war. However, in order to get such technology, the drone sector needs to be able to access UK capital. We need more joint ventures between our defence companies in the UK and Ukrainian defence companies.

I want to underline why these drones are so important. There are now many different types of drones. There are massive drones, like the ones the Iranians are

unfortunately supplying to Putin's forces, such as the Shahed drone. When I was in Ukraine, I spent some time in a bunker because at one point there were 50 Shahed drones overhead. There are also drones that are necessary to hold Ukrainian positions and to help the Ukrainians to advance.

As the security adviser and expert James Rushton, whom I had the opportunity to meet while I was in Ukraine, told me, small recon drones such as the DJI Mavic are the difference between an entire platoon of Ukrainian troops surviving or not. They can help the Ukrainians to know if the Russians are coming over the horizon, so they can get away in good time. The converse is true, as they can also help the Ukrainians to hold positions and to advance. It is important that we get to a place where we are able to provide more capital to Ukrainian companies, to help them with the parts they need and, collectively with European allies, to help them produce some standard and cheaper types of drones, as they will be vital in the war.

2.43 pm

Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind): I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and others for securing the debate, of which I am proud to be a co-sponsor. Many excellent and learned points have been made. There has been a real show of unity from the House and we can all be proud of the debate today.

Three years ago, peace was broken. The world woke up to something we hoped we would never see again—full-scale war in our backyard. Russian tanks were rolling into Europe, across Ukraine's borders; missiles were lighting up the sky and the fire of war ripping through homes. There was complete and utter destruction of harmony and innocence, with people grabbing whatever they could and fleeing for their lives. Russian forces had brutally invaded their sovereign neighbour. Putin, the dictator, thought this would be over in weeks, yet because of the tenacity, fight, bravery and leadership of Ukraine and Zelensky, here we are three years on.

Today Ukraine is still fighting, and not just for its land but for its survival. It has been said many times before but I will say it again: if Russia stops, this war is over; if Ukraine stops, it loses everything. So today, before anything else, we pause to honour those who have paid the highest price; the parents who have buried their children; the soldiers who kissed their loved ones goodbye, not knowing if they would ever return; and the civilians who once lived in peaceful villages, now reduced to rubble. Millions have been displaced, hundreds of thousands have been killed, and schools and hospitals have been destroyed in targeted ballistic missile strikes, among other acts of terror and war. People have endured torture, execution and sexual violence, they have had their children snatched and sent to Russia, and there have been horrors that we in Britain would struggle even to imagine, never mind put into words.

Yet despite all that, the flame of hope for a free nation, Ukraine, not just stands but fights and refuses to surrender or be footnote in the history of the brutal expansionism of that barbaric, mad tyrant in Moscow. We all like to think that in that scenario we would do the same, and that we would kiss our loved ones goodbye and fight for our country, our families and our way of life. Ukrainians have been doing that now for three

years, through smoke, rubble and fire, and attack after attack. They have stood up and said to Putin, "Not us—not Ukraine."

It is in honour of that bravery, spirit and flame of hope that we must proclaim: to not an inch of Ukraine is Russia entitled; not a metre of Ukraine belongs to Russia; not a mile of Ukraine is in Russia's sphere of influence by divine right. That air, that soil, those people and those children are Ukrainian. We stand with them today and every day, for democracy, for freedom, for sovereignty, for decency, and for the world that we want to believe in—no surrender, no appeasement, no deals without Ukraine at the table. We will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. Slava Ukraini.

2.46 pm

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I thank the members of the Backbench Business Committee and the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for granting and leading the debate.

Three years ago, we watched as missiles rained down on Ukraine from Kharkiv to Lviv, damaging even the Holocaust memorial at Babyn Yar. Anyone who has stood in that space will share the sense of revulsion at that desecration. A motorised column, reported to be some 40 miles long, advanced on Kyiv and its advance groups left a horror of murder in their wake. This was the terrible return of unrestricted industrial warfare to Europe for the first time since 1945. The goal must be stated bluntly: the Russian state seeks the destruction of Ukrainian sovereignty and Ukrainian national identity. The proof of that assertion can be found in bodies that were laid out in Izium, Bucha and Kherson, and, I fear, in many other places whose names are not known to us and that only liberation will identify.

When we think back to February 2022, we must remember the hope that could quickly be found among the despair. A small Ukrainian force defeated the Russians at Hostomel airport, and on such a fine margin, the nation may have been saved. The actions of successive UK Governments and the unity of this House have, as many other hon. Members have said, been essential to that Ukrainian struggle for liberty.

Out of war have come new bonds of family and friendship. I pay tribute to the members of the British armed forces who have trained Ukrainians and to the Royal Centre for Defence Medicine in Birmingham—they have learned from us, and, as was said earlier, we have learned from them. I also pay tribute to all those who have acted as hosts as part of the wider support network for Ukrainian refugees.

One of the most valuable things we can do in this place is repeat Ukrainian voices. I will quote one—that of Ivanna Khrapko, the youth chair of the Federation of Trade Unions of Ukraine, who it has been my pleasure to come to know over the last couple of years. Ahead of a TUC vote some 18 months ago, she said:

"Of course we want peace, more than anything. But we want a just peace, without occupiers in our country."

As Oleksandra Matviichuk, the head of the Centre for Civil Liberties in Ukraine, which holds a Nobel peace prize, said:

"Peace cannot be reached by a country under attack laying down its arms, that would not be peace but occupation."

[*Laurence Turner*]

I hope that message—so eloquently articulated by Ukrainians, who know the Russian regime better than anyone—is heard by all those currently making decisions about Ukraine’s future. I cannot go into detail in the very short amount of time available, but the issues identified by the hon. Member for Chichester (Jess Brown- Fuller) with regard to the Ukraine permission extension scheme have been heard in my constituency as well, and I hope that Ministers are monitoring those concerns closely.

I close by echoing one last Ukrainian voice—that of Taras Shevchenko, who wrote in a poem almost 200 years ago, also under Russian occupation:

Oh bury me, then rise you up
And break your heavy chains
And water with the tyrants’ blood
The freedom you have gained
And in the great new family,
The family of the free,
With softly spoken, kindly word
Remember also me.

The words ring true today.

If one message is to go from this House today, I hope it is this: our nation’s support for the Ukrainian cause is constant, not passing. We remember Ukraine, and we will stand with Ukraine and with our Ukrainian friends to the end—to the very end—and to the hoped-for day, as hard as the path may now be to imagine, when all Ukraine will be free.

2.50 pm

John Slinger (Rugby) (Lab): In the short period of time I have, I will say this: we face a critical moment for our nation, for Europe and for the world. Now is the time to uphold our values and to encourage our allies to do the same. That means concrete steps here and now to protect and defend Ukraine, as well as lasting agreements to ensure its security into the future.

While this feels like a dark phase for European security, it is not the first time that we who believe in co-operation and the importance of alliances have had to argue the case with those who favour a more transactional, zero-sum approach to international relations. We must hearten ourselves that we have won the argument before, including with our American friends, and we must appeal to the noblest instincts of that great nation.

We are now at a hinge in history—perhaps the most dangerous one since the cold war—because at stake is not just the erasure of a nation, but the weakening of the international rules-based system and the transatlantic military alliance that have, in combination, underpinned European security since world war two. Even the concept of truth is being challenged, but I will not rehearse those points; we all know that there is a truth, and we must defend it. We must not allow great powers to trade Ukraine’s future like a pawn in a game of chess, because at stake is the principle that bullies must not prosper in our world. If they do, other nations will be next. Indeed, the former British Prime Minister whose bust sits in the Oval Office once said:

“An appeaser is one who feeds a crocodile, hoping it will eat him last.”

The Baltic states understand that.

I strongly welcome the leadership that the Prime Minister has shown in reasserting our values and our commitment to increase defence spending and contemplate putting peacekeeping troops on the ground. We must defend the right of any country to defend itself against invasion by its neighbour, but Ukraine is not just any country; it is a beacon for those who value freedom. In its bravery and sacrifice, it is upholding the concept of not just its own, but every nation’s sovereignty. It is defending the international rules-based system, international law, freedom, democracy, human rights and, yes, us. We must remind our friends around the world that intelligent self-interest and upholding moral values are synonymous. If we do that, Ukraine will live on, the rules-based system will live on and, ultimately, a world that values and defends freedom and democracy against those who threaten them will live on.

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

2.53 pm

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): While I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, it is one that we all hoped we would never have to have, but I thank the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for securing it.

For more than three years, the brave people of Ukraine have heroically defended their country against a full-scale invasion, defying Putin’s expectations and showing the world their courage, resilience and unwavering determination. They have reminded us all of what is at stake: the right of a sovereign nation to choose its destiny, free from coercion and tyranny.

Today, we are at a pivotal moment, with our Prime Minister in the US. This is a moment that will determine the future of our continent for generations to come. Now more than ever, we must stand firmly in support of our Ukrainian friends, resist Trump’s dangerous flirtation with a deal that rewards Russian aggression, and work with our European allies to defend freedom and democracy.

The UK must act decisively. That starts with working with our European allies to unleash the £40 billion-worth of Russian assets currently sitting idle in banks, in order to give Ukraine a critical boost at this critical moment. The UN General Assembly has recognised Russia’s obligation to make reparations for this illegal war, yet history shows us that Russia will never voluntarily pay those reparations. By redirecting these funds to Ukraine, we are not undermining the rule of law, but upholding it. Some fear that seizing those assets sets a dangerous precedent. I argue the opposite—it sets a necessary precedent. It tells the world that the international community will act decisively against those who wage unprovoked wars of aggression. It is only right that those assets are repurposed for military aid, humanitarian support and rebuilding efforts.

Any negotiations about Ukraine’s security must involve Ukraine itself. This war is about Ukraine’s sovereignty, and its fate cannot be decided in backroom deals between Washington and Moscow. I cautiously welcome reports that the White House is engaging respectfully with Kyiv, but this commitment must extend beyond words. There can be no ceasefire or security negotiations without Ukraine at the table; anything less would be an insult to the sacrifices made by its people and a betrayal of the values we claim to uphold.

Supporting Ukraine means more than military aid alone. It requires long-term investment in defence manufacturing, joint procurement with Ukrainian companies, and a recognition that Ukraine's innovation in defence technology, robotics, artificial intelligence and prosthetics is unparalleled globally. The UK should actively support and invest in those sectors, helping to strengthen Ukraine's economy while also bolstering our own security and technological capabilities. We must also stand with Ukrainian veterans and refugees. More than 250,000 Ukrainians now call the UK home, and many of those who arrived here in 2022 will soon need to apply for visa extensions under the Ukraine permission extension scheme. While that scheme grants those Ukrainians an 18-month extension, it provides no certainty about their long-term future. We must ensure that Ukrainians in the UK have clarity about their right to remain, while understanding that so many of them will return to their country once the war is over.

If the US retreats from its role in global security, Europe must step up, and Britain should lead. The Government's pledge to raise defence spending to 2.5% of GDP by 2027 is welcome, and we hope it will mean a reversal of the Conservative party's short-sighted cut of 10,000 troops, but we must go further. Given the increasingly volatile global landscape, the UK needs to plan to further increase defence spending. Now is not the time to play politics. The Government should recognise this and host cross-party talks to discuss a pathway to 3% as soon as possible.

However, we must fund this increased defence spending in the right way. At a time when Ukraine's economy has contracted by nearly 30% and its reconstruction needs are estimated at nearly \$500 billion, it is incomprehensible that the UK has chosen to cut its international aid budget to fund the increase in defence. Slashing funding for global development while increasing defence spending is like robbing Peter to pay Paul. The UK's soft power is a vital tool in this fight, and we must restore our aid budget to 0.7% of gross national income, ensuring that our support for Ukraine does not come at the cost of abandoning other vulnerable nations. Defence, after all, is based on defence, diplomacy and development. The Liberal Democrats have set out how an increase in defence spending could be fairly funded by increasing taxes on social media firms and other tech giants, but the Government have chosen to finance it by cutting the international aid budget. This is a dangerous mistake; weakening the UK's global influence will only play into the hands of Russia and China.

We must also lead discussions about the creation of a European rearmament bank. Led by the UK and other like-minded European NATO allies, such a bank would allow us to collectively increase defence spending further and faster by raising additional private capital. That model would mean a more stable long-term financing system, enabling the defence industry to innovate and increase production capacity.

The question is not whether we act, but what happens if we do not. Failing to stand with Ukraine will embolden Putin, undermine NATO and threaten European security. Three years into this war, the stakes could not be higher. We must take bold action to stand up for democracy, for our allies in Ukraine and eastern Europe, and for our own security.

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

2.59 pm

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): It is an honour to have the opportunity to mark the grim milestone that is the third anniversary of Putin's illegal invasion of Ukraine. I am grateful to the Backbench Business Committee for calling this debate, and I pay tribute to all the brilliant speeches we have heard from Members on both sides of the House, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith).

Above all, though, I pay tribute to the people of Ukraine. Without any provocation whatsoever, Ukraine has suffered vast casualties and a national trauma beyond our wildest imaginings, all forced on it by an aggressive dictator and bully. If we ask ourselves why this war has happened, surely Lord Acton had the explanation, when he famously said back in 1887:

"Power tends to corrupt and absolute power corrupts absolutely."

There is a reason why Putin can murder on our streets, threaten nuclear war, harass our maritime and airspace, invade free nations, do away with his political opponents and care not a jot for a casualty rate in his own forces of more than 1,000 a day. It is because he is not constrained by the checks and balances of a democracy that holds him to account. He has absolute power, and he has used it destructively, regardless of the impact on his own people, let alone the people of Ukraine. Putin's motive is the motive of so many despots and dictators down the centuries: power lust and hunger for conquest. He externalises his nation's problems, which his corrupt oligarchy can never solve, and that ultimately leads to internal economic hardship and pain for all, bar him and his close elite.

I am incredibly proud of the support that we gave in government to Ukraine; we provided the weapons to help it avoid an early capitulation, which would have been truly disastrous for Ukraine and the free world. In opposition, we have continued to stand resolutely with Ukraine, supporting the Labour Government to that end, as they supported us prior to the July election. We wish the Prime Minister every success in Washington and hope for a lasting peace, in which Ukraine can finally enjoy the security it deserves. For all the talk of peace, and for all our efforts to date, providing everything from tanks to Storm Shadow missiles, and despite the incredible bravery of Ukraine's armed forces in defying the odds to push back Putin's land and naval forces, the day-to-day reality in Ukraine is one of continued bombing, pain and suffering for its people.

A key question for us in this debate is: what action can we undertake this day to support the ongoing fight? I turn to the subject of drones and rearmament, which was raised by the hon. Member for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor) in an excellent speech, but one aspect of rearmament speaks to our own need to rearm. Also, Ukraine will need rearmament on a far greater scale, whether a settlement is achieved or not. If there is no settlement, the ongoing war will require that rearmament. If there is, the need to give Ukraine security about its future will also require a continued ramping up of military industrial production, not least to deter Russia, so now that the Government have confirmed their plan for a sustained increase in defence spending, we must urgently unlock our domestic procurement to drive our defence industrial capacity and that of Ukraine.

[James Cartridge]

On Monday, I had the pleasure of visiting a brilliant UK defence SME, Modini, which is creating one-way attack drones and other capabilities for the British Army. When I launched the MOD's first-ever defence drone strategy about a year ago, the plan was to procure drones at scale for Ukraine, as we have done, and to learn from that to build a domestic industry capable of arming our own military. It was frustrating to hear from Modini what I have heard from so many of our best defence SMEs, which is that procurement is largely on hold. En masse, our fantastic firms are like a coiled spring, waiting for the Government to press "go" on procurement at the scale and pace we have needed for months.

Like the Lib Dem spokesperson, the hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire), I believe that a big step forward would be for our defence companies to urgently forge new joint lines of production with Ukrainian firms in the United Kingdom, honouring the pillar 1 promise in the 100-year partnership to

"Establish stronger and closer defence cooperation and industrial bases."

That is so important because, for safety reasons, Ukrainian defence companies that I have spoken to want UK production, away from the bombing. They also know that partnering with UK SMEs will provide access to capital and ultimately a chance to feed into UK procurement. For the UK, that co-operation means access to the know-how and expertise of those companies with manufacturing capabilities that have succeeded in a war as it is being fought. For our armed forces and the MOD, it means realising the cultural change that we need—being less risk-averse in procurement, and rapidly developing capability to enhance the lethality and survivability of our armed forces in the near term. That will be particularly important should there be a peacekeeping force.

Ultimately, conventional war that is sustained for a longer period is fought in terms of factory production capacity, which is linked to innovation. I do not agree with the hon. Member for Loughborough (Dr Sandher) about capital controls—I think there is enough capital—but he made an excellent speech about the need to boost capacity. When I was the Minister for Defence Procurement, I looked at multilateral procurement with NATO partners. Whatever its current military capabilities, Europe has a vast industrial base that could scale up if there is the will power to do so, and if there is leadership from Governments.

We led at the outset of the war, and with our greatest ally, the US, reasonably asking us and our NATO allies to do more of the heavy lifting in confronting the Russian threat, we will need to lead again. That requires leadership on industry and innovation in the UK and across Europe to massively boost our defence industrial capacity. I urge the Minister to do everything possible to accelerate partnerships with Ukrainian businesses that have delivered on the frontline, but which will be even stronger with British backing. That will create British jobs, and will deliver a far greater scale of production for both countries' armed forces. We can and must continue to do everything possible to support Ukraine.

3.5 pm

The Minister for the Armed Forces (Luke Pollard): I am grateful to the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) for initiating

this timely debate, which it is an honour to close, and I am grateful for all the superb contributions from Members on both sides of the House. I am especially grateful for the powerful advocacy of Members who have just returned from Ukraine; they shared their experiences of what is going on there, and told the story of the brutality of the Russian onslaught. I have been in a bomb shelter in Kyiv as the air raid sirens sound, which is a sobering experience. It stays with you, and it must. It is a reminder of the daily courage of our Ukrainian friends as they resist Putin's illegal invasion.

Today we have had the opportunity to reflect on the most unhappy of anniversaries. It is three years this week since Putin's illegal full-scale invasion of Ukraine—three years in which thousands of people have lost their lives. Millions of Ukrainian families have seen their homes and communities destroyed, and Ukrainian children have been stolen by Russia. Although Russian troops continue to make small territorial gains, both nations have become deadlocked in a war of attrition. But this is a war that Putin believed he could win in three days. Thanks to the extraordinary resistance and courage of Ukraine, Russia has been humbled on the battlefield. Three days have turned into three years, and today marks 1,099 days.

Mr Francois: The whole House will recall that when Russian tanks were bearing down on Kyiv, President Zelensky was offered a ride out for his own personal safety. He famously replied,

"I don't need a ride. I need ammunition."

That was Churchillian heroism, wasn't it?

Luke Pollard: All parties in this House have rightfully praised President Zelensky, the democratically elected leader of Ukraine. It is right that we continue to stand with him and his people for as long as it takes; I will come on to that in my remarks.

Putin's resources have been drastically worn down, with over 860,000 Russian soldiers killed or wounded. The UK Government expect the grim milestone of 1 million Russian casualties to be achieved in the coming months. Nearly 4,000 main battle tanks and 8,400 armoured vehicles have been lost, and the damage and destruction of the once formidable Black sea fleet is testament to what a nation without a navy can now do with the right equipment and approach.

Let us not forget that over these three years, the UK has often been the first to step up to help Ukraine. This year, we will spend £4.5 billion on military assistance—more than ever before. To date, the UK has provided £12.8 billion of support and trained over 51,000 Ukrainian personnel with our allies as part of Operation Interflex, and we have committed to £3 billion a year in military support for as long as it takes.

We have continued to strengthen Ukraine in recent weeks. Earlier this month, we announced a new £150 million firepower package, including drones, tanks and air defence systems. On Monday, the Defence Secretary announced that we are doubling our support for Ukraine's lifesaving defence medical services, with a £20 million uplift in funding for Project Renovator. The UK has been repairing and upgrading a military rehabilitation hospital in Ukraine, and providing training to Ukrainian surgeons, doctors and nurses, and the funding will provide a major boost for this project. It will help Ukrainian soldiers to

recover from frontline service, and help those who have suffered life-changing injuries while defending Ukraine's sovereignty.

We also heard on Monday from the Home Secretary that we are turning the tables on Putin by blocking Russian elites and oligarchs from entering the UK, and the Foreign Secretary announced the largest package of sanctions since the early days of the conflict, which aim to hit Russia's revenue and hamper Vladimir Putin's military machine. Standing alongside our allies, we will do what is necessary to support Ukraine, and keep Europe and Britain safe. The UK is solidifying our historic 100-year partnership with Ukraine, signed by the Prime Minister and President Zelensky in Kyiv in January; bolstering co-operation on defence and security, and more; and, importantly, signalling our confidence that in 100 years' time there will still be a free and sovereign Ukraine.

I turn to some of the important questions that have been raised in today's debate. On negotiations, while Russia is weakened, it remains a significant military threat, not just to Ukraine, but to the whole of Europe, and the United Kingdom. Ukraine is the frontline of freedom, and our defence and security begin on that frontline in eastern Ukraine. That is why the decisions made in negotiations over the coming weeks and months will define not only the outcome of this conflict, but the shape of European and global security for decades to come.

Everyone wants this war to end, none more than the Ukrainian people, who need a chance to rebuild their shattered nation, so the efforts by President Trump's administration to find a solution to the crisis are welcome, but the resulting peace cannot be achieved at any price. That would be an insult to Ukraine, the armed forces of which continue to fight with enormous courage and skill, and the population of which continues to ensure unimaginable hardships. When the fighting stops, it must be followed by a strong, stable, durable, lasting peace. That means a deal that safeguards Ukraine's sovereignty and ends Russian aggression—not a temporary ceasefire before Putin finds an excuse to return to violence, but a lasting and durable peace. An insecure peace risks more war, and a US backstop is the only way to achieve a durable and lasting peace.

The Government's position is clear: negotiations about Ukraine cannot happen without Ukraine. At the same time, it is right that the UK and Europe play our part in securing the peace. It is our security that is being negotiated, as well as Ukraine's. We have to work together with the US to achieve a sustained peace and protect the democracy that both the US and Europe hold so dear. That is why the Prime Minister has said that a US security guarantee in Ukraine is critical to stop Putin attacking again. It is welcome that we are now talking about negotiations, but as a Defence Minister, let me remind the House that we must not jeopardise the peace by forgetting about the war.

President Trump has long expressed his wish for Europe to step up and take more responsibility for its own security, and he is right. Indeed, we are responding to that challenge, and we are stepping up. Earlier this week, the Prime Minister announced the biggest sustained increase in defence spending since the end of the cold war. We are bringing forward our Labour manifesto commitment to spending 2.5% of GDP on defence

to 2027—back to a level that has not been achieved since 2010, when Labour was last in government. Ahead of his visit to Washington today, the Prime Minister also announced that, subject to our economic and fiscal conditions and aligned with our strategic and operational needs, we will set a clear ambition for defence spending to rise to 3% in the next Parliament.

Through our strategic defence review, which will be published in the spring, we are assessing the threats that Britain faces and building the defence capabilities we need to meet them. We are also cutting waste in the Ministry of Defence, and reforming procurement and recruitment, including by addressing some of the outdated medical standards that have been raised in this debate. We are prioritising investment in UK defence industries. As a result, our armed forces will once again become fit to fight a modern war, learning the lessons from Ukraine and adapting to the evolving threats we face, because we know that strengthening defence is the only way to win peace—by deterring conflict, but also by preventing defeat in it, if necessary. We are also stepping up in NATO, and encouraging all our NATO allies to spend at least 2% on defence. With Britain spending 2.5% on defence from 2027, we are also setting a new benchmark for others to follow.

Two weeks ago, I was leading a UK trade delegation in Ukraine with our Dutch and Norwegian colleagues. We talked about more joint ventures, more investment, more tech transfers of knowledge and data sharing in both directions. This week, I visited Finland, Latvia, Lithuania, Denmark and the Netherlands to discuss with our close allies how we step up our collective support for Ukraine.

The United Kingdom will stand with Ukraine for as long as it takes. Slava Ukraini.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Sir Iain Duncan Smith to wind up the debate.

3.15 pm

Sir Iain Duncan Smith: It is great that you are in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker, because two and a half years ago you came out to Ukraine with me and the charity, as others have done, and you were fantastic talking to troops suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. They remembered that when I saw them again later, so I thank you on their behalf.

This has been an excellent debate. It will send a message of unity to the President of America. It will tell him that this House is united in its support for Ukraine and believes that if we have faith in Ukraine it will succeed, and that there is no peace that is not durable that is worth the word peace. We need to make sure it has freedom and justice at the same time.

To finish the debate, I will give one small quote—if the House will forgive me; it is very short—from the man who, in 1941, was also appealing to the President of a nation of 130 million that was in isolation and not likely to enter a war on our behalf. This is the sign that we must send to the man who has a bust of Churchill sitting in his office. This is how Churchill appealed to the President of America, and, on behalf of Ukraine, I repeat it:

“Put your confidence in us. Give us your faith and your blessing, and, under Providence, all will be well. We shall not fail or falter; we shall not weaken or tire. Neither the sudden shock of

[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

battle, nor the long-drawn trials of vigilance and exertion will wear us down. Give us the tools, and we will finish the job.”

Slava Ukraini.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the third anniversary of the war in Ukraine.

St David's Day and Welsh Affairs

3.17 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered St David's Day and Welsh Affairs.

I am delighted that the Backbench Business Committee has granted this debate. It is wonderful to see colleagues in the Chamber this afternoon from across the House, many of whom kindly supported the application. This is my sixth St David's Day debate and my first as Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee. It was a great honour to have been elected Chair of this important Committee, so this afternoon I would like to take the opportunity to tell the House about the work the Committee has been undertaking so far.

I would like to begin by paying tribute to my predecessor, the former Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire, Stephen Crabb. He did an exceptional job fostering a collegiate atmosphere to ensure that the Committee worked together to achieve the best for Wales, regardless of individual party affiliation. I very much hope to carry forward that consensual approach to the work of the Committee, because I believe that is the way to get the best for the people of Wales.

I would also like to take this opportunity to pay tribute to the exceptional Clerks team, led by Alison Groves, who support the Committee. The full extent of the work they do behind the scenes is rarely appreciated by Members, but the Committee simply could not function without them. I am very lucky to have the support of such a diligent, hard-working team, and I thank them all for the individual skills and abilities they bring to benefit the Committee.

The Committee may be newly formed, but it is already off to a flying start. We have already heard evidence from the Secretary of State and the First Minister, and opened three inquiries, with several more ideas for the rest of this Parliament in the works. We have also taken evidence on several pressing issues for Wales, including the impact of the Budget on Wales, the closure of Holyhead port and the tragic loss of 17 inmates at Parc Prison.

The first inquiry we have opened is on promoting Wales for inward investment. While the UK ranks among the most successful countries in Europe for attracting foreign direct investment projects, Wales has struggled to attract the same level of inward investment as other nations and regions of the UK, so this inquiry will focus on how brand Wales is promoted internationally. In order to market Wales as a competitive destination for inward investment, we will consider what lessons can be learned from success stories in the creative industries and sports sectors, and whether there are international examples of effective investment promotion campaigns that can inform Wales's approach. We will look at how the Welsh brand is articulated and marketed to international audiences, what barriers exist to promoting Wales internationally as a destination for inward investment, and how well supported Welsh businesses are in attracting inward investment. All these factors will be vital to deliver and support sustainable local benefit and prosperity.

Our second inquiry is on the environmental and economic legacy of Wales's industrial past. We know that Wales has a proud industrial heritage based on

activities such as coal mining, slate quarrying, copper smelting and steel making. The industrial revolution was fuelled partially by Welsh coal, shipped out in vast quantities from the south Wales coalfields. Merthyr Tydfil and Blaenavon were world renowned for their ironworks, and the legacies of these communities live on in the landscape and the buildings.

Less than five minutes' walk from my new constituency office in Newbridge is Newbridge Memo. Formerly the Celyn Collieries Institute, built by miners using subs taken from their wages, it is still the centre of the community today, hosting the local library, a ballroom, a cinema and a coffee shop. This is the living legacy of the miners—I know many places in Wales that would be poorer had they not actively built and fought for their communities. Of course, I must not forget to mention the Blackwood Miners Institute, which has recently been rescued from closure by Caerphilly county borough council, a decision applauded by all local community groups and users of the 'Stute.

Today, most of the heavy industries that powered the Welsh economy during the 19th and 20th centuries are gone. The Welsh Affairs Committee will examine their environmental legacy and the economic impact of their decline, and what this means for Wales as it transitions to the green and digital economies of the future—including, of course, the semiconductor cluster and data centres in my constituency.

We know that coal tips continue to have a significant impact on people and our environment. As well as causing pollution, coal tips pose a risk of landslides—a risk that flash flooding, made worse by climate change, makes even greater. We in Wales are acutely aware of these risks, after a landslip was caused by heavy rain in Tylorstown in 2020, and more recently during Storm Bert in Cwmtillery. I must acknowledge the additional £25 million provided by the UK Government to ensure coal tip safety in Wales—money that has now been provided after our calls were ignored for 14 years by the previous Government.

The decline in heavy industry also brought economic challenges to former industrial areas, which persist to this day. Last year, the Coalfields Regeneration Trust said that the south Wales coalfields have

“exceptionally low job density, high numbers of out-of-work benefits, poor health”

and “extensive deprivation”. Our inquiry into the environmental and economic legacy of Wales's industrial path will look at all these issues and the role that former industrial communities can play as part of Wales's exciting future.

Finally, we have opened an inquiry into prisons, probation and rehabilitation in Wales. Much of this work was started under my predecessor, and, when I was elected Chair, I was keen for it to continue. Criminal justice in Wales exists within a unique policy environment, with prisons, probation and rehabilitation services reserved to the UK Government, and key intersecting services such as health, education and housing devolved to the Welsh Government.

The inquiry will look at the challenges and opportunities that are presented by this unique constitutional arrangement, examining where the UK and Welsh Governments are working well together and identifying areas for improvement. We will consider the UK

Government's recent criminal justice policy initiatives and safer streets mission, assessing the extent to which they have been tailored to meet the needs of Welsh offenders. We will also consider the effectiveness of intergovernmental relations between the UK and Welsh Governments and their associated agencies in supporting offender management and rehabilitation in Wales, as well as the vital role played by the private sector and third sector organisations.

We will look at how suitable the Welsh prison estate is for keeping prisoners healthy and safe and ensuring they can access effective rehabilitation services, including healthcare facilities. The Committee undertook a visit to HM Prison Parc in November as part of this work, and we will continue to monitor progress at this prison as part of our inquiry.

I turn to my own constituency of Newport West and Islwyn. The boundary changes at the general election last year meant that, sadly, I lost some of my favourite wards in the former Newport West constituency to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden), but I have been very lucky to inherit most of the Islwyn constituency. I have to remember all my predecessors: Paul Flynn in Newport West and Neil Kinnock and Lord Don Touhig in Islwyn. Those are very big boots to fill, so I take their legacy very seriously indeed and hope to serve the people of Newport West and Islwyn as well as they did.

Let me turn now to the whole point of the debate today. St David's Day is a wonderful occasion to celebrate all that is brilliant about Wales. Whether enjoying the seaside resort at Llandudno, walking along the Gower peninsula, or climbing up Pen-y-Fan in Brecon, Wales is a place of extraordinary natural beauty, which welcomes many hundreds of thousands of tourists each year.

It is often said that Wales is a land of song. As I look around the Chamber, I am certain that, between us and the other place, we could have a proper choir going here if we actually worked on it. We are very proud of our heritage in culture and the creative arts, including the Welsh National Opera and the many film and TV companies that are sited in Wales, producing content for Wales and UK TV. I just need to quickly say that I achieved a lifetime ambition on Saturday, thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi), who introduced me to the other Ruth Jones, of “Gavin and Stacey” fame—*[Interruption.]* Exactly, what's occurring? May I say that I was completely starstruck? She was lovely.

Wales is not all cuddly lambs, daffodils and choirs. It is also a country of protest. The rights that we have today enshrined in law to protect the Welsh language were hard fought for by activists, who held the Government of the day to account and persisted with their campaigns—some lawful and some not—for many decades, finally to achieve parity of Welsh and English. Our care and passion for the Welsh language is clear. Only two events in more than 100 years have disrupted the National Eisteddfod in Wales, one of them being the recent covid pandemic, and the other the great war in 1914.

We are also a country with a strong history of Chartism—that noble cause that spread across the entire United Kingdom, burning brightly in south Wales, and particularly in my own constituency of Newport West and Islwyn and, of course, in Newport East. Many fought for years there to achieve democratic changes, even losing their lives in pursuit of a fair and open

[Ruth Jones]

democracy, which is something for which we all need to be very grateful. The fact that an ordinary girl like me from Duffryn comprehensive school can represent the people of our communities here in this extraordinary place is something that I will never take for granted.

Adam Jogee (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): Many people in Newcastle-under-Lyme and Staffordshire enjoy the delights of Wales. As a child, my mother spent many happy summers at Colwyn Bay. This is the first St David's Day in five years that I am not an employee of my hon. Friend, so I want to congratulate her on an excellent speech and say that, on behalf of the people of Newcastle, I wish her and her constituents a very happy St David's Day.

Ruth Jones: I thank my hon. Friend for that, and may I say that I have taught him all he knows?

I could go on, but I do not wish to take up any more time. I want to hear from other colleagues present today, and I look forward to their contributions.

3.28 pm

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn a dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus i chi, Ddirprwy Lefarydd. A happy St David's Day to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to everyone across the House. It is lovely to see so many daffodils.

This is a time to take pride in our culture, our communities and our language—each a rugged testament to our resilience as a nation. We are a nation of creativity and innovation. We all know that Wales has the talent, the resources and the potential to be more than brilliant, but it is time to be more ambitious. It is time to up our game.

Although we may not yet have a St David's Day bank holiday, that does not stop us from coming together to celebrate what makes our country so special.

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I thank the right hon. Member for giving way and would like to take the chance to wish everyone a very happy St David's Day. Does she support my calls to make St Piran's Day, the national day of Cornwall, which is taking place next Wednesday on 5 March, a bank holiday?

Liz Saville Roberts: Yes, we should celebrate our regional and national saints with vigour and enthusiasm, and ensure that people get every opportunity and the time to enjoy them.

Today we reflect on all that is great about Wales, but we must also acknowledge the challenges we face and, more importantly, determine how we can overcome them. Our arts and culture, so integral to our national identity, are hanging in the balance. Our national museum and national library are facing potential staff losses, and our national theatre has had to shut up shop. Meanwhile, the NHS in Wales has been—there is no other way of putting it—chronically mismanaged for 26 years, more than a quarter of a century. Labour boasts of lavish spending, but we have record-high waiting lists month after month. Nearly half of cancer patients are not getting the treatment they need on time, and ambulance response time targets are missed time after time.

Our schools are also struggling. PISA results are at their worst ever level. Recruitment targets have been missed for the past eight years, and Plaid Cymru freedom of information requests have found that the Welsh schools maintenance backlog totals over half a billion pounds. The buildings in which we expect to develop the skills of the next generation to build our nation are crumbling away.

First Minister after First Minister promised that a Labour Government here in the UK centre of power would turn the tide in Wales, but all we have seen is broken promises: a refusal to scrap the Barnett formula, leaving our funding arrangement misaligned with our needs and leaving Wales short-changed; not a single penny of High Speed 2 funding, while reducing the Barnett comparability factor for Wales to just a third—33.5%—leaving us again without that which we are owed to tackle our crumbling transport infrastructure; and an expansion, incredibly, of the cruel austerity agenda by removing the winter fuel allowance from thousands of Welsh pensioners, keeping the two-child cap in place and refusing compensation for 1950s-born women.

Only this week the Government voted down the opportunity that Plaid Cymru brought to devolve Wales's Crown Estate assets, denying us the rewards of our own natural resources in Wales. That is despite Welsh Labour still supporting the Crown Estate's devolution. In fact, the First Minister has called it an "important cause for our nation".

The Welsh Labour former Counsel General Mick Antoniw called UK Labour's rejection of devolution a "big mistake" with

"no genuine economic or political logic".

Added to that is the hike in employer national insurance contributions that will hit core public and third sector services, as well as family businesses, and the impact on the future of Welsh farming of inheritance tax changes and the shrinking of agriculture funding through Barnettisation.

Labour has well and truly let us down since 2004, and now there is nowhere else to turn to blame for it. Plaid Cymru is used to calling out Labour's failures, whether here in Westminster or in Cardiff Bay. Plaid Cymru has proven time and again that we are never afraid to scrutinise Labour's decisions. Unlike the Labour Welsh Government, we are willing to demand better for Wales. We always put Wales first. It comes with our name. Labour sits on its hands and panders to right-wing extremists, dancing to the tune of Reform—its Members are not even here, though they expect Wales to dance to their tune in 2026. Reform shouts out its empty slogans into the void of its non-existent Welsh policies.

Plaid Cymru is setting out our vision for a Plaid Cymru Welsh Government in 2026, with our initial plan for the NHS, including regional elective care hubs, an executive triage service and health board collaboration. A Plaid Cymru Government will hit the ground running, unafraid to implement the changes that Wales needs to fulfil our potential. Wales needs a fresh start, and Plaid Cymru is ready to invest in our people and our futures and to lead with policies that will transform lives and communities.

As we approach Senedd Cymru elections, the tide is turning in Wales. We should no longer have to accept any more empty promises or measly crumbs from Westminster dressed up as big, celebratory announcements.

Labour in Westminster is not prepared to give Wales what it deserves, and Labour in Wales will not fight for it. Plaid Cymru will always demand fairness for Wales. Our record and our name speak for themselves. Let us work together, expecting a Plaid Cymru Welsh Government, to build a fairer, more prosperous Wales, where every lucky person who lives there gets to call it home and to expect more.

3.34 pm

Carolyn Harris (Neath and Swansea East) (Lab): It is always a great pleasure to speak in the annual St David's Day and Welsh affairs debate, and it is a special honour this year to be speaking as the Member of Parliament for the new seat of Neath and Swansea East. Having lived in Swansea East my entire life, it was a real step into the unknown when the boundary changes forced me to leave behind half of my very special constituency to represent a completely new and equally special constituency. It may only be 15 minutes down the road, but those 15 minutes bring whole new communities, a much more rural landscape and a diverse caseload that differs in many respects from what I knew before.

When I made my maiden speech in this place almost 10 years ago as an Opposition MP, I spoke about my city, Swansea, questioning Dylan Thomas's portrayal of it as an "ugly, lovely town". I thought it is only right for my first St David's Day speech as a very proud Government MP, representing Neath and Swansea East, to talk about the new part of my constituency and the wonderful town of Neath.

Neath is a town steeped in history. We have Neath abbey, a Cistercian monastery dating back to 1129, and a Norman castle, also built in the 12th century. At the heart of the town centre are Victoria gardens, overlooked by the formidable St David's church, named for our patron saint. Consecrated in the 1860s, the church continues to be a focal point of the community today and it is always a great pleasure to be invited to attend events there, especially with my constituency husband, Jeremy Miles MS.

Just a few minutes away from the church is Neath market, a traditional covered market that has traded in the same building since 1837. As shops have come and gone over the years, the market has been a constant and the produce on sale is, in my opinion, the best available. If a shopping list includes Glamorgan sausages, Caerphilly cheese, a dozen Welsh cakes, a bunch of daffodils or even a bucket hat with a dragon on it, Neath market is the place to go.

Neath really has a past to be proud of. In addition to the beautiful historical buildings, we also boast one of the oldest fairs in the UK. Neath great fair, which takes place every September, can be traced back to 1280 and not even the first world war could disrupt it, with Henry Studt's vans even used as a recruiting office for the war effort in 1915. Talking of showmen like Henry Studt, yet another outstanding church in the town centre, St Thomas, has a close affinity with the Showmen's Guild, housing a wonderful carousel horse and a stained-glass window that was commissioned for the guild's centenary celebration.

Our modern-day Neath is no different from anywhere else across the country, with its once bustling town centre feeling the effects of the convenience and value of online shopping. I know many constituents were understandably devastated when Marks and Spencer

closed nine months ago after decades of being the town's anchor store, unfortunately with very little support from the rainbow independent-Plaid coalition local authority. We are very lucky to still have a selection of national chains and individual bespoke shops still trading and thriving. Personally, I am a very big fan of shopping locally as it means I can pop into the Castle Hotel for a cup of coffee. At this point, I must give a special mention to Miss Jones Boutique, Mossies and Coco Blush. Any time hon. Members see me standing here, it is almost certain that I am wearing something from one of those shops.

Like everyone else in our great country, my constituents in Neath are a truly patriotic bunch. Hon. Members will struggle to find a man, woman or child who is not vehemently proud to be Welsh; proud of our country, of our history and of those who represent our nation. Back in July, at the very start of this Parliament, the Leader of the House joined me in wishing good luck to Team GB in the Paris Olympics and particularly to Dan Jervis from Resolven, who was heading to Paris as part of the GB swim team. I mention Dan again today as earlier this month he retired from competitive swimming. I congratulate him on all he achieved and thank him for being such a wonderful role model.

I know from visiting a host of grassroots sports clubs across the constituency that we have plenty of aspiring athletes who want to follow Dan's lead. Last October I was particularly pleased to support a heart screening programme for young people from Bryncoch football club in Neath and Clydach football club in Swansea. Thanks to a generous donation, we were able to work with TOBE-Heartsafe to bring that programme to young people who otherwise might not have been able to access it. TOBE-Heartsafe was set up by Sam Richards in memory of her son Toby.

It has always been my desire to help people. That was at the heart of why I first stood for election 10 years ago. A decade on, I remain as proud as I was on that first day, now with a growing number of Welsh Labour representatives in this place. While I have not quite got St David's knack of working miracles—but I do have a go—I will do everything in my power to help my constituents. I remain humbled and thankful that the people of Neath and Swansea East put their trust in me again last July, and I look forward to continuing to represent and support all my constituents throughout this Parliament. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, a very happy St David's Day.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Members will appreciate that, quite rightly, there is heavy demand to speak in the debate. If Members can help each other by keeping their remarks to about four minutes, I will be able to get everyone in.

3.41 pm

Aphra Brandreth (Chester South and Eddisbury) (Con): It is a pleasure to contribute to this debate marking St David's Day, and to celebrate the rich culture, history and contribution of Wales to our shared Union. My constituency of Chester South and Eddisbury shares part of its western border with north Wales, and the ties between us run deep. Many of my constituents cross the

[Aphra Brandreth]

border daily for work, school and appointments, and to visit family and friends. In fact, Wales is particularly close to my heart because my mother was born in Swansea.

Our past relationship with Wales, however, has not always been as cordial and amicable. Henry, Prince of Wales, who would go on to become Henry V, was named Earl of Chester in September 1403. He used his powers over the city of Chester to order that all Welsh people and Welsh sympathisers should be expelled from the city following the battle of Shrewsbury, caused by a Welsh uprising. During the battle, Henry sustained a nasty injury as a result of an arrow. That led to him becoming slightly paranoid about the prospect of further Welsh uprisings and pushed him to pass a law that said that a Welshman was not permitted to enter Chester before sunrise or stay after sunset. If he did, he would be subject to the penalty of decapitation. I am relieved to say that law is no longer in place, as it would certainly put a dampener on our tourism industry, not to mention my family gatherings. It also led to the urban myth that it is legal to shoot a Welshman with a longbow after midnight in Chester on a Sunday, so long as he is within the city walls. I have recently taken up archery, but let me assure the House that it is not with the intention of testing the legality of this law.

Despite such moments of strained relations, we have always been linked by geography, trade and shared experiences. Chester's strategic location made it a key military stronghold for the Romans, the Mercians, the Normans and, most notably, Edward I during his conquest of Wales. Thankfully, our cross-border exchanges these days involve much less castle storming and much more co-operation. In the first and second world wars, the Cheshire regiment fought alongside Welsh contingents in some of the most challenging campaigns, including Gallipoli. That legacy of co-operation and mutual support is something we should celebrate.

Cheshire and north Wales share a deep connection across multiple areas. I will briefly refer to two of them: our shared economy and our shared infrastructure. Our local economies in Cheshire and north Wales are very much co-dependent. Our rural economy is supported on both sides of the border by growers and producers. In a recent Westminster Hall debate on agricultural property relief, I intervened on the hon. Member for Caerfyrddin (Ann Davies) to highlight the importance of farming to our economies. I was struck when she said in response that her farm supplies milk to a major food producer in my constituency—I did not know that. That coincidence illustrates perfectly how we work to support each other, particularly in the rural economy.

Our local economies are deeply interconnected—many workers from my constituency commute to industrial sites, such as Airbus in Broughton and Deeside, and many people commute from Wales to work in my constituency. Of course, visitors from Wales help to drive Chester's tourism and hospitality sector. It goes both ways: many of my constituents enjoy weekend trips to the north Welsh coast, whether for a stroll along Llandudno's promenade or a well-earned break on Anglesey. It is important that we continue to share a close economic relationship going forward, because both Cheshire and Wales are net contributors to our respective economies, and together we lead the way in innovation and entrepreneurship in so many ways.

A strong economy must be supported by strong infrastructure, which brings me to my second point. We have great potential for growth in north-west England and north Wales, but often our infrastructure does not meet demand. I have spoken in this House about the need to electrify the trainline between Crewe—our major rail hub—and Chester. However, if we are serious about growth and stimulating our economy, the north Wales main line should be electrified all the way to Holyhead to unlock its full potential.

Road infrastructure is equally vital. Many of the roads that run through my constituency of Chester South and Eddisbury, such as the A51 or the north Wales expressway, are critical for freight and connectivity, particularly those linking the port of Holyhead to Liverpool and Manchester. Yet some roads, including the A51, are not suited to the volume and type of traffic that they now carry. When heavy goods vehicles pass through villages such as Clotton and Duddon, where homes and Duddon St Peter's Church of England primary school sit right on the road, it is clear that improvements must be made. I hope that the Government will, in partnership with their Welsh counterparts, continue to build on the positive momentum put in place by the previous Government on delivering the transport upgrades that both sides of the border need.

As St David's Day approaches, the future of Wales as part of the United Kingdom is bright and exciting.

John Cooper (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): It is wonderful to hear that my hon. Friend has a new string to her bow. She makes the point about the many ways in which we are connected and share heritage across the country. We are celebrating St David's Day, and we all have our own local saints and national saints, but is it not marvellous that ultimately we all come together as one nation—the United Kingdom—and that more unites us than divides us?

Aphra Brandreth: My hon. Friend makes a critical point. All parts of our Union are important.

Our relationship with Wales is one of shared history, shared prosperity and, occasionally, friendly sporting rivalry. Of course, our affection may be briefly set aside for 80 minutes when England travel to Cardiff for the Six Nations in a couple of weeks' time, but I am confident that our friendship will survive even another English victory.

Wales remains an integral part of the United Kingdom, and our deep ties—economic, cultural, and personal—will only continue to grow. Let us celebrate that today and work together to ensure that both sides of the border thrive in the years ahead. *Diolch yn fawr*, and happy St David's Day to all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): I call Jessica Morden.

3.48 pm

Jessica Morden (Newport East) (Lab): *Diolch*, Madam Deputy Speaker. I wish everyone a happy St David's Day for Saturday.

As always, it is a pleasure to have the opportunity to speak in the Chamber about our wonderful city of Newport, and to see my constituency neighbour, my

hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), who is certainly a very proud Newportonian, open the debate so ably—just as ably as she chairs the Welsh Affairs Committee.

For generations, Newport has been known for its rich industrial heritage. It was once central to the world during the industrial revolution, when iron and coal were shipped globally from its docks. On a point of trivia, those docks were disguised as the port of Southampton in the recent “Gavin and Stacey” Christmas special, when Nessa—a very close friend of my hon. Friend—tries to head off to Panama. Today, a new industrial revolution is under way in city. It is bringing well-paid and highly skilled jobs, fostering innovation, and marking a significant shift in Newport’s economic fortunes. I am speaking about this today as we look to the UK Government and our excellent Secretary of State to help us.

Newport is rapidly becoming a hub for data and technology, attracting global businesses and securing billions of pounds of investment, both in my constituency of Newport East and in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn. From the decades-long work of KLA in Ringland, to the Vishay site, Vantage and Microsoft at the other end of the city, which my hon. Friend represents, we have a globally significant semiconductor cluster. Newport is still a steel city—more of that later—but is also evolving into a “cwm silicon”: a Welsh silicon valley.

Powered by renewables, innovators such as SAE are leading the way, repurposing the former coal-fired power station at Uskmouth into one of the UK’s largest battery energy storage plants. This will store energy from renewables—it is right next to the Severn estuary, so any investment in tidal technology is welcome there—and feed it directly into the grid, ensuring that Newport steps into this new industrial revolution with the environment at its heart, protecting our unique natural surroundings.

At the centre of all this sits our city’s port. As the UK’s largest steel port, it is leading the way in becoming a port of the future, with an ambitious plan by Associated British Ports to decarbonise. That will not only sustain the port’s long-term viability and provide a source of renewable energy for the city but create more jobs in the industries of the future for the people of Newport. I hope my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will ensure that a strategy for Welsh ports is very much part of the industrial strategy.

The city has come a long way since 1962, when Llanwern steelworks became the first place in the world to use a computer to control a hot strip mill. It continues to produce world-class automotive steel, thanks to its dedicated and highly skilled workforce, represented by excellent unions, and in recent months it reached a new output record of 14 kilotons in a week following the introduction of new technology. With the ongoing work by the Government to establish a long-term and ambitious vision for the UK steel industry through the industrial strategy and the steel strategy, Llanwern has the potential to maintain an exciting future on the cutting edge of steel making.

However, it is important that the steel strategy addresses the major challenges the industry faces. We appreciate the £2.5 billion of support for the industry, but ahead of the expiry of the existing steel safeguards next year, the industry is calling for robust quotas that will protect

the UK market from global excess capacity and trade diversion, especially in the light of US tariffs. The strategy also needs to address the persistent issue of energy costs and procurement, and an update from the Secretary of State on any conversations with the Cabinet about steel would be most welcome.

As in the last industrial revolution, when Newport was key to getting black gold to the world, the city is once again essential to the industries of tomorrow. Without all the vital components—wafers, data centres for hyperscalers, semiconductor manufacturing equipment and renewable energy capacity—the UK risks missing out on this AI and data-driven industrial revolution. With support for and investment in Newport from the UK and Welsh Governments, working in partnership with industry, we can move forward with the ambitious plans outlined in our manifesto, with the industrial strategy now coming together.

Newport sits at the heart of all that is vital to transforming public services and driving economic growth across the UK. Our Newport city council leader, Dimitri Batrouni, would love to pursue plans for an AI growth zone, to make use of our strengths and assets and to take advantage of the incredible opportunities that lie ahead for our city. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn and I would welcome a meeting with the Secretary of State about supporting these plans. As Newport representatives with our councillors and Members of the Senedd, we have big ambitions for our city in this field.

In closing, I invite all Members to pick up their mobile phones or tablets—if they are allowed to. Without the research and development work happening at KLA in my constituency, we would not be able to do everything we can on our devices. Every day, each of us interacts with hundreds of devices that would not exist without the cutting-edge R&D carried out by KLA, which builds the equipment needed to manufacture semiconductors. Newport is right at the heart of all that. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for the opportunity to raise this today. I look forward to the Secretary of State’s reply and to working with colleagues in Government at both ends of the M4 to pursue this ambitious vision for our city.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins): Order. I am very keen to get everyone in, so I am imposing an immediate four-minute time limit.

3.55 pm

Ann Davies (Caerfyrddin) (PC): Diolch yn fawr iawn, Madam Dirprwy Lefarydd. I begin by referring Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests.

What a pleasure it is to be here today attending at my very first St David’s debate in the House, representing the fine people of Caerfyrddin. Although it is traditional to hold this debate, I want to thank the Backbench Business Committee for finding time to allow the tradition to continue and giving us the opportunity to discuss all things Welsh. I am delighted to be joined today by Sian, one of my three daughters, and her beautiful family, as it is half-term week in Wales. This is their very first visit to the House; diolch yn fawr i chi am ddod!

[Ann Davies]

Given that I am a farmer from a predominantly agricultural constituency, Members would expect me to start with “the land”, so I will not disappoint them: I am going to talk about farming. Seventy-four per cent of Caerfyrddin’s land is agricultural, and that is not just a statistic but a reflection of our way of life. Farming supports families, strengthens our rural economy, and keeps our Welsh language and culture thriving. As a tenant dairy farmer myself, I know at first hand about the dedication, the hard work and the sacrifices that come with this way of life.

The Government’s complete disregard for the sector has been astounding: the changes to the agricultural property and business property reliefs are pushing family farms to the brink. Ignoring this reality is a betrayal, not just of farmers but of the communities, businesses and local economies that depend on them. We must bear in mind that, according to union figures, for every £1 spent by the agricultural industry £9 is created locally and fed into local businesses, retaining that circular economy on which we all depend. Along with farmers, the local businesses that they support are crucial to our local economy.

We have incredible businesses in Caerfyrddin—Adeiladwyr LBS, Morgan Marine, and Whitland Engineering, to name just a few—all training and employing local people. We also have Bremenda Isaf, a publicly owned, council-owned farm growing fresh, high-quality, affordable produce for our schools, care homes, and cafés—and let me tell the House that its tomatoes and carrots are to die for! They are absolutely delicious. Those examples show that our communities do not lack potential or ambition, but they have lacked investment. We need a targeted rural economic strategy, one that delivers stable jobs, affordable housing, and real support for small businesses.

Farmers are also instrumental in providing answers to tackle the climate and nature crises. Adopting renewable energy through a mix of solar/wind and marine is a way for us to play our part in addressing these issues. However, in the transition to renewable energy we must also consider the needs of our communities and natural environment. Caerfyrddin’s natural beauty is priceless, but Green GEN’s plans threaten to scar our landscapes with a chain of pylons running through the Tywi and Teifi valleys. Undergrounding these cables—something that local groups have long demanded—would not only preserve the natural beauty of Caerfyrddin’s landscape, but protect our power supply from increasingly extreme weather events driven by the climate crisis. Power outages following Storms Darragh and Éowyn were caused by trees falling on overground electricity cables.

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): The security of our infrastructure and energy supply is crucial, in the context of both weather and possible enemy attacks.

Ann Davies: Absolutely. It is vital for any new electricity infrastructure to be placed underground, as it is in Belgium, Holland, Germany, Denmark, Ireland and most other European countries. Would that not make more sense?

We have a once-in-a-generation opportunity to build a green economy that works for everyone in Wales, not just big investors, so let us get it right. As St David said,

“Gwnewch y pethau bychain,” which means “Do the little things.” But let us be clear: little things do not mean insignificant things. Thriving family farms, strong local businesses, green energy that works for our communities—these things might seem small in isolation, but put together, they shape our economy, culture and future. Let us stand up for our farmers, our businesses and our communities. Let us invest in Wales, and let us get it right. Dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus —have a lovely, happy St David’s Day.

4 pm

Catherine Fookes (Monmouthshire) (Lab): Llongyfarchiadau to my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) on securing this debate, and dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus pawb—happy St David’s Day to everyone.

Twenty-five years ago, I was lucky enough to make Wales my home, and I am so proud to represent Monmouthshire; from Llantony to Llanishen, it is the most beautiful constituency in Wales. We have the most incredible sights, with the commanding Bannau Brycheiniog in the north and the picturesque Wye valley national landscape in the east, as well as the brilliant market towns of Abergavenny, Chepstow, Monmouth and Usk and the Magor marsh in the south. Last week, I visited Usk and Prescoed prisons and our fantastic probation services. I would like to take a moment to pay tribute to all our public servants working across Wales and Monmouthshire as teachers, doctors, nurses, prison and probation officers and so much more. They are at the heart of our communities.

Each community across Monmouthshire is vibrant and adds to the welcoming culture that we in Wales are so proud of. After all, Monmouthshire community organisations, such as the Abergavenny community centre, are some of the best in the UK. The community always rallies round and people support each other in a crisis, such as the floods in Skenfrith.

Wales also has a strong and long history with the Labour party; it elected great leaders and political thinkers like Kier Hardie in Merthyr Tydfil, Aneurin Bevan in Ebbw Vale and James Callaghan in Cardiff. It is a history that we value and should never take for granted. The bond between Wales and Labour is built on our understanding of the priorities of our communities, and our Welsh Labour Government colleagues have been delivering for Wales for 25 years. They have shaped a country where we are proud to work differently, in partnership with the public sector, charities and unions.

We are a country that leads the world on the environment, with a world-first future generations Act, an active travel Act, and a plastic bags tax, and we are leading on recycling. We have prioritised families, delivering universal free school meals in all primary schools and the biggest building investment in Welsh schools since the 1960s. We have three new secondary schools in Monmouthshire, built under the Welsh Government’s 21st-century schools programme—unlike the Conservatives, we never stopped investing in our schools and our young people in Wales—and the very latest to open its doors will be in Abergavenny in April. Wales is a country where we stand up for and fight for what we believe in. It is an honour to be a Monmouthshire MP. Having two Labour Governments working together has made a great difference to all our services.

I am proud that ever more Monmouthshire residents are starting to learn Welsh, me included, although I am at the very start of my journey and must apologise to all fluent Welsh speakers for my pronunciation. We now have three Welsh-medium primary schools in the county: Ysgol y Ffin, Ysgol Gymraeg y Fenni, and our very recently added Ysgol Gymraeg Trefynwy. I am very grateful to all the campaigners over the years who have got these schools open, particularly Councillor Tudor Thomas. I recognise that, much like our rugby team, the Welsh language in Monmouthshire is on the rise, but there is still some way to go.

Wales has a lot to offer and, for a small nation, has given the world so much. I am so proud to consider myself Welsh, having moved there 25 years ago, and to represent the great constituency of Monmouthshire. I am incredibly humbled and proud that the people of Monmouthshire chose me in July 2024. Felly eto dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus i'm hetholwyr yn Sir Fynwy ac i bawb sydd yma heddiw.

4.4 pm

Llinos Medi (Ynys Môn) (PC): Diolch, Dirprwy Lefarydd. St David, the patron saint of Wales, was a renowned teacher, teaching his lessons across Wales. He founded monastic settlements and churches in Wales, Brittany and south-west England, teaching his message of discipline and living a simple life that shaped the communities he served. In the Wales of today, we would do well to remember history's lessons and not repeat mistakes that have been made. In particular, we seem to be struggling to learn from experience when it comes to the economy.

In 2025, Wales's GDP per person is 26% below the UK average. Parts of Wales, including west Wales, the valleys and Ynys Môn, my constituency, are performing even more poorly. Child poverty is set to reach 34% by the end of the decade, but in Scotland it is forecast to be 15% lower. For decades, we have failed to address the fundamental problems that face Wales. We have never had an ambitious, strategic economic plan. The case for a new, radical and "made in Wales" approach to economic development is clear for all to see.

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): Does the hon. Lady join me in welcoming the new Labour Government's efforts, particularly through the industrial strategy, to fundamentally address the systemic problems around economic growth that have afflicted many communities in west Wales, including in my Pembrokeshire constituency?

Llinos Medi: I am not sure if the hon. Gentleman has looked at the ambitious plan he mentions and counted how many times Wales is mentioned: if he puts the word "Wales" into Google and searches that document, he will find that Wales is mentioned about nine times. That shows the lack of ambition for Wales.

Wales has immense natural resources. It is in a prime position to lead the industries of the future and give us energy security. Ynys Môn is a clear example of that potential. We have the community-owned Morlais tidal project; companies from across the world are looking at the potential of deploying their technologies in such zones. Ynys Môn also has the Wylfa site, the best site in the UK for a new nuclear power project, which would

drive growth and economic development across Ynys Môn and north Wales. I urge the Government to officially designate Wylfa a preferred site for nuclear development.

Across Wales, there is huge potential for floating offshore wind. According to the Crown Estate's "Celtic Sea Blueprint", upcoming offshore wind developments could create up to 5,300 new jobs and generate £1.4 billion, notably, "for the UK economy". A devolved Crown Estate would ensure that those jobs and wealth were created and kept locally. Maximising our clean energy potential must be done strategically to create economic growth that benefits our communities.

We should recognise the value of our agricultural sector to the economy and the importance of food security, and we should not be pursuing large-scale solar farms on agricultural land. There is plenty of room for small-scale solar, including on rooftops and buildings. The Alaw Môn and Maen Hir projects on Ynys Môn would have a detrimental impact to the economy. Solar farms do not create jobs; they dissolve jobs.

Taking the bold measures that I have outlined today will help create new jobs and opportunities for people in Wales. It would revitalise the economy and help to encourage people to stay in Wales, while attracting many recent emigrants back. That is the bold, innovative thinking we need for the second half of this decade and beyond, and Plaid Cymru is ready to deliver this vision for the communities of Wales. I wish a happy St David's Day on Saturday to you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and to the rest of the House.

4.9 pm

Andrew Ranger (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a real pleasure to speak in my first St David's Day debate in this place, along with so many other new Members.

The time around St David's Day is always special, as so many have said. It is a moment of national and local pride for Welsh communities, a time when we celebrate everything that makes us proud of Wales. I look forward to joining in our annual St David's Day parade in Wrexham this Saturday, led by the Cambria band, on what will be a busy day in the city, with our monthly award-winning street market and a home game against Bolton Wanderers also happening.

St David, or Dewi Sant, was known to have been a radical of his time, doing away with and challenging the perceived norms. We see that radical spirit woven into the fabric of Welsh politics—the radical spirit that saw Nye Bevan lead the charge for the national health service, the fightback against the devastation of Thatcher and the Conservatives' decisions to close the mines in the 1980s, and the enduring quest for devolution, which was finally achieved just over 25 years ago, under the last UK Labour Government.

The devolution we celebrate has allowed Wales to do things differently; we have free prescriptions; we are keeping, not cutting, maintenance grants for students; we have a publicly owned train company; and we have the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015—the first in the UK. All that and much more was achieved because of devolution, not in spite of it, as some may believe. Wales is a strong devolved nation in a strong Union; devolution is an evolving journey, not a destination. I look forward to seeing how that journey develops, now that we have two Governments working together.

[Andrew Ranger]

St David's Day is about celebrating the proud history that we all share, so it is a shame that no Reform Members are in the Chamber to brush up on their history for their next day trip across the border. That history ranges far and wide, from St Davids to Wrexham and from Chepstow to Holyhead, but I hope that colleagues will forgive me if I speak further on history a bit closer to home—any opportunity to wax lyrical about Wrexham.

Most will of course know about the world-famous Wrexham associated football club, but they may be less aware of the role that our city played in ensuring that Welsh football is what it is today. In February 1876, a group of football enthusiasts met at the Wynnstay hotel in the centre of Wrexham. From that meeting came the formation of the Football Association of Wales and the Welsh cup, which remains one of the oldest competitions in the world; Wrexham has won it a record 23 times. The Cae Ras in Wrexham is the oldest international stadium in the world that is still hosting matches, the most recent of which was earlier this week, and Wales's first home match was held there in 1877; it has hosted more Wales international matches than any other ground.

Much is said about the seven wonders of the world, but not enough is said about the seven wonders of Wales, three of which can be found in my constituency. We have St Giles parish church in the centre of our city; the Overton yew trees, which are estimated to be around 2,000 years old; and the bells of All Saints' church in Gresford, which have been ringing continuously since the 16th century—hopefully with a break—and which sometimes ring of their own volition.

No debate about Wales would be complete without mention of beer. Wrexham Lager has a history that spans back to 1882, and it continues to make a significant contribution to the Welsh economy, exporting across the world. I have just joined other Members here at an excellent showcase of Welsh food and drink, at which another Wrexham brewery, the Magic Dragon, was showing its exceptional beers.

There is so much more to say about Wales and about Wrexham, but in the interests of time, I finish by wishing everyone a dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus for Saturday. Diolch yn fawr, Madam Deputy Speaker.

4.13 pm

Mr Alex Barros-Curtis (Cardiff West) (Lab): Diolch yn fawr, Madam Deputy Speaker. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) and my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), who I congratulate on her stewardship of the Welsh Affairs Committee, for securing this debate.

It is an honour, as a new Member of Parliament, to take part in my first St David's Day debate. Despite what some news outlets have said about me—this is a lesson not to believe everything we read in the press—I am a proud Welshman, and I am proud to be one of the representatives of our nation's capital in this Chamber. St David's Day allows us to celebrate our patron saint Dewi Sant, who is incidentally the only native-born patron saint of the four home nations and of Ireland, but it also allows us an opportunity to come together and celebrate our communities, to talk powerfully about the brilliance of Wales, and to be ambassadors for Wales, both at home and abroad.

Today, we have heard some excellent contributions from colleagues across the House about how brilliant their constituencies are, but I am sure you will agree with me, Madam Deputy Speaker, that it is a truth universally acknowledged that Cardiff West remains the best. It is a vibrant, brilliant community that is the proud left bank of Wales. Two First Ministers have come from my constituency, and our current First Minister was born in Ely, in the heart of my constituency. In my maiden speech, I described how while

“each area is defined by its own unique character...the common thread that runs through them is a proud community, replete with families, local activists, sports clubs, volunteers and faith leaders”—*[Official Report, 25 July 2024; Vol. 752, c. 888.]*

all committed to serving the neighbourhoods that they call home.

Although I of course love all parts of my brilliant constituency, I want to place a little focus on Ely in this contribution. Ely is a proud community that has endured many problems over the years, and when reporting on Ely happens, the media tends to focus only on the negative, rather than the vibrancy and community spirit that I have seen in my short time as its Member of Parliament. That vibrancy and community spirit has been tested with housing shortages, benefit cuts, austerity and a lack of investment over the past 14 years. Let us be clear, despite the amnesia of Plaid Cymru Members: this was a legacy of a Tory Westminster Government.

Now, under this UK Government, for the first time in 14 years we have a Westminster Government committed to delivering for Wales. It is the first time in a generation. Since the general election, Wales has seen the largest funding boost since devolution, with £21 billion of new money and a record £1.7 billion spending boost for the Welsh Government to support public services, including the NHS. I pay tribute to the Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff East (Jo Stevens), and the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend the Member for Llanelli (Dame Nia Griffith), for their efforts to secure that funding, and for their continuing work to forge a new partnership with the Welsh Government, returning it to a partnership of respect.

Since my election, I have sought to focus on Ely, trying to help tackle some of its issues while also promoting its story. For example, it needs improvement to its parks, so I welcome Cardiff council's commitment to a new youth zone. Over the years, Ely has had a proud sporting tradition. Its sports clubs are at the heart of the community, and at the weekend, Trelai park in neighbouring Caerau and the recreation ground in Ely are huge sources of joy and fun for children, adults and families. However, we must also support further funding for our schools. Cardiff West community high school serves both sides of Ely—Caerau and Ely. I have seen the great work it does in the community, working with partners to make its new facilities available to young people across the constituency.

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend join me in congratulating the Welsh Labour Government on their work on schools in Wales, keeping the investment in school buildings going after it was cut in England in 2010 through the 21st century schools programme? Now, through the sustainable communities for learning programme, which has seen schools and colleges across Wales—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. The hon. Lady was going to be next on my list, but that was a very long intervention.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I wholeheartedly agree with and support my hon. Friend's intervention, and I look forward to hearing more about it in her speech.

Of course, the route out of poverty is through education, and we must continue to work with the Welsh Government to improve educational outcomes in areas such as Ely. Already, the proposed budget from the Welsh Government will mean an extra £1.5 billion for public services, once again showing the power of partnership between two Governments working together in the interests of the Welsh people. Why, therefore, Plaid Cymru will be joining the Conservatives next week to vote against that investment in the budget is beyond me.

Liz Saville Roberts: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Barros-Curtis: Very briefly.

Liz Saville Roberts: I am sure the hon. Gentleman knows as well as I do that this is not an increase in real terms, and that the Welsh budget is front-loaded. We know that grief is coming down the track in future budgets, so it is hardly appropriate to be singing the praises of this budget, knowing what is on its way.

Mr Barros-Curtis: I will simply say that while I may agree with some of what the right hon. Lady said today, it is still inexplicable to me that Plaid Cymru would vote against an extra £1.5 billion in the budget next week, and join the Tories in doing so. Their reasons for doing so seem unfathomable.

I will conclude by saying that I am proud to serve the constituents of Cardiff West, and I will always work hard for the whole community there. To everyone in this House and to all of my constituents, I say Dydd Dewi Sant hapus.

4.18 pm

Steve Witherden (Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) on securing this important debate. Having spent my entire life in various parts of Glyndŵr, it is an honour to represent my constituency of Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr, an area steeped in the rich history of Wales. Bersham, for instance, was the cradle of the industrial revolution, home to the Davies brothers' workshops. It is where British ironmaking began in 1670; where smelting iron ore with coke first took place in 1721; and where the pioneer of industrialisation, "Iron-Mad" John Wilkinson, established himself in 1761. It is where the first single-mould cannons in the world were bored, which were against the Americans during their war of independence. It was also the site where the cylinders for James Watt's steam engine were manufactured.

While much of Wales's industrial development focused on the extraction of raw materials, such as coal, slate and water, the Ruabon-Chester railway—the oldest commercial rail line in Wales—was not used for resource extraction. Instead, it was used to export manufactured goods made from the beautiful Ruabon red clay deposits in the area to England. Fast-forward to the present day, and it is wonderful to see how modern Glyndŵr has

evolved from its heavily industrialised past. The coal spoil tip in Rhostyllen, for example, housed the Hollywood-style Wrexham sign when the football club gained two famous owners a few years ago. We have the old chemical plant site, straddling Cefn Mawr, Acrefair and Trevor, which has naturally rewilded with an abundance of buddleia flowers and butterflies during the summer months. A walk up the Trefnant valley to the top of Acrefair is now as beautiful and idyllic as it would have been in pre-industrial times, with rare birds and uniquely marked brown trout visible in the brook.

Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr is full of people with big hearts doing things every day to make our vibrant constituency special. In Llanidloes, constituents established a community venue at the Hanging Gardens, providing cake, soup, entertainment and wood and metalworking classes, complementing a town that already boasts community energy and solar organisations. It even offers a chance to borrow—not buy—from the library of things. In Machynlleth, our town councillors recently opened local town council-run toilets at a time when so many public conveniences are closing. That has made a big difference to the many visitors to the brilliant El Sueño and the Mach comedy festival.

In Carno, tireless volunteers are campaigning to reopen the railway station and establish a Laura Ashley museum at the very spot where its factory once stood. In Welshpool, the community hub has evolved from being a welcoming space into a supportive environment offering multiple services. One of the councillors, Ben Gwalchmai, has recently led the successful project to provide free community wi-fi, alleviating data poverty for many residents.

Our agricultural shows and fêtes at Glyn Ceiriog, Montgomery, Llanbryn-mair, Guilsfield, Berriew, Llanfair Caereinion and Llanfyllin would not be possible without the help of an array of amazing volunteers, nor would the community wellness hub at the George Edwards hall in Cefn Mawr, which has had a real and substantial impact on the mental health of local people. People in Plas Madoc recently celebrated 10 years of their leisure centre, which is owned and managed by the community. The Splash Community Trust, which manages the facility, has expanded its remit to support the community by hosting a food bank and offering other advice services. Its success story has been an inspiration to us all.

4.22 pm

Tonia Antoniazzi (Gower) (Lab): Happy St David's Day, everyone. A lot can change in a year, so I had a look back at my speech from last year to see what is different and what has stayed the same. It turns out that I only need to make one adjustment to my opening lines from last year, so here goes: I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones)

"for securing this debate—one that I look forward to every year."—[*Official Report*, 29 February 2024; Vol. 746, c. 511.]

My apologies for taking out the name of the former right hon. Member for Preseli Pembrokeshire, as he is a good friend. As they say, needs must. Like last year, we are back again after three defeats for Wales in the men's Six Nations. I am hopeful, however, that the women's squad will provide some national joy when their tournament kicks off later in March.

Moving on to the new, perhaps the biggest change in the last 12 months is that we now have a Labour Government in the UK, working with the Labour

[*Tonia Antoniazzi*]

Government in Wales. Labour took 27 seats in Wales, with 10 newbies, some of whom are here today, and I welcome them with open arms. This is one of the parliamentary highlights of the year. I extend that welcome to our new Welsh MPs in other parties. We may not be aligned on everything, but we all do care deeply about getting the best outcomes for Wales.

Following the boundary changes at the general election, my team and I have been working alongside two Labour MSs: Rebecca Evans of Gower and Julie James of Swansea West. Both have recently announced that they will stand down at the next Senedd election, so I want to take this opportunity to thank them for their service to their constituents and the people of Wales in their ministerial roles.

I have told Members of this place many times before that I represent the most beautiful part of Wales, and that remains unchanged. Gower is world-famous for its breathtaking coastline, so naturally the quality of our seawater is deeply important to my constituents and me. In the last 12 months, I have set up a campaign to test the bathing water throughout the whole of the winter season. The secret of its success is the commitment of my constituents, local businesses and the Gower Society. Those of us who live near the coast know that our constituents swim or dip in the sea all year round, not just during the bathing season. I pay tribute to Dawn Thomas from Nature Days, who has gathered all the data, and Sarah Samuel, the secretary of the Gower Society; they have been absolutely outstanding in running the programme. What we are doing is new, so their guidance is really important, and it will inform both the Welsh Government and the UK Government.

Gower is also known for its rural landscape, and farming plays a pivotal role in the constituency. Many farmers have rightly raised concerns about the announcements in the Budget relating to inheritance tax, and I want to assure them that I will continue to listen and to share their concerns with the Government, ensuring that their voices are heard.

As in many rural communities, pubs are hugely important in Gower. On Tuesday next week, I will welcome Lara from the Kings Head in Llangennith, as she is a pub finalist in the community pub hero awards—make sure you are there, Madam Deputy Speaker, because it is the best night in the parliamentary calendar. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary beer group—of course I am—I am delighted that there is some local representation at PubAid's annual awards, which celebrate the contribution that pubs and hospitality make to their communities.

Some things will never change, and I want to talk about women in sport in Wales. I congratulate the Wales women's football team on reaching this year's Euros tournament for the first time. Years of hard work and dedication have paid off, and I wish them well in Switzerland, particularly against our neighbours and old sporting rivals, the English. But do not worry, and panic not—I have not forgotten about the rugby. The women's rugby world cup is coming.

4.27 pm

Gill German (Clwyd North) (Lab): I need no excuse to wax lyrical about Wales—particularly the mighty Gogledd, or north Wales, which I am proud to call

home—but I am delighted to have the opportunity to do so here in this House as part of my first debate to mark St David's Day.

In my teaching days, I would have spent St David's Day organising paintings of red dragons; cutting, folding and sticking yellow paper into daffodils; and conducting singing in the round for the song “*Dydd Gŵyl Dewi ydy hi*”. However, in the run-up to St David's Day, *dyma fi*—here I am—in the House of Commons as the proud MP for Clwyd North, or *yr Aelod Seneddol dros Ogledd Clwyd*.

Thanks to the coastal path running along the coastline of Wales, I can take the House for a walk along Clwyd North from end to end. We can walk beside wide sandy beaches that other coastal areas can only dream of, from Rhyl and past the Pavilion theatre and the lifeboat station that has served our waters for over 150 years; through Kinmel Bay, Towyn and Pensarn, with its hundreds of caravans nestled by the shore, which host visitors who have holidayed there for generations; through the glorious Porth Eirias in Colwyn Bay, with its watersports centre and divine seafood at the Bryn Williams bistro; and to the bobbing boats, and chic cafés and shops, of Rhos-on-Sea.

Our Clwyd North coastline is truly something to be proud of and to behold, but there is so much more, including the market town of Denbigh, where everybody knows each other's names, with its historic Denbigh castle and the fabulously renovated Buttermarket, which is now a centre of wellbeing, culture and heritage; the fine Welsh folly that is Bodelwyddan castle, which is now a beautiful hotel; the magnificent cathedral of St Asaph; and the majestic splendour of Rhuddlan castle. Clwyd North has so much to offer.

Across Wales we have lots to be proud of. The coastal path is just one of the achievements that show the value we place on wellbeing and rights in Wales. It was a journey hard travelled by our Welsh Labour Government against the hard winds of 14 years of Tory rule in Westminster. In 2015 we passed the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act, giving Wales the ambition, permission and legal obligation to improve social, cultural and environmental wellbeing.

That of course chimes loudly with the long-term aims of our UK Labour Government, and this is no coincidence. United by our shared Labour values, our Welsh Labour Government at last have a partner in our Westminster Government to jointly work towards our shared Labour aims. With the partnership in power of Eluned Morgan as First Minister and my right hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff East (Jo Stevens) as Secretary of State for Wales, we are finally setting about realising our hopes and ambitions for the future. We have made a great start, with the largest funding boost to Wales since the dawn of devolution. In Clwyd North this means that long-held regeneration ambitions can finally start to become a reality, which is no less than our communities deserve.

This St David's Day we have more to celebrate than ever in Wales, with a vision and a plan for the future backed by two Labour Governments. *Mae Cymru yn symud ymlaen gyda phartneriaeth o bŵer*—Wales is moving forward with a partnership of power. *Dydd gŵyl Dewi hapus, bawb*.

4.31 pm

Henry Tufnell (Mid and South Pembrokeshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) and my good friend and constituency neighbour the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake) for securing this debate.

St David's Day is a very important day for Wales, but particularly for my constituents in Mid and South Pembrokeshire. I live in St Davids, the birthplace of the patron saint, and the area surrounding St Davids is part of the Pembrokeshire Coast national park. With its breathtaking cliff walks, hidden beaches and amazing wildlife, it has been the site of thousands of holidays, hikes and even film sets. This weekend, St Davids will host the annual dragon parade in honour of the birth of St David, and we will see schoolchildren, community groups and local residents sharing in a day of joy and local tradition. The parade will feature music and colourful dragons made by the residents of St Davids, showcasing some of the creativity that Pembrokeshire is home to.

I was lucky enough to experience for myself the incredible creative talent we have in Pembrokeshire last week at the annual Coram Shakespeare Schools theatre festival at the Torch theatre in Milford Haven. The festival provides an incredible opportunity for children of all ages and educational needs, and my communities get involved in local theatre by building the children's confidence, tackling issues of anxiety and mental health, and equipping them with skills for life. That is why I am so thrilled about our Welsh Labour Government's commitment to supporting Wales's brilliant arts and culture sector with a £4.4 million annual funding boost, which was announced just last week.

Alan Gemmell (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): May I extend the wishes for happiness of the people of Central Ayrshire to Wales on this St David's Day? As a former trade commissioner, I was delighted in Mumbai to spend time to celebrate the achievements of the people of Wales all around the world. I know that Wales has many friends in India and around the world because of those creative industries.

Henry Tufnell: I thank my hon. Friend—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): Order. Before the hon. Member continues, let me just say that I will be calling the first of the Front Benchers to speak at 4.35 pm precisely.

Henry Tufnell: I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention, and I will therefore make some progress, Madam Deputy Speaker.

This crucial support will protect our theatres, cultural spaces and museums so that they can continue to play a central role in education, community engagement and tourism. Local sports clubs are at the heart of our communities, promoting active, healthy lifestyles and supporting our most talented athletes to achieve their dreams. They include St Davids's Jasmine Joyce, who represented Team GB in the women's rugby sevens at the Tokyo Olympics, and Joe Allen, a midfielder for Wales, who started out playing in a local Tenby football team.

Pembrokeshire is bursting with talent, and I am determined to ensure that my constituents are given the support and resources they need to release their full

potential. So I was delighted with the recent commitment from the Energy Secretary in announcing Pembrokeshire as a key growth region for clean energy, which will mean more investment in skills and secure jobs for the future. After years of neglect from successive Tory Governments in Westminster, Labour is putting a vote of confidence in Pembrokeshire.

That commitment will support the fantastic work of Pembrokeshire College and the local businesses that are already leading the way to maximise the benefits of a green transition for local people. Just last week I visited WB Griffiths, a local construction company based in Haverfordwest, and its fantastic cohort of new apprentices. This family-run business offers a brilliant range of apprenticeships and makes a real difference in our community, helping to improve the energy efficiency of buildings and homes.

Mid and South Pembrokeshire has a proud industrial history. The oil industry transformed the county's economic fortunes in the 1960s and '70s. *[Interruption.]* And I will give way, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes): I thank the hon. Gentleman for meeting the time limit so neatly. That brings us to the Front Benchers.

4.35 pm

David Chadwick (Brecon, Radnor and Cwm Tawe) (LD): I thank the hon. Members responsible for securing the debate.

Our patron saint, St David, championed the virtues of leadership and perseverance, urging us to "do the little things". His words, though centuries old, resonate powerfully as we face the ongoing challenges in our constituencies today. His words underscore the necessity for meticulous attention to the seemingly minor yet impactful decisions that together weave the effective fabric of governance. Over the past eight months, I have seen how small decisions can change lives for the better. The residents of Ystradgynlais are delighted to know that, following my request, a banking hub will be opening on their high street within the next three months. The banking hub will boost an already thriving high street and spur on the local economy.

Ystradgynlais was once a vibrant hub of industrial activity. The closure of the "Tick Tock" factory in 1999 was a significant economic blow to the town, resulting in hundreds of redundancies. Established in the 1940s, the factories have been described to me as "the making" of local women. The factories thrived throughout the 1950s and into the 1960s, heralding a new era in the history of Ystradgynlais and the surrounding areas. Local women enjoyed economic independence regardless of their educational background or marital status. The flexibility in working hours offered at the factories was revolutionary, allowing women to structure their shift patterns to suit their family commitments.

At their zenith, the factories employed around 2,000 workers and provided more than just employment; they fostered a community. Each worker was automatically a member of the social and recreational club, which featured rugby and football teams, a choir, and offered much more, including regular day trips and dances. Moreover, the closure of the Dewhirst factory in Ystalyfera in 1998 resulted in 300 job losses. The closure was part

[David Chadwick]

of a broader programme that hurt the local economy and the community's wellbeing. The end of operations at Dewhurst highlights the vulnerability of such communities to global shifts in industrial practices and economic policies.

Those closures are not ancient history; their effect is a stark, recent reality that continues to impact the community profoundly. The legacy of factories such as the Tick Tock and Dewhurst illustrates the pitfalls of globalisation. They show us how industries can significantly influence community building and social empowerment, but also how their closures can lead to profound community and economic disruption. Since then, successive Governments have failed to replace those jobs.

Despite the challenges that the community faces, there is hope in initiatives such as the mobile banking hub coming to Ystradgynlais shortly. That will stand as a testament to the resilience and adaptive spirit of these communities. This institution signals a potential revival of economic engagement and empowerment. However, it also highlights the gaps left by the Government's sporadic support and delayed responses, which fail to harness the full potential of Welsh innovation and resourcefulness.

Wales, as we all know, is a mostly rural nation; a nation of small towns and villages. So one might imagine that the Labour party would understand the importance of rural public services, but people living in rural areas in Wales are watching as their services disappear one by one. Just this week, police stations in Crickhowell and Hay were closed without any prior warning. That will make it harder for the people who want to keep us safe to do their jobs. Police officers are key workers and their offices should be treated as such.

Due to impending top-down reorganisations, small towns such as Knighton and Crickhowell are also facing the closure of their fire stations. How can anyone think it is a good idea even to consider taking fire engines out of communities that are frequently cut off by flooding? Following storm after storm over the past year, the fire service teams across Powys have proven themselves indispensable, and so are those services. These closures jeopardise public safety and erode trust in the state's ability to protect and serve rural communities. Each closure and each cutback is a stark reminder of the Government's wavering commitment to public safety, underscoring that the need to address this is not just a matter of convenience but a fundamental issue of community security.

The controversy surrounding the demolition of Godre'r Graig primary school following its closure in 2019 due to a supposed landslide risk underscores the urgent need for transparency and evidence-based decision making that involves and listens to local communities. Despite the school marking the sixth anniversary of that closure, pupils and teachers remain in temporary classrooms without a clear plan for the future, and this uncertainty, coupled with local doubts about the actual risks posed by the nearby quarry spoil tip, calls for a thorough examination of the facts to ensure that policies are built on solid foundations.

Drawing inspiration from the great Welsh leader David Lloyd George—the greatest Welsh politician of all time, and the longest continuously serving MP in this House's

history, with 55 years of continuous service—we are reminded of the transformative power of bold and decisive action. In his own words:

“The finest eloquence is that which gets things done”.

Lloyd George, who reshaped British society in the early 20th century with progressive reforms, understood the balance between vision and action, and his legacy is a testament to the impact that that visionary leadership can have on a nation's course.

Now that the spirit of Welsh liberalism breathes again in this Chamber, I want to turn Wales into a nation of winners again, because the Welsh Liberal Democrats are winning in Wales once again. Today, let us embody the spirit of St David by committing to both the small deeds and significant actions necessary to secure a prosperous future for Wales. Let us move boldly forward, together advocating for St David's Day to be recognised as a national holiday.

Ben Maguire: I commend my hon. Friend for his excellent speech. It is great to see the Liberal Democrats supporting St David's Day being made a national holiday. Will he join and support my campaign for Cornwall to have St Piran's Day as a public holiday? Gool Peran Lowen.

David Chadwick: I do of course support my hon. Friend's campaign, and I hope he will also endorse our campaign for St David's Day to be considered a public holiday.

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

4.42 pm

Mims Davies (East Grinstead and Uckfield) (Con): *Diolch yn fawr, Madam Deputy Speaker.* It is an honour to respond to this today's debate on St David's Day and Welsh affairs on behalf of His Majesty's loyal Opposition. It is a huge honour to carry out this role, working together with our Senedd team, councillors and activists.

Funnily enough, I have always been known in this party as the honorary Welsh girl, and it has never felt more right than today. Living and being in Wales has shaped my life for the past 30 years. I spent nearly 10 years of my life there—as I get older, that number diminishes in terms of percentage somewhat—and I, like many Members present, have a massive passion for Wales. Those who have lived there know just how special Wales is; it has shaped our lives, hopes, dreams and families. Living there is certainly an unforgettable experience—although I am quite pleased that many of my nights out on Wind Street in Swansea have been forgotten by my friends and family.

Hon. Members: More!

Mims Davies: Well, there was a lot of that. The only reason I left Wales, actually, was because of my ex-husband's job—they do say they are exes for a reason, so there we go. I will not go into my nickname of DJ Love Spoon, which is definitely for another day.

It is certainly an extra pleasure to conclude this debate on behalf of my party today after the Welsh food and drink showcase earlier. I was particularly

impressed with the Atlantic Edge oysters, which arrived from beautiful Pembrokeshire, and wine from family-run vineyards in Wales has never tasted so good, along with the beef jerky and salt beef—what an afternoon for us here in the House of Commons. I was recently in Wales with the Leader of the Opposition, visiting JCB at Wrexham. I certainly think that we could use a bucketful of those oysters going forward.

I was with some of my constituents in East Grinstead—as Members know, my constituency is not in Wales—which is home to the Caravan and Motorhome Club. The club is vital to Wales as it runs the campsites, offering jobs and opportunities across the nation. It would be remiss of me not to share with the House its concerns over the tourism tax from the Welsh Labour Government and the rise in national insurance contributions.

We have had a positive and spirited conversation about Wales this afternoon, as we would always expect in this House. It is absolutely right that issues and concerns are raised here and that we use every opportunity possible to champion Wales and our Union, and my party, the Conservative and Unionist party, has never shied away from doing just that. We fully believe in Wales, which is why, when we were in office, we were so dedicated to helping unleash its true potential.

Let me turn to some of the comments made this afternoon. I was very jealous of the Chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones), for meeting the other Ruth Jones—not only is her TV brilliant, but her books are too. What a talented lady she is. The right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts), the leader of Plaid Cymru, was wearing an outstanding daffodil, as we would expect this afternoon. She gave a characteristic speech of passion and love for Wales.

I was fascinated to hear the hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) talking up Neath market. Balancing that with Swansea market must be a difficult challenge, but if there is one lady who is up to it, it is her. I say to the hon. Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) that I was very lucky to pop along to the beautiful Three Cliffs Bay Holiday Park. I was pleased to hear her standing up strongly for her constituents in terms of the inheritance tax, and supporting the pubs, including the beautiful Kings Head in Llangennith—what an exciting week she has ahead of her. She talked about the spirit of sport in Wales, particularly women's sport, which is characteristic of her.

My hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth) spoke about her mum from Swansea—I did not know about that! That is what I love about being in the Chamber, particularly on a Thursday afternoon. She is a new archer, which reminded us all to be very careful of arrows. The hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) rightly spoke about the rich heritage of steel, and now silicon, in her constituency. That reminded me of my rich heritage: I was getting a new passport in Newport, and decided to get a tattoo to go with it, so part of Newport is always carried with me!

The hon. Member for Ynys Môn (Llinos Medi) spoke about the future of Wylfa and Morlais. It is really important for her to be championing that sector and her constituency—just like her predecessor did. I am in no doubt that it is important to know what the next steps in that sector are.

The Conservative Government always focused on Wales, delivering an additional £18 billion. It is vital to remember the work that we did. I know that all constituencies will have benefited from the support that we offered during covid, including the furlough scheme. That is why we can now talk about those businesses and those opportunities in Wales.

I recently had the opportunity to visit the Port Talbot steelworks to see what was happening just ahead of the forthcoming electric arc furnace, which will start this summer. There are some important and exciting times ahead for that community. Yesterday, I met representatives from S4C, which was important given the focus that our party gave to supporting the Welsh Language Act 1993. It was a pleasure to meet the team and hear about Welsh media, which shaped my career, as many Members here know. We understand the vital importance of local production, local commissioning and opportunities right across Wales because of the media sector.

It would be remiss of me not to focus on some of the challenges across Wales. My party and I join the Secretary State in supporting very strongly the idea that Wales needs a nationwide grooming gang inquiry. Can she give an update on that at the Dispatch Box?

As a Minister in the Wales Office, along with Alun Cairns, I was delighted to scrap the Severn bridge tolls, which was a boost for investment and local people. The tourism and attractions sector is concerned about the tourism tax. It is important that we do not “devolve and forget” when it comes to Wales. We Conservatives believe in Wales. We believe that it is the right place to invest in, live, work and visit.

4.50 pm

The Secretary of State for Wales (Jo Stevens): I thank the Backbench Business Committee for recognising the importance of allocating time to hold this debate on Wales and Welsh affairs. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones) and the hon. Member for Ceredigion Preseli (Ben Lake), the chair and vice-chair of the Welsh Affairs Committee, respectively, for proposing today's motion.

It is a real honour to be the first female Labour Secretary of State for Wales and to begin delivering this Government's plan for change. Across Wales and the whole UK we will raise living standards, make our public services fit for the future and our streets safer, secure home-grown, clean energy and ensure opportunity for all. That is the change that people across Wales need, deserve and voted for seven months ago. When we took office, I was clear that my priorities in the Wales Office included bringing investment to Wales to create well-paid jobs and economic growth, protecting and defending our steel communities and resetting the relationship between the UK Government and the Welsh Government, to be one of trust, co-operation and mutual respect.

The past six months have already seen billions of pounds of investment committed and hundreds of jobs created, including at the Port of Mostyn, and at Eren Holding at Shotton Mill. The ground has been laid for thousands more in advanced manufacturing, renewable energy and other growth sectors. Just this week, I announced a £600 million investment by Copenhagen Infrastructure Partners into Bute Energy and Green GEN Cymru's onshore wind generation. That will create hundreds of

[Jo Stevens]

new jobs and contribute significantly to the UK Government's clean power mission and our ambition to double onshore wind, as well as the Welsh Government's target for green electricity in Wales by 2035.

David Chadwick: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Jo Stevens: If the hon. Gentleman does not mind, I will carry on because we do not have much time.

We have given the green light to Welsh freeports to unlock billions in private investment and galvanise almost 20,000 jobs in our port communities of Milford Haven, Port Talbot and Holyhead. Two investment zones, in Wrexham and Flintshire and in Cardiff and Newport, have been confirmed, with £320 million of funding to support growth in key sectors of the economy to create those new jobs. We have also secured funding for local growth projects across Wales worth £440 million, including money for Cardiff Crossrail and the recently opened Porth transport hub.

We have protected key programmes that are important for local regeneration and economic growth, such as the iconic Newport transporter bridge and Venue Cymru in Llandudno. We are continuing to invest throughout Wales, with over £790 million in UK Government funding through the city and regional growth deals. Unlike the Conservative Government, whose £22 billion in unfunded commitments left many Welsh levelling-up developments at risk, our investment in these initiatives is an example of how our plan for change will lead to a decade of national renewal for people the length and breadth of Wales.

Wales now has the benefit of two Labour Governments committed to the regeneration and economic growth that will put more money in people's pockets, raising living standards. This is a partnership in power that will continue to deliver for the people of Wales. As we have heard this afternoon, the Welsh Government had a record-breaking funding settlement from the UK Government in the Budget of £21 billion, with £1.7 billion extra to spend on improving public services in Wales. The Welsh Government have committed £600 million of that extra funding to health and social care. I really welcome the recent news that waiting times in Wales are heading in the right direction.

I hope that both Conservative and Plaid Cymru Members of the Senedd will reconsider their position on voting against the Welsh budget next week, because they are sending the message that they do not want that extra investment into public services in Wales.

Liz Saville Roberts: From the point of view of Plaid Cymru, what is the Secretary of State doing to address the structural inequality of the United Kingdom, which her Government are maintaining in the partnership she talks about between Labour in Westminster and Labour in Cardiff? The funding inequality that does not recognise our needs remains there still.

Jo Stevens: I do not think the right hon. Lady has really listened to the list of things that have been announced for Wales in the past seven months. It is always the same with Plaid Cymru; it is always about the structures and the process and not about the outcome and the priorities of the people of Wales.

David Chadwick: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Jo Stevens: I will not, because the hon. Gentleman has had his speech.

Turning to steel, hon. Members may recall that on election day last year, Tata was intending to shut down both its blast furnaces, ending steelmaking at Port Talbot. Again, unlike the last Tory Government who promised to Port Talbot £80 million of support that did not exist, this Government have secured that amount of support and we are delivering for our steel communities right across south Wales. In just six months, more than £50 million has been allocated through the transition board to help people and businesses, and this month I announced the first regeneration project to be supported by £8.2 million of transition board funds.

I mentioned earlier my priority to reset the relationship with the Welsh Government. Since the election, people across Wales have been able to see the results of that reset: significant inward investment, a record-breaking Welsh Budget settlement, investment zones, freeports, clean energy projects on and offshore, and UK and Welsh Governments working together and delivering for the people of Wales on economic growth, clean energy, water regulation, health and plans for future rail improvement.

David Chadwick: Will the right hon. Lady give way?

Jo Stevens: I will not. After years of deadlock, it was this UK Government that stepped up with £25 million for the Welsh Government to keep coal tips safe. There is no better illustration of the new relationship between the two Governments than that co-operation on a matter that I know is of concern for people in former coalmining communities across Wales.

Today's debate has raised some important issues and we have had some excellent contributions from colleagues. I will run through a few, such as that of my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris). Whenever I hear the word "Neath", I just think of the "Neath, Neath, Neath!" rugby chant. That was definitely a "Neath, Neath, Neath!" speech. On the contribution by the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth), I recognise, having grown up very near to the border, the economic, cultural and personal ties that she described. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) asked for a meeting with her colleagues to talk about Newport. I will be delighted to do that.

My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire (Catherine Fookes) talked about the 21st century schools programme, as did my hon. Friend the Member for Clwyd North (Gill German). My hon. Friend the Member for Monmouthshire also paid tribute, which I echo, to all the public sector workers of Wales. To my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Andrew Ranger), I was delighted to see Wrexham AFC promoted last season. I went to the game against Stockport at the end of the season and have, in my time, drunk quite a lot of that famous export, Wrexham Lager.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff West (Mr Barros-Curtis) talked about the political DNA in his constituency and about Ely, and I recognised his descriptions of the sports clubs. I have spent many weekends on the touchlines of pitches in Cardiff West and it is great to see the clubs

going from strength to strength. My hon. Friend the Member for Montgomeryshire and Glyndŵr (Steve Witherden) gave a passionate speech about the history of his constituency, which is full of people with big hearts. He definitely has a big heart.

My hon. Friend the Member for Mid and South Pembrokeshire (Henry Tufnell) mentioned his constituency's proud city of St Davids and the £1 million regional skills fund that we have recently announced for Pembrokeshire. I was very interested to hear mention from the hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) of her Wind Street escapades. I had some of those as well, so maybe we should have a chat outside the Chamber about that at some point.

I want to wish everybody a very happy St David's Day. I thank them for their contributions and I look forward to celebrating on Saturday.

4.59 pm

Ruth Jones: I am proud to have brought this debate to the Chamber to celebrate St David's Day. It is great to speak from the Government Benches for the first time following an amazing Labour victory at the general election. We now have a new partnership with the Welsh Government based on respect, trust and delivery, and these warm words are matched with actions: the Chancellor gave a record £21 billion spending boost to the Welsh Government to support public services and infrastructure across Wales.

I thank all Members for their contributions. The hon. Member for East Grinstead and Uckfield (Mims Davies) mentioned many of them, as did the Secretary of State, so I will not go through them. It is great to welcome so many new Labour colleagues to this Chamber, and I look forward to watching them grow and develop over the coming years.

Finally, I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, all Members and our constituents—

5 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

Non-league Football Clubs

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

5 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to be in the Chamber to discuss an issue that many of my constituents in Redditch and the villages, along with constituents across the country, care so deeply about: non-league football. I am grateful to the Minister who will respond, and I put on record my thanks for her steadfast commitment to bringing in the Football Governance Bill. I know that she cares deeply about and is heavily invested in the future of our nation's favourite game. I also thank the various football clubs, organisations and supporters who have contacted me to tell me their positive and negative stories about what is happening in their communities.

I am blessed in my constituency to have several excellent non-league football clubs, including Redditch Borough football club and the aptly named Sporting Club Inkberrow FC, but today I will speak directly to Redditch United's contribution to our community. Non-league football clubs attract local fans and generate money through ticket sales, concessions such as food, drink and merchandise, and parking fees. The funds flow directly into the local economy, benefiting surrounding businesses, such as pubs, cafés, restaurants and shops.

In partnership with the Football Association, Redditch United has commissioned a study on the club's various impacts, and the results are staggering. United's total direct economic value to the local economy is over £2.5 million. The club generates nearly £200,000 in total health value, nearly £20,000 in social value and over £1 million in wellbeing value—all from just 10 full-time staff and 50 part-time staff. Those numbers, and that effectiveness, would make any local authority, public health unit or Government scheme blush.

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend will notice that I have found my Harlow Town FC badge and have worn it for the debate, and I welcome the importance he places on non-league football. Does he agree that it is not just the paid staff members of the club whom we should recognise, but the huge number of volunteers? I pay particular tribute to a Welsh lady who is our secretary, Donna Harvey. It is the community feel that brings people together and makes non-league football so special.

Chris Bloore: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to point to the incredible impact of volunteers on our local football clubs. Despite the professionalism of non-league football clubs in recent years, they would not exist if it was not for volunteers like his constituent.

Non-league football is often more affordable for fans, allowing people greater access to entertainment in their community. The relatively low cost of attending matches means that more people can engage with the sport and participate in local economic activities surrounding the home grounds. United charges £123 for a season ticket, and crowds have trebled in the last five years.

Dave Robertson (Lichfield) (Lab): Hear, hear!

Chris Bloore: Thank you. More and more local boys and girls are building an affinity with the club, and local businesses are benefiting. United has nearly 400 youth players visiting its ground every week, marshalled by nearly 500 volunteers, and over 100 adult players and 560 community programme participants. The economic footprint of daily training sessions at the Valley stadium is significant; it reaches everyone from our petrol stations to our bus companies, and from local shops selling sports drinks and water to shops that help parents to fuel children before they play.

Engagement with Redditch United provides a wide range of benefits to different individuals. The Football Association credits Redditch United with creating 173,000 hours of social interaction, generating £187,000 in player wellbeing value, and £1.8 million in value generated from club volunteering hours.

Dave Robertson: I am blessed to have two non-league football clubs at step 4 and step 5: Chasetown FC and Lichfield City. Who can forget Chasetown's giant-killing exploits in the FA cup a few years ago? The sense of achievement and togetherness that brought to the entire town of Burntwood is difficult to replicate. Does my hon. Friend agree that while it is important to recognise clubs' economic value, it is the social value—the togetherness, camaraderie and civic-mindedness that come with supporting these clubs—that is so valuable for our communities?

Chris Bloore: I should have sent my hon. Friend my speech beforehand, because I will come to that. I agree that non-league clubs bring more than economic value to their communities.

United has been at the forefront of mental health and wellbeing campaigns. Many volunteers have gone on to work in the game and have become accredited coaches, or have simply built up the confidence to get back into paid work after a lengthy absence. I recently attended a walking football event at the Valley stadium. It was heartening to see more senior players who were still active, and that those who had suffered from poor mental health felt that they had an outlet, and a community to be proud of.

Football is a tool to create partnerships that local government and national Governments sometimes cannot make. Redditch United has signed a sponsorship deal with internet giant Reddit, stemming from a post on that site. I must admit, I was little overwhelmed at the sight of Reddit directors from the United States visiting our town, walking around the Valley stadium and cheering on the Reds.

United does even more. The design-a-kit campaign has been launched for a second year, engaging local school children. The club is working on making the fan base more diverse through work in schools, hosting employability talks, mock interviews, sports delivery, work experience, and work with local universities and colleges, including a special education needs and disabilities college that uses the ground for sports provision. Helping young people into jobs that pay taxes will help us to rebuild our public services and put the public finances on a solid footing once again. The club is a networking hub for businesses—and, yes, it is creating the next generation of male and female footballers, who I hope will push United up the pyramid, and training the next generation of coaches. The Valley is also home to the West Bromwich Albion ladies team.

Despite that incredible work and the proven benefit for the economy and the community, the challenges facing local non-league clubs are significant. It is getting harder, not easier, for non-league clubs to be sustainable, and their contribution is at risk. Limited revenue streams mean that non-league clubs often face financial struggles. They may struggle to maintain infrastructure, pay players and compete with larger clubs. Sometimes, promotion can mean being placed in a geographically challenging league, which makes it difficult to attract players, and in some cases, relegation follows promotion.

Last night, I had the chance to speak with Ellis Platten, the creator of the “AwayDays” YouTube channel, who has done an excellent job of chronicling the impact of a local club hitting tough times, not just on a fan base but on a community. It has chronicled everything from Durham City's unwanted winless run to Farsley Celtic playing home games miles away from its home ground. Such stories are not uncommon when ownership fails. Ten per cent of the teams that were in Redditch United's league last year no longer exist. The economic footprint and social impact of those clubs have been immediately lost, and there is nothing to replace them.

No billionaires are interested in rescuing smaller clubs, so non-league teams simply collapse. As with the loss of a major high-street retailer, the knock-on impacts on the local economy can be catastrophic. It is not just the economic benefits that are lost; all the work done off the pitch at the heart of our communities is lost, too. If Redditch United were to shut its doors, we would lose so much more than a team. Despite the excellent work of the Football Foundation to support clubs such as Redditch United and to improve local football facilities, the balance between being a community asset and maintaining financial sustainability can be challenging for such clubs, and too many towns are losing them.

Martin Vickers (Brigg and Immingham) (Con): Usually when I mention football in the Chamber, it is in reference to Grimsby Town, but on this occasion I will mention Brigg Town FC, which is now in my constituency, thanks to boundary changes. It is a community interest club. I went to one of its matches a few weeks ago. The hon. Gentleman and other Members have drawn attention to the important role that such clubs play in the local community. In order to secure finance, they encourage local businesses into sponsorship. Does he agree that that is a vital source of income for non-league clubs?

Chris Bloore: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. Redditch United would not be in existence if it were not for the support of local businesses in Redditch and the villages. We are extremely appreciative of their sponsorship, and if some of them are watching this, we hope that they renew their sponsorship agreements for the next 12 months.

Trickle-down economics simply does not work in the football pyramid, and not simply in cash terms. It can be difficult for non-league clubs to approach councils for support when it comes to planning, or to ask councils to involve them in long-term strategic economic, health and leisure decision making. Many transport routes that served local grounds have been lost, and while premier league and championship clubs might receive significant support in making their grounds accessible, the same does not apply to many non-league clubs, due to a lack of funds and expertise in town halls.

Laurence Turner (Birmingham Northfield) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for giving us the opportunity to talk about our local non-league football clubs, such as Northfield Town FC and Alvechurch FC; I pay tribute to them for their community work. Does he agree that many clubs face a challenge in finding funding to bring on more women's and girls' teams, and to invest in the infrastructure? The same applies to disability teams. That can be a barrier to accessing wider funding. I believe he knows both football clubs well. Does he share my hope that they will find that investment?

Chris Bloore: I thank my hon. Friend for his contribution. As a goalkeeper, I let in many goals by Northfield Town FC, so I have made my contribution to his constituency. He is absolutely right. I had the fortune to bring the chairman of Redditch United, David Faulkner, to the Houses to Parliament to meet the chairman of the FA. We made it clear that there is not the money available at the moment to build the infrastructure and facilities for girls and women, and it is preventing participation, so we must do more to build that infrastructure and those facilities in our communities.

Non-league football clubs are ideally placed to support this Government's commitment to the growth and regeneration of our town centres, build a transport network fit for purpose, improve skills and education and, critically, reduce the burden on our NHS by promoting sporting participation. The economic impact of non-league football clubs is multifaceted. They contribute to local employment, business revenues and social programmes. While their financial reach is smaller than their premier and football league rivals, their influence significantly shapes local economies and fosters community cohesion and pride. Redditch has 500 players, but only 20 of them are on the men's first team. A football club is more than what happens on a Saturday afternoon. We need to talk about clubs, not just teams, as the impact of clubs such as Redditch United is more than just their place in the football pyramid. When they are lost, the benefits to our economy and society are lost, too.

Not every non-league club has a Ryan Reynolds or a Rob McElhenney and accompanying Disney+ TV show. I wish they had, because if we have learned anything from the Wrexham story, it is that when a football club has the means to be successful, it can rejuvenate a town. Success breeds confidence and pride. People start smiling, and the money and investment follow, not just into the football club but throughout the city and regional infrastructure.

Sarah Edwards (Tamworth) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing such an important debate, celebrating the immense value of football and our local clubs. I commend the mention of women and girls; I used to play football myself for a team.

I want to talk about Tamworth FC. My local chairman contacted me about the 3UP campaign, which is pushing for an extra promotional place from the national league to the English football league. That would provide more ambition for clubs, provide inspiration for fans and, crucially, ensure that money flows from the top right through the game to our lower non-league clubs. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to support initiatives like that, to ensure that clubs and local economies benefit?

Chris Bloore: Football is about competition. More relegation and more promotion is a good thing for me, so I certainly endorse Tamworth's support of the campaign.

Although I have focused on Redditch United and am proud of what the club is doing on and off the pitch, I know that the excellent work it does, despite extreme challenges, is being repeated up and down the country by staff and volunteers. They are not asking for a handout—just for the respect and support they deserve. While I welcome this Government and this Minister's commitment to delivering the Football Governance Bill, I hope that when the Bill is passed, the Government will be able to work with the Football Association, local authorities and non-league clubs to review the sustainability and resilience of non-league football and, crucially, opportunities for growth via our non-league clubs.

Such a review into the financial sustainability, governance and gaps in support for non-league clubs, at step 2 and below, would allow us to recognise what support they need and how we can finally ensure that the riches of our game make it down to the real grassroots. There is more we can do with local authorities to ensure that transport links support the growth of clubs and encourage more fans to attend. We can help local authorities to recognise local clubs' importance and provide guidance on strategic planning, including the benefits of working alongside clubs in meeting leisure, education and economic priorities.

Finally, and crucially, we need to offer the same governance support to non-league clubs, their fan bases and their communities to ensure that we reduce the number of clubs forced to drop down divisions or fold because they do not have the liquidity to continue their operations at the highest level. Securing the future and prosperity of non-league clubs could benefit many Ministers sitting around the Cabinet table.

I am unashamedly a passionate football fan, but my passion for non-league football and my team, Redditch United, is not just about what happens on the pitch for 90 minutes.

Non-league football clubs are often the unsung heroes of our local economies. As I have explained, they not only put millions into our economy but provide jobs, are the base for critical educational and social programmes, help people back into work, and provide sporting facilities enabling thousands of boys and girls every week to stay fit and healthy. I hope that during this Parliament we will be able to investigate how we can use the tools available to the House to support them, the local economies that rely on them, and the communities that love them.

Finally, I want to pay tribute to David Faulkner, his staff, and the volunteers who have made Redditch United more than just a football club.

5.15 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport (Stephanie Peacock): English football is one of our greatest exports, which this Government want to see thriving for generations to come. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore) for highlighting the impact of clubs such as Redditch United in his constituency on local communities. Indeed, we have heard from Members on both sides of the House about the huge impact that non-league clubs have on their areas. English football is a fantastic global success story, and of course it all begins, and would not be possible without, grassroots football.

[Stephanie Peacock]

I want to say something about the important contribution that football and the sporting sector make to our economy, and to communities up and down the country. In October last year, the Department for Culture, Media and Sport published new research measuring the impact of the sport and physical activity sector on the economy. It showed that the sector had contributed £53.6 billion to the UK economy in 2021, which means that it was worth more than 2.6% of the UK's economy. In the same year, 878,000 people on full-time contracts were employed in the sector. One of the reasons the sports economy forms such a significant proportion of the total economy is our footballing sector: the same research showed that football, throughout the whole pyramid, including professional and grassroots football as well as football's indirect impact on the economy at large, generated £8.71 billion for the economy. The research did not even measure the societal benefits of actually playing grassroots football, which I will touch on later. Football clubs deliver significant economic benefits to their local economies, but they also deliver indirect economic benefits to the local communities that they serve, attracting visitors and bringing increased footfall to the hospitality, retail, and transport sectors. The Government want a thriving grassroots sport sector, with strong national governing bodies, including the Football Association, that can use their nationwide remit to deliver sport to people across the country. The DCMS provides the majority of support for grassroots sport through our arm's length body Sport England, which annually invests £250 million of lottery and Exchequer money. The FA is a long-term partner of Sport England, which is investing £26.1 million pounds in the FA for 2022 to 2027.

As a Government, we understand the value of grassroots sports facilities. That is why we are delivering the multi-sport grassroots facilities programme, which is investing £123 million of UK-wide funding in 2024-25. It has helped to fund a total of 559 projects across England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland so far this year. Projects funded through the programme include new artificial grass pitches, new changing pavilions and clubhouses, floodlights, fencing, pitch maintenance equipment, and goalposts. It was great to attend the Chorley Women versus AFC Fylde match a few weeks ago, as part of the Premier League's "More than a Game" trophy tour, and to see the impact of this funding at first hand in the improvements made to the facilities. Following the autumn Budget, the Government confirmed their continued support for elite and grassroots sport through future investment, and further details of that investment will be confirmed in due course.

My hon. Friend raised the importance of transport links to support the growth of clubs. I agree with him that we all need to play our part in supporting the case for our local clubs to be well served by local transport, not only for football fans but for access to opportunities to participate in sport. I am discussing with colleagues across Government how we can improve public transport access to and from sporting events, as I know that is an issue of interest and concern for Members on both sides of the House.

My hon. Friend also raised governance support for non-league clubs. The revised code for sports governance sets out the levels of transparency, diversity and inclusion,

accountability and integrity that are required from the FA and other organisations that seek and are in receipt of public and national lottery funding. Any governance concerns regarding non-league clubs should be raised with the FA, which has its own complaints procedure. Sport England oversees the FA's compliance with the code, and any concerns about the governance of the FA should be raised with Sport England.

That is why it is important that support for grassroots football continues into the future—because the influence of non-league football extends far beyond purely economic impact. Non-league football clubs have an important part to play in delivering wider societal benefits, fostering social cohesion and building a strong sense of local identity. Clubs often engage in community initiatives and contribute to civic identity and pride in place. They run extensive outreach programmes, volunteer initiatives, and youth development schemes that offer safe spaces and educational opportunities to local residents. I have seen that at first hand in my constituency, having visited clubs including Wombwell Town FC, Wombwell Main FC and Worsbrough Bridge Athletic FC, as well as seeing the work Elsecar Main FC has done with Elsecar Holy Trinity primary academy, reviving its playing field. I know the huge role community clubs play in my own area of Barnsley and across the country.

An FA study from 2019 showed that the value of regular grassroots football in England was over £10 billion per year. This consisted of a direct economic value of just over £2 billion per year and a social wellbeing value of over £8 billion per year. The FA study also showed that playing regular grassroots football saved the NHS over £43 million per year through reduced GP visits.

It was great to attend the FA's "Made For This Game" event in Parliament this week as part of its campaign to empower girls in schools across the country to get involved in sport, no matter their age, role, ability, race, religion or ethnicity. I am looking forward to supporting the FA campaign next Friday closer to home in Barnsley for its fourth annual "Biggest Ever Football Session". It is great to see that the FA's target of equal access to football for girls in 75% of schools has been met, but we are committed to going further. This Government believe every girl deserves the opportunity to get involved in whatever sport they choose, because we know the power of football clubs, from non-league clubs to professional clubs, in getting people active and bringing communities together.

Non-league clubs also bring about significant economic benefits and are an essential part of the social fabric of our country. It is right that we also thank the thousands of volunteers who give up their time to support their local non-league clubs; without them clubs simply would not survive. My hon. Friend rightly paid tribute to the contribution of volunteers.

This debate has been a brilliant opportunity to discuss the economic contribution of non-league football clubs. As I have set out, football and sport make a hugely important economic contribution to our economy and our country. This is exactly why the Government support non-league and grassroots football, and I again thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate.

Question put and agreed to.

5.22 pm

House adjourned.

Westminster Hall

Thursday 27 February 2025

[ESTHER McVEY *in the Chair*]

BACKBENCH BUSINESS

Rural Crime

1.30 pm

Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered rural crime.

It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey, and a privilege to open this important debate on rural crime. It is fantastic to see many hon. Members, from both sides of the House, joining the debate, and I thank them all for their attendance.

I grew up in the rural constituency of North Cornwall—which I now proudly serve as its Member of Parliament—and my family and friends, like many others, are acutely aware of the dangers that rural crime can bring and the drastic effects it can have on our small, tight-knit communities. For too long, rural crime has been overlooked and not made a priority by successive Governments, but for those living and working in our rural communities, its impact can be absolutely devastating. Let me be crystal clear: rural crime is rarely random or opportunistic, and successive Governments have not given it the attention it deserves.

The evidence overwhelmingly shows that rural crime is now dominated by organised criminal gangs that operate with sophistication across police forces and systematically target farmers, tradesmen and rural businesses. I am not talking just about the occasional theft of a piece of farm equipment; this is large-scale, co-ordinated and organised criminal activity, with criminal networks exploiting gaps in policing resources.

Ian Roome (North Devon) (LD): Sadly, in the last week my constituency has suffered a spate of rural break-ins on the edge of Exmoor, and a quad bike and a chainsaw were also stolen from sheds in West Anstey earlier this month, in a pattern that we are very familiar with. Just this past week, South Molton and UMBERLEIGH joined a string of other Devon villages where thieves believed to be targeting cigarettes struck local shops and service stations overnight. Does my hon. Friend agree that, when we talk about rural crime, we are really talking about the perception among criminals that rural areas are soft targets for obtaining goods that can be easily fenced elsewhere?

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. Interventions should be brief.

Ben Maguire: I completely agree with my hon. Friend, and I will come on to that type of rural crime. We have become far too much of a soft touch for these organised criminal gangs.

If we want to tackle crime in this country, we must finally start taking rural crime seriously. The latest figures from NFU Mutual put the total cost of rural crime in 2023 at £52.8 million—an increase of 4.3% on

the year before. But those figures only reflect insured losses, and the true cost is likely far higher, as many people do not have trust or confidence that crimes will be properly investigated when reported.

The explosion in thefts of high-value equipment is particularly worrying. GPS theft surged by 137% last year, costing £4.2 million, and farmers cannot simply replace the equipment overnight. Theft of quad bikes and all-terrain vehicles, which are critical equipment for farmers and rural workers, rose by 9% to £3.2 million. Livestock theft remained at an alarming £2.7 million, with evidence of animals being butchered in the fields and then stolen, causing immense distress to farmers.

Farmers—who faced botched Brexit trade deals thanks to the Conservatives, and who now face a family farm tax because of this Labour Government's changes to agricultural property relief—are suffering from the scourge of rural organised crime, which is often theft to order. The toll on farmers' mental health and wellbeing is enormous, and my inbox has been inundated with cases from North Cornwall. One farmer saw his £17,000 all-terrain vehicle stolen in the dead of night, and that was not the first time thieves had targeted his property. Another farmer, in the village of St Kew, lost more than £3,000 in the blink of an eye when thieves broke in and stole vehicles, tools and equipment that he relied on for his livelihood. Finally, one farming couple in Blisland had two quad bikes taken from their locked garage, costing £15,000 to replace. With this particular theft, police travelled all the way from Totnes—a three-hour round trip—showing up three days after the event. They put a few signs around the property, and the farmers have not heard from them since. Those stories make it unsurprising that 86% of countryside residents have said rural crime is negatively impacting their mental wellbeing, as highlighted by various surveys conducted by the NFU.

Yet, one of the most under-reported aspects of rural crime is the mass theft of power tools and machinery from tradesmen and small businesses—a crime that exceeds farm machinery theft in total volume. The figures are staggering. Of the over 3,600 stolen tools recovered by the national rural crime unit, only 77 were successfully returned to their owners. That is just 2%, which is an abysmal rate of return, with a huge impact on the livelihoods of these tradesmen. These thefts can devastate builders, carpenters, plumbers and others who rely on expensive, specialised equipment to earn a living. When tools are stolen, jobs are lost, deadlines are missed and insurance costs soar. Yet, some manufacturers outright refuse to co-operate with crime prevention efforts, as there is currently no legal requirement for forensic markings or GPS tracking on these high-value power tools to help with their recovery.

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): The hon. Gentleman may be aware that a private Member's Bill I brought forward in the last Parliament—it is now the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023—would enable us to place that requirement on power tool manufacturers to fit forensic marking; it just requires secondary legislation. The Bill was discussed at all stages of debate during its passage through the House of Commons and the House of Lords, so will the hon. Gentleman support my calls from back then, and on the new Government now, to look at bringing in that secondary legislation to make the Act apply equally to power tools?

Ben Maguire: Along with my Liberal Democrat colleagues, I certainly do support that change, and I will discuss it slightly later in my speech.

The trust that our rural communities have in police forces to solve these crimes is shockingly low, with two thirds of respondents to one survey saying that reporting rural crime is a total “waste of time” as they know it will go unsolved. The Government could reopen some of the smaller police stations in rural areas, such as that in Launceston in my constituency, so that these crimes can be reported and dealt with by the front desks, which would certainly be a start in regaining the public’s trust and confidence,

As the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) just mentioned, Parliament passed the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act in July 2023, with the aim of deterring thefts of farm vehicles by requiring immobilisers and registration databases. The Act was a clear step forward, but unfortunately it did not do quite enough to tackle the true scale of the problem, as it does not cover GPS units, power tools or smaller, high-value pieces of equipment, which are among the most frequently stolen items. Will the Government consider the merits of extending that legislation to ensure that all GPS systems, power tools, and pieces of high-value rural equipment are required to have forensic markings and registration databases?

Greg Smith: Will the hon. Gentleman give way on that point?

Ben Maguire: I am going to carry on for a moment.

Without proper enforcement and action, we are leaving the van door wide open for thieves. While rural crime grows, police forces remain underfunded, overstretched and lacking the specialist knowledge needed to combat these offences. In many cases, local police do not have the resources, staff or capability to track and recover farm equipment and power tools at the rate at which they are stolen. These crimes are committed across wide areas and are often too small to warrant the attention of large-scale organisations such as the National Crime Agency but too big for individual forces to deal with on their own.

That is where the national rural crime unit comes in. The unit is a vital national co-ordination centre, and does excellent work in the recovery of stolen property, sharing intelligence across forces and disrupting these organised criminal gangs. Shockingly, the national rural crime unit is set to lose its single national crime co-ordinator this year due to a lack of funding. That role has been essential in tackling cross-border rural crime, linking intelligence between forces and co-ordinating national efforts to combat criminal gangs. However, without continued funding, that vital work will collapse.

Furthermore, the NRCU is entirely industry-funded, yet as it stands the Government take 50% of all cash assets seized from criminal gangs, which cannot be returned to the victims. That 50% could instead go directly back into fighting the criminal gangs, and supporting the work of organisations such as the NRCU. I ask the Minister to commit to providing long-term funding for the NRCU to allow it to continue its critical work and deliver greater co-ordination between local forces to tackle rural crime. As it stands, the Government are relying on the insurance industry to fund rural crime policing, and my constituents and I view that as unacceptable.

County line drug gangs have increasingly infiltrated Cornwall and other rural areas across the country, exploiting vulnerable individuals, including children, to traffic and sell drugs across the region. In Bodmin, for instance, gangs took over the homes of vulnerable residents—a practice known commonly as cuckooing—to establish bases for their illicit operations. These gangs operate across vast rural areas and often in sparsely populated towns and villages, and proper resourcing is required to ensure that they are properly policed.

The costs of rural crime extend beyond humans, often harming our natural environment and the animals that live in it. Illegal snaring, hare coursing, poaching and other criminal activity have decimated and traumatised wildlife populations in North Cornwall and across the country. That is not to mention the huge problem of fly-tipping, which comes up time and again from my constituents, with rubbish being illegally dumped in our towns and across our countryside. To combat that issue specifically, the Government could consider a single reporting mechanism for fly-tipping, so that landowners and farmers need report an incident only once and will have the confidence that it will be followed up on.

Despite facing unique challenges, rural police forces such as Devon and Cornwall police continue to receive some of the lowest funding per head in England. In Cornwall alone, the population swells by over 3 million during the summer months, placing enormous strain on an already overstretched police force. Meanwhile, the police and crime commissioner for the region costs around £1.5 million a year, factoring in expenses and office costs. That money could instead go directly into funding into rural crime teams—officers on the beat, instead of office administrators.

Furthermore, more than a third of officers in Devon and Cornwall have less than three years of service, due to difficulties in retention and recruitment caused by chronic underfunding over many years. Despite those clear pressures, the Government have failed to reform the funding model to reflect real-world policing demand in our rural communities. Policing should not be a postcode lottery, where the most in need are often the least supported.

On all these issues, we still seem to have no clear Government strategy to tackle rural crime. We do not appear to have national co-ordination, proper funding structures or a commitment to equipping rural police teams with the resources they so crucially need. The Government could look to organisations such as the Scottish Partnership Against Rural Crime, which has had an official rural crime strategy in place since 2019. That strategy focuses on gathering intelligence and raising people’s confidence in reporting crimes to the local authorities. As a result, the cost of rural crime in Scotland reduced by £2 million, from £5.6 million to £3.6 million in just one year.

The rural crime team established within the Lancashire police force is also proving to be an excellent example of a specialised rural crime unit. One resident served by their work said that the police

“just showing their faces around here has had a massive impact on rural crime for us”

and that it had even led to a “massive decrease” in fly-tipping. That is why, on 14 January, I introduced the Rural Crime (Strategy) Bill, which would require the Home Secretary to establish an independent taskforce

to develop and implement a comprehensive rural crime strategy. The taskforce must bring together stakeholders from across industry, police and rural communities to advise the Government, ultimately leading to a strategy that could take vital steps such as ensuring that properly funded dedicated rural crime teams or specialists are embedded in police forces—currently, less than 1% of police officers are assigned to rural crime—providing training for police and 999 control room staff on how to tackle rural crime, and improving intelligence sharing among the different forces.

Rural crime is a serious, organised and devastating issue for our countryside communities. It is time for a cohesive national strategy that puts an end to the chaos of underfunded police forces and unco-ordinated responses and that gives teeth to legislation to tackle these problems. Organised crime is thriving, and the Government need to act now, starting with bringing forward a comprehensive rural crime strategy, because our rural communities deserve so much better.

Several hon. Members *rose*—

Esther McVey (in the Chair): Order. I remind Members that they should not mention any live legal cases during the debate. Members should bob if they wish to be called, and interventions must be brief. We will come to the Front-Bench spokespeople at 2.30 pm.

1.46 pm

Kevin McKenna (Sittingbourne and Sheppey) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) for securing this debate and for comprehensively outlining many of the problems. It was good to hear his insights and the work that he has already done, particularly around rural thefts and thefts of farm equipment, which are a big issue in my constituency. I will focus on fly-tipping, which is a huge blight in Sittingbourne and Sheppey and across the whole of Kent, where it costs about £1.8 million annually.

One of my problems with fly-tipping is the name; it is too cutesy. It makes it seem so unimportant—“Fly-tipping? Well, fine.”—but it is a massive environmental scourge and a massive scourge on the people who live near it. In an urban setting, it is often small scale, with lots of people doing it on housing estates and in back alleys—I have that in bucketloads in my constituency—but there are also huge, illegal dumping tips. I have one in my constituency on Raspberry Hill Lane near Iwade. Yesterday morning, a BBC documentary showed drone footage of the site, with a real investigation from BBC journalists into the problems.

Fly-tipping has been going on there for a long time. Residents have raised the issue repeatedly, and they have struggled to understand what has been going on to challenge it. Some of what has been looked at very much involves cross-agency working that has frequently failed. One of my biggest concerns about fly-tipping is whether we have the structures in place to investigate it: are the right organisations doing the investigations, and do we have the right level of punitive punishments for the people who are destroying vast swathes of countryside?

The site that I am discussing is right next to a site of special scientific interest. It is an extremely vulnerable area. It is also right on the edge of a village. The smell, the noise and the disruption is obvious to everybody as they go past it.

At root, this is an organised crime issue. Whether the sites are big or small, it is not just a man in a van dumping stuff in someone’s bins or back alley or on the street. At multiple sites, such as the one that I am talking about in Kent, truck after truck brings along its loads of unprocessed waste, which is dug into the ground and left for the birds to eat and spread around nearby farmland.

I do not think people understand the significant impact that it has on local people, or how frustrated many of them are at not getting a response from the authorities about what is going on. When they have reported fly-tipping, it is hard to understand where investigations have got to or whether anyone is looking into them at all. Because organised crime is involved, many of my residents are afraid to raise the issue publicly.

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): The hon. Gentleman is making an interesting point about fly-tipping as an issue of organised crime. I suppose that Opposition Members would also include casual littering in the same bracket. We see that every day in towns and villages, but also on the side of motorways. Does he want to say something about that also being a real scourge of society?

Kevin McKenna: I am very happy to say that. We have a lot of casual littering, with things thrown out of cars as going up the A249 between Sheppey and Sittingbourne, so it is an issue. We also see articles from time to time about middle-class fly-tipping, with people—apparently benignly—leaving furniture out on the street in front of their house for people to pick up. Honestly, I can see that that is well-meaning—or thoughtless. That level of littering needs dealing with in one way, but it is the organised criminal side of it that we really need to look at in a much more systematic way.

Does the Minister think that the Environment Agency is the right organisation to be doing the investigating? It is not really set up as an investigative organisation, but that is where the bulk of the digging and detective work is now falling. That is similar to some of the other issues regarding the Environment Agency, such as with land drainage, where it is pulled into operational matters when that is not really what it is set up for. I would like to hear the Minister’s thoughts about whether we need to look at how the Environment Agency operates, what its real function is, and whether it should be the investigating agency.

I would also like to look at what the actual penalty for the crime is, where it is provable that those people are organised criminals. Frankly, where landowners have been using land to create organised illegal dumps, I would question whether they should retain the assets—not just the land, but the vast fleets of trucks and lorries that they are using for that. It is being done on an industrial scale and it needs to be addressed, not with fines of a few tens of thousands of pounds, but by looking at actually seizing the assets of those organised criminals.

Finally, the most important thing that I want to talk about is that, at its root, organised crime is a market issue. Those people are criminals, but they are serving a market need, and a lot of that is down to regulation. Are the regulations around the licensing of waste removal and waste processing incentivising criminal gangs to get

[Kevin McKenna]

involved in this “business”—obviously in scare quotes—rather than other areas of crime? Honestly, as with many areas of organised crime, we have to look at the market forces behind that crime and see how we could use regulation to disincentivise criminals and then hopefully get them as they move into other areas.

1.52 pm

Greg Smith (Mid Buckinghamshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) on securing this debate. While I will talk about the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 in more detail later in my remarks, I assure him, because of the comments that he made, that GPS units were very much intended to be included within the scope of that Act; they were spoken about extensively at all stages of debate before the Act achieved Royal Assent. I urge the Minister to have that in mind as she prepares the necessary statutory instruments to fully bring the Act into force. I believe that has now been promised to come by this summer.

Fundamentally, rural crime is devastating to all rural areas, not least those such as mine in Mid Buckinghamshire, where the economy is mostly agricultural and entire communities are centred around farming and the local economy that farming supports. Whether it is theft, hare coursing, fly-tipping or antisocial behaviour—to name just a few such crimes—the countryside is too often an easy target for criminal gangs looking to make a quick buck. It is imperative that the Government recognise that and take steps to build on the work that we did in government, particularly over the last few years, to tackle and prevent rural crime.

According to the Countryside Alliance’s 2023 rural crime survey, fly-tipping accounted for the most commonly reported crime—to the point made by the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna)—at 37% of cases, followed closely by agricultural machinery theft at 32% and trespassing at 31%. It goes without saying that farm machinery is essential to the smooth running of farms. Those items are not just tools; they are the backbone of the entire agricultural machine. Whether it is a combine harvester, a tractor, or a high-tech bit of equipment, the cost of replacing them can run into tens of thousands of pounds.

In 2022 alone, rural crime cost UK farmers over £50 million, with farm machinery theft accounting for a substantial portion of that. NFU Mutual—which, let’s face it, insures the vast majority of agricultural machinery in this country—estimates that the cost of rural crime increased by 4.3% year on year in 2023 to £52.8 million, and the cost of GPS theft alone reached an estimated £4.2 million in 2023, which was a 137% increase. Quad bike and all-terrain vehicle theft cost an estimated £3.2 million in 2023—up 9% on 2022. It is not just heavy machinery and equipment that is targeted. Often it is fuel, which is all too easy for organised gangs to simply siphon off and load into a van, then off they go, leaving victims with huge losses and hefty bills to restock.

Last year I visited a farm in my constituency that is directly opposite Chequers. It seems like an unlikely place for opportunist thefts to happen—opposite one of the most heavily armed and secure premises in my

constituency—but the farmers fell victim to the loss of some 2,000 litres of red diesel that was siphoned off and taken away in the night. That particular farm operates a very good farm shop, and the thieves also got away with two chest freezers full of meat destined for it. That has not just a huge financial impact on those farmers and that business; there is an equally huge toll on business owners’ and farmers’ mental health, as the hon. Member for North Cornwall referenced.

These criminal gangs are incredibly difficult to apprehend when operating across county lines, and the raids can often take several hours and go on through the night, with criminals targeting several farms and heading off great distances with the stolen items. Some are even shipped overseas and sold without any traceability. The ever-evolving nature and sophistication of criminal gangs makes this a severe uphill battle, but it is a battle that, I would put to this House and to the Minister, this country can win. We can defeat these gangs.

The Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act, which was my private Member’s Bill, requires retailers to register ATV sales and to ensure that vehicles are fitted with unique identifiers in the form of forensic marking. That will help police forces to track those that fall into the wrong hands. The use of GPS trackers and forensic marking on machinery is already helping farmers who voluntarily fit them to their equipment to ensure that stolen items can be recovered; where voluntarily applied, law enforcement agencies have followed leads and caught criminals before they could profit from their crimes.

Given that my Bill achieved Royal Assent in 2023, I was hopeful that the secondary legislation would have been passed before the general election was called last year, or quickly after it. That was not to be, but I am assured from commitments made in the main Chamber that those pieces of secondary legislation are coming. I would be grateful if the Minister could reconfirm in her speech that the summer is still the intended point of arrival for them, so that we can debate the regulations in a Delegated Legislation Committee.

Another common-sense piece of legislation passed under the last Government was the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which increased the maximum sentence for hare coursing from a fine to six months in prison. It is not just the legislation that is making a difference; it is the commitment of local law enforcement. In Buckinghamshire, Thames Valley police has been working tirelessly to track down and apprehend those responsible for thefts and other rural crime.

Increased patrols, better surveillance systems, and collaboration with local farmers and rural communities have contributed to a drop in farm machinery theft in areas where such initiatives have been rolled out. I argue that, with the support of the Thames Valley police and crime commissioner, Matthew Barber, Thames Valley police is leading the way, with a commitment in the 2024-25 policing budget for an uplift in officers to tackle rural crime—in fact, a doubling of Thames Valley’s rural crime taskforce.

The national rural crime unit has been mentioned in this debate. Thames Valley’s rural crime taskforce, led by Stuart Hutchings, has been a trailblazer feeding into that. Launched in March 2022, the taskforce has made a huge impact. It has already seized more than £5 million-worth of property including vehicles, drugs, plant machinery and tools, as well as completing hundreds of investigations

and supporting hundreds of people with crime prevention advice. I pay particular tribute to the national rural crime unit, led by Superintendent Andy Huddleston, who was instrumental in helping to put my Bill together and who I very much value as a friend and someone I look to for sage advice. The unit has recovered stolen property, including agricultural machinery and vehicles, worth £10 million since 2023. It has co-ordinated operational responses across the UK that have resulted in multiple arrests, as well as disrupting organised crime groups. The national construction and agriculture theft team, which sits under the NRCU, seized £3.1 million-worth of stolen vehicles and machinery in 2023 alone.

Even in the last few weeks, this co-ordinated approach, started by the last Government and hopefully continued by this one, has produced significant results. Following a series of hare coursing and associated antisocial behaviour incidents across the south-east and east of England, key arrests were made by Cambridgeshire police with support from Thames Valley police. This reinforces the effectiveness of intelligence sharing and co-ordination between forces that makes entire regions and the whole country safer by stopping these gangs operating.

To conclude, rural communities in Buckinghamshire and the whole country deserve the same level of protection as urban areas. We must ensure that our hard-working farmers are able to focus on what they do best—feeding the nation—without the looming threat of theft, intimidation or criminal damage hanging over their heads. I urge the Minister to ensure that the good words that have been said about fighting rural crime under this Government so far are turned into a solid reality that will protect rural communities—my own and all others across the country—in the coming months and years.

2.2 pm

Alex Brewer (North East Hampshire) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under you in the Chair, Ms McVey. Last week, one of my local farmers told me that in the last two years there have been fewer thefts on his farm. I was thrilled and asked him what had led to that—and he told me that everything worth taking had already been stolen.

My constituency of North East Hampshire is a beautiful part of the country. Rolling countryside is peppered with picturesque villages, farm shops and even a vineyard. Despite being officially classed as semi-rural, it has all the hallmarks of idyllic country life. But beneath that is a troubling picture. Day in, day out, farmers face theft, fly-tipping and hare coursing on their land, and this is often accompanied by threats, violence and intimidation. These are not small, isolated incidents in rural pockets; every farmer I speak to has plenty of experiences to share.

As we have heard, these crimes are linked to and a major source of funding for organised crime such as drug trafficking and gambling. This in turn affects our towns and returns to our communities in the form of shoplifting, car theft and county lines drug dealing. Last year, an estimated 6,600 active county lines were in operation, generating an annual criminal profit of £800,000—a figure likely to be a significant underestimate. The profitability of rural criminal activity and competing county turf wars in turn increases violence and rural knife crime. There are 22 active organised crime gangs across the country that are specifically involved in rural crime. The organisation of these groups enables them

to take stolen goods across international borders, and farming equipment is frequently traced to eastern Europe and Africa.

The more valuable the crime is to the criminal, the more aggressively they will protect it, and farmers are experiencing the impact. Isolated farms are exposed, and farmers tell me that they receive direct threats of retribution for reporting crimes. We know that these rural crimes are often under-reported and difficult to prosecute, especially given the ways in which police weaknesses are exploited across county boundaries. Despite the precautions of CCTV, extra locking on gates and digging ditches, the police are usually just too far away to be able to reach the farms quickly enough. The impact of Conservative cuts to policing is still being felt despite recent recruitment of new officers. We are not back to former police officer numbers and many are not experienced enough to manage the complex and violent nature of rural crime.

Hare coursing is particularly lucrative, with betting proceeds running into tens of thousands of pounds on each race. The money goes to criminal gangs and the farmers are left with damaged fields and dead hares. Criminals know the land so well that they can simply duck for cover when they see the blue lights of a police vehicle. If they do end up in a police chase, they drive so dangerously that the police are often forced to give up pursuit. The knowledge that they can avoid police action and prosecution has made criminals in rural areas, including mine in North East Hampshire, increasingly brazen. They will drive over fields of crops three or four times a season, damaging fields that support our food security, pushing farmers' insurance bills through the roof and making farmers feel so threatened that some physically cover their heads when they move around their own land at night because they expect to be attacked.

This is a complex problem that requires a co-ordinated, deliberate and targeted solution. Hampshire was promised a rural crime taskforce, but where is it? There has been a lot of talk and very little action. All the while, farmers continue to experience an escalation of crime that is costing Hampshire at least £1.4 million a year. We know what needs to be done, so I call on the Minister and the Government to work with local communities to build up dedicated rural crime units, increase specialist training for new police officers and forge collaboration across county boundaries. Many of the solutions lie in planning policy partnerships, partnerships with industry, and prevention, as much as with policing. We have the knowledge; now we need the strategy, the leadership and the action.

Farmers have had a hard deal recently and our food security is at risk. It is time for the Government to step up to ensure the safety and dignity of our farmers and to put an end to the distress that rural communities are facing. Our farmers are the backbone of this country—it is time we gave them the fair deal they deserve.

2.7 pm

Patrick Spencer (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): It is wonderful to see you in your place, Ms McVey. I credit the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) for securing this debate.

I represent a predominantly rural constituency with low crime rates. Those low crime rates have been achieved by focusing on three things: increasing police numbers,

[Patrick Spencer]

effective police strategies and a strong local economy that has minimised the age-old problem of poverty driving crime rates. I pay tribute to my police and crime commissioner, Tim Passmore, and the hard-working people serving Suffolk constabulary. But this positive headline negates two fundamental realities.

First, it does not portray the changing nature of crime across Suffolk and other rural areas, specifically the proliferation of crime in our agricultural sector and on farms; fly-tipping, which was raised by the hon. Member for North Cornwall; poaching; damaging heritage and historical sites; crime at logistics hubs and warehouses; and, awfully, hidden crime such as sexual exploitation and domestic violence, which have tragically become all too prevalent in rural communities.

Secondly, the positive headlines ignore the fact that Suffolk constabulary has to police both a very rural countryside with a low population density over a large geographic area as well as urban crime in Ipswich. Covering very different environments and very different types of crime presents huge challenges to many rural police forces, be they in North Cornwall, Suffolk, Essex, Hampshire or anywhere else. We have already heard that the Countryside Alliance rural survey estimates that more than a third of people living in rural communities experience rural crime every year. As the hon. Member for North Cornwall said, the NFU estimates that the cost of rural crime increased by nearly 5% last year to £52.8 million.

The situation facing rural police forces is indeed tough, so in the short time I have, I ask the Minister to comment or give a steer on this Government's intent on the following. First, earlier this week I had the opportunity to take part in Home Office oral questions, and I raised the long-term problem of looking at the funding formula for rural constabularies. I accept that the problem is long term and that the previous Government did not do nearly enough to tackle the confusing nature of our funding formula. Rural constabularies, as I said on Monday, consistently receive less money than urban ones. Will the Minister agree to publish the formula and methodology, and launch a consultation on reforming it, so that we can move on—and away from this iniquity?

Secondly, the national rural crime unit was set up by the last Government and it has made great strides, along with the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 that my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) was epic in the pursuit of. However, the NRCU has a very limited mandate. Could it not expand to tackle other forms of crime that we know proliferate in rural areas, such as fly-tipping, organised crime and rural domestic violence? At the moment, I am afraid to say that it is somewhat limited to the pursuit of crime around equipment and GPS theft, and other things that are specific to agriculture and farming. By expanding its remit, and giving it extra funding, it could support rural police forces with intelligence on tackling problem areas.

Finally, I ask the Minister what steps this Government are taking to invest in technology that will help deter and tackle rural crime? Yes, police forces do need cars and coppers. The hon. Member for North Cornwall mentioned earlier issues around the public faith in our police to turn up and tackle crime. Just over the recess, my next-door neighbour was broken into. Did the police turn up? No, they did not—it was deeply disappointing.

We need cars and coppers, but we also need drones that can react 10 times as quickly to theft on a farm. We need AI tools and monitoring CCTV that are able to pick up potential targets and suspects. Technology may be expensive up front, but the savings in the long term will be substantial. Rural crime is not just about farms and tractors. It has a real impact on people, lives and livelihoods, and it is too often underestimated here in Westminster.

2.13 pm

Chris Bloore (Redditch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) on securing this vital debate. He gave such a comprehensive overview of the many challenges facing our rural communities that I will perhaps make my speech slightly shorter than planned.

Although my constituency is named simply Redditch, some Members will have noticed that I often refer to it as Redditch and the villages. That is because although the Boundary Commission for England has found it fit to change the layout of my constituency on many occasions, it has yet to update its title. In addition to the town of Redditch, my constituency is vast and contains many beautiful rural communities and villages. Tomorrow I will be walking with local councillors in Dodderhill parish, and I know the issue of rural crime will feature heavily in those important conversations when we speak face to face with constituents.

Fly-tipping remains one of the biggest concerns of my residents, local businesses and farmers, with many selflessly cleaning up after the thoughtless actions of others and the organised dumping of waste by nefarious actors. As the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) mentioned, the 2023 Countryside Alliance rural crime survey showed that fly-tipping was the most reported rural crime in our communities, and 73% of respondents said it was on the increase.

A 2024 National Farmers Union survey found that more than half of respondents had experienced small-scale fly-tipping on their farm, and more than a quarter had experienced large-scale fly-tipping. Fly-tipping on private land is often under-reported because the responsibility for dealing with it rests with the private landowner and is not subject to mandatory data reporting. Will the Government reconsider that situation, so that we can understand the true scale of fly-tipping on private land across the country?

I welcome the Government's decision to introduce in 2026 mandatory digital waste tracking to prevent bad actors from getting away with fly-tipping in our communities. Currently, there is no comprehensive method for tracking the waste produced in the United Kingdom. Existing systems are fragmented across the country and utilise a mix of digital and paper storage. The Government's initiative will enhance the regulation of waste management by transforming how environmental regulators monitor compliance and prioritise their regulatory activities. It aims to help to prevent waste-related crimes such as fly-tipping. Hopefully, if we know where waste is coming from, we will be able to take punitive actions against the organised crime networks that are exploiting our rural communities and costing my local businesses millions of pounds.

Of course, many other rural crime issues will come up on the doorstep tomorrow, from car theft and tool theft, which has already been mentioned, to burglaries,

farm machinery being stolen—often made easier by our proximity to the motorway network—and the continued incidents of antisocial crime that continue to worry my residents. That is why I welcome the Home Secretary's commitment to ensure that rural communities will see the benefits of the Government's promise to enhance our neighbourhood policing teams.

I finish by thanking our existing policing teams and Harvington, Norton and Dodderhill parish councils for their hard work in combating rural crime and ensuring that our beautiful villages remain great places to live.

2.16 pm

John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): As ever, it is an absolute pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) on securing this important debate.

The Scottish Borders is home to many people who rely on agriculture, forestry and tourism for their livelihoods. These communities are tight-knit, with deep-rooted traditions, but they are also isolated. This geographical isolation often makes them more vulnerable to crime. Livestock theft, vandalism and break-ins at farmhouses and outbuildings are just a few examples of the challenges faced by farmers and rural residents.

As we have heard, rural crime is going up, and going up fast, rising by 34.9% in 2023 compared with the previous year. It cost the UK £52.8 million in 2023, according to NFU Mutual. Livestock theft remains a particularly disturbing issue, with cattle, sheep and even horses being stolen from fields or transported to markets without detection, with NFU Mutual claiming that that cost around £2.7 million in 2022.

Another crime that has been on the rise is the theft of agricultural equipment. Tractors, trailers, quad bikes and tools—vital assets for those who work the land—are all being stolen, sometimes in broad daylight. According to NFU Mutual, of the £1.8 million estimated total cost of rural crime in Scotland in 2023, £1.1 million related to machinery theft.

These are not just petty thieves but sophisticated and organised criminal gangs, often travelling up from England. [*Interruption.*] I apologise to colleagues—I will explain later what I mean by that. I am not coming out with an anti-English rant here. The impact of the crimes goes far beyond the immediate financial loss: it disrupts the day-to-day operations of those affected, causing distress to families, and results in significant delays that can affect the wider rural economy.

What can we do to address this issue? Much of this policy area is devolved to the Scottish Government and the Scottish Parliament. My MSP colleague Rachael Hamilton recently presented a Bill to the Scottish Parliament that would replicate UK legislation enacted in the last Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith), who highlighted the importance of his legislation and what it will achieve when it is finally fully enacted. The Scottish Bill introduced by my colleague in the Scottish Parliament will help to tackle rural crime in Scotland head-on.

It is clear that rural crime cannot be tackled through traditional policing methods alone. A more comprehensive, multifaceted approach is required. First and foremost, we must ensure that police forces in rural areas are properly resourced. I pay tribute to the local police

officers in the Scottish Borders who do a tremendous job in engaging with the rural community and farmers in my constituency. They do everything they can to protect those people and prevent this type of crime from happening, but their hands are tied behind their back because the SNP Government have not done enough to resource local policing. The SNP focus too much on the central belt of Scotland and do not allocate enough resource to rural areas such as the Scottish Borders. It is unfortunate that no SNP Members are here today to explain why they do not fund my local police in the way we would expect.

We must provide additional funding for policing services in rural communities, and ensure that officers have the training and equipment they need to address the unique challenges of rural crime, and we must improve communication between local farmers and the police. We also need to recognise the role of preventive measures—as rural communities become more connected through technology, we must harness that power to reduce crime. Surveillance technologies such as CCTV cameras, automatic number-plate recognition systems and livestock tagging can be used to monitor activity and deter potential criminals. Rural watch schemes, whereby communities come together to report suspicious activity and share information, are another effective means of prevention. By encouraging the use of such technologies, we can create a more proactive approach to tackling rural crime.

Although technology and policing are vital, local residents and communities have an important role to play too, so we must empower them to be part of the solution. Community-led initiatives such as neighbourhood watch schemes and local crime prevention workshops can provide valuable support to law enforcement. This effort resulted in some good news in my constituency just last week, when Scottish Borders police reported that a quad bike stolen from Jedburgh was recovered after a member of the public saw it being loaded into the rear of a van. They contacted the police, which allowed officers to trace the van, resulting in the thief being arrested.

Finally, we must work collaboratively with farmers and landowners to develop strategies for crime prevention and resilience. Farming is at the core of the Scottish Borders economy and it is essential that we protect those who sustain it. Engaging farmers in conversations about crime, sharing best practice on security and offering training on how to protect a property will help to build a more secure and resilient agricultural sector.

In the light of much of this policy space being devolved, as I mentioned earlier, will the Minister commit to ensure proper cross-border engagement? Many of the challenges that we face in the Scottish Borders come from the urban conurbations further south. Some come from Edinburgh, but the police reports suggest that Newcastle and the surrounding urban areas present us with particular challenges, so I ask that there be more engagement between the police forces on both sides of the border. That happens already, but more needs to be done to ensure that we are ahead of the game.

Rural crime in the Scottish Borders is a growing issue that demands our attention. Although the challenges are unique to rural areas, there are solutions that apply across the board. By working together, giving the police adequate resources, leveraging technology and supporting local communities, we can ensure that people in rural

[John Lamont]

communities such as the Scottish Borders feel safe, secure and supported. Our rural communities are the lifeblood of this country and we must do all we can to support them.

2.23 pm

Lisa Smart (Hazel Grove) (LD): As a fellow north-western MP, let me say that it really is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey.

For too long, our rural communities have been subjected to too much rural crime, but time and again previous Governments have failed to take those crimes seriously enough, and have left police forces understaffed, under-resourced and thus ill prepared. The new Government have the opportunity to take real action to address rural crime, and the Liberal Democrats will continue to fight to ensure that it is tackled properly, starting with a real strategy and real resources for our police. We look forward to scrutinising the Government's plans for crime and policing as the current legislation makes progress.

In 2023, the NFU reported that the cost of rural crime rose to £52.8 million—up nearly 22% since 2020. Farmers and rural business owners are left to pick up the pieces and face huge financial losses. Rural crime does not just hit wallets but takes a toll on people's wellbeing. The NFU survey also found that 86% of farmers say that rural crime is negatively affecting their mental health, so we need more from the Government.

I am lucky enough to represent the wonderful constituency of Hazel Grove, where we have urban, suburban and some semi-rural communities. Although there are trends and similar issues that affect the whole community—off-road bikes are just as annoying in Marple as they are in Woodley—certain crimes disproportionately affect the more rural areas of my patch. In High Lane, constituents have raised with me concerns about the impact that low-population density can have on criminals' ability to commit crime. It makes sense if we think about it. It is easier to steal a quad bike or livestock if the barn they are kept in is several miles from the nearest neighbour.

The Minister and I have spoken before about the importance of neighbourhood policing—I think she and I agree on that—but I have spoken with local police officers from my patch who tell me they just do not have the resources or the tools to catch offenders, so too many of our communities are left to deal with the consequences. That is why we are pushing for a dedicated rural crime strategy, which is sorely needed.

As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) mentioned, we are not just talking about petty theft. Much of rural crime is driven by organised criminal gangs. According to the National Rural Crime Network, there are at least 22 active gangs stealing farm machinery, vehicles and GPS equipment and selling them on the black market, which contributed to a loss of over £4 million in 2023 alone. The gangs exploit the fact that police forces are stretched thinly, and often work across county and police force borders to evade capture. Criminals know that rural policing is underfunded and overstretched, so they take full advantage.

Freedom of information requests show that less than 1% of police officers in England and Wales are dedicated to specialist rural crime teams. Many police forces lack the basic tools they need, such as mobile ANPR cameras

and rural drone kits, as others have mentioned. How can we expect our dedicated police to fight rural crime without the right resources?

The Countryside Alliance reports that nearly half of rural residents—49%—feel that the police do not take rural crime seriously enough, and two thirds think that reporting it is a waste of time. That is something I hear from my own constituents. Ian from Mellor reported repeated instances of people riding those irritating, illegal off-road bikes, terrorising his street. When his wife calls the police, she waits 20-plus minutes on hold each time, month after month, and nothing is seen to be done.

The Lib Dems will fight to keep rural communities safe and continue to give rural crime the attention that it deserves. I commend my hon. Friend the Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) on securing this important debate. He spoke with eloquence and clarity about the issues and some of the things that we Lib Dems would like to see happen to tackle these issues. I am particularly keen to hear the Minister's thoughts on my hon. Friend's Rural Crime (Strategy) Bill.

There have been other strong contributions from Members today. The hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) made a really interesting point about the language we use when we talk about fly-tipping. I agree with him that the language we use can diminish the issue—there is a similar issue around shoplifting. It can almost sound like a little bit of fun rather than a really serious problem. Some really good work has been done on calling it “shop theft” rather than shoplifting. The hon. Gentleman also made interesting points about investigation and enforcement.

The hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) commented on Chequers being a low-crime area. If I were a mischievous person, Ms McVey, I might make a comment about some of the people who have stayed over at Chequers in the past, but I am not a mischievous person so that point can be left to somebody else.

My hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) made important points about police numbers and the importance of a co-ordinated and targeted approach. I thoroughly endorse her comments.

I was glad that the hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) mentioned some of the hidden crimes, such as the sexual exploitation and domestic violence that occurs in rural communities. That was a really important point to make at that point in the debate.

The hon. Member for Redditch (Chris Bloore)—and the villages, of course—talked about our brilliant rural communities taking matters into their own hands when they have to clean up after inconsiderate illegal fly-tipping.

The Lib Dems' comprehensive plan to tackle rural crime includes establishing a permanent national rural crime co-ordinator to work across police forces and share best practice. We would embed a properly funded, dedicated rural crime team in every police force, which would include a single point of contact for local communities. At the very least, I urge the Government to provide specific rural crime training for police and 999 control room staff—including in metropolitan forces like my local Greater Manchester police—to increase access to the technology needed to detect and deter rural crime, and to streamline communications between rural crime offices and the communities they serve,

including via WhatsApp for a quick intelligence-sharing reporting tool. That is what a real rural crime strategy would look like: real action, real funding and real support for our rural communities.

2.30 pm

Robbie Moore (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I thank the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) for securing this important debate, and I thank all Members for their contributions. Crime is often perceived to be an issue confined to cities and metropolitan areas. While it is true that crime rates are often higher in these areas, it is easy to overlook the unique challenges of policing rural communities.

As many Members have eloquently said in today's debate, the reality is that rural crime is often a complex picture for the police, ranging from minor incidents of antisocial behaviour to organised criminal gangs exploiting our rural communities through machinery theft, livestock theft, fly-tipping and county lines operations—indeed, many of the issues that have been outlined today.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) rightly outlined, many of the hidden challenges associated with rural crime are very complex and need the full weight of police attention. As NFU Mutual's rural crime report indicated, the cost of rural crime has risen again this year to £52.8 million. We know that the cost is likely to be substantially higher, given how insurance policies work for those thefts.

Research from the National Rural Crime Network concludes that there is an unprecedented level of organised rural crime, with its datasets illustrating the point. This has led to the network's focus on making sure it is working collectively with all stakeholders that are willing to interact, and on making sure that all police forces are working as collaboratively as possible.

It is therefore vital that the police have a full range of powers and resources to tackle rural crimes. It is also imperative that the Government work effectively with the National Police Chiefs' Council to ensure that the next rural and wildlife crime strategy reflects the priorities of our rural communities.

Every Member has mentioned fly-tipping, which is an attack on our communities, nature and environment. It endangers wildlife and people alike, and the harm caused by these criminals must not go unpunished. For this reason, under the previous Conservative Administration, DEFRA grants were allocated to 58 local authorities specifically to enable them to provide additional enforcement powers.

I welcome the Government's intention to act on fly-tipping through the Crime and Policing Bill. However, it appears that all they are offering is limited statutory guidance for local authorities. I am therefore interested to hear from the Minister about the extent to which the guidance will help local authorities by further increasing the powers available to them. What will the guidance seek to achieve? Will it be accompanied by additional financial support, like that previously made available to local authorities by the previous Conservative Administration, and will it enable further enforcement action?

Fly-tipping is probably one of the most prolific categories of rural crime, as the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna and my hon. Friends the

Members for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) and for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) mentioned. A survey of NFU members found that 54% of respondents had experienced small-scale fly-tipping on farmland, while over a quarter—30%—said they had been hit by large-scale industrial fly-tipping. DEFRA statistics from January 2023 show that fly-tipping is estimated to cost the economy £924 million in England alone. Worryingly, instances of large commercial fly-tipping are ever-increasing, costing local authorities in the region of £13.2 million.

John Lamont: Does my hon. Friend agree that, with many councils closing tips and other community services, there is almost no other option for some residents to dispose of materials? Obviously, fly-tipping is illegal, but when councils cut back services such as tips, there is often no other alternative but for residents to do that. That is not a defence, as the action is totally unacceptable, but if there is no other option, some people are forced to do it.

Robbie Moore: As my hon. Friend makes clear, fly-tipping hits every part of our community. In Keighley and Ilkley, Bradford council recently made the decision to close two household waste and recycling centres, which has resulted in more fly-tipping not only in those parts of the rural environment that sit on the urban fringe, but sometimes in the most isolated of rural places. That is incredibly detrimental to many of our constituents. I would very much like to see, as we have previously advocated, a single reporting mechanism for fly-tipping, which would make it easier for police forces to manage the levels of reporting. This must continue to be a priority for all Governments.

Hare coursing has also been mentioned, and intervention is crucial to preventing wildlife crime. I thank all those involved with the passage of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act under the previous Conservative Administration, under which hare coursing now carries the appropriate punishments that recognise the damage it causes, with powers in place to impose custodial sentences, as mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire. As the Sentencing Council stated in its January 2025 consultation,

“The courts now have a fuller suite of sentencing powers, including new ancillary orders, to deal with hare coursing offences.”

Hare coursing may seem to many like an abstract issue, but for the many Members who represent rural constituencies, the offence unfortunately continues to take place. As a result of that Act, however, incidents are being reported. It is encouraging to see that, as of this Tuesday, 16 people have been arrested for the crime, but that underscores the need for the police to ensure that offenders are properly punished. It is highly encouraging that in areas where police forces are taking part in Operation Galileo, hare coursing has decreased by 40%. As I mentioned, the Sentencing Council is consulting on updating its guidance to reflect instances of this crime. I would be grateful if the Minister could keep the House updated.

Without doubt, the other big issue that has been mentioned is machinery and diesel theft. Based on data from the NFU and the Countryside Alliance, one of the most impactful crimes affecting rural communities is theft of agricultural machinery, including vehicles. Data from

[Robbie Moore]

the NFU indicates that the theft of agricultural goods costs more than £10 million in just the last year, which is a shocking amount.

I give huge credit to my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Buckinghamshire, whose private Member's Bill, now the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act, received Royal Assent back in 2023. The Act provided the Government and the police with wider powers to tackle the increasing incidence of vehicle and equipment theft from farms, including of quad bikes and ATVs, focusing on prevention. As my hon. Friend has consistently indicated, there is still a need for secondary legislation. It is comforting to hear that it will potentially be laid before the House by the summer, but the Government need to pass that secondary legislation to ensure the Act includes other agricultural equipment such as power tools.

Members have also mentioned livestock worrying, which involves livestock being attacked or chased by dogs that are not kept under proper control. NFU Mutual found that an estimated £2.4 million-worth of farm animals were killed by livestock worrying in 2023 alone, a rise of 30% on the previous year. Those deaths were not always because of physical attacks or injury. With the lambing season now under way, I worry that the issue will fill all our inboxes in the spring months ahead.

The Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill, which is a critical piece of animal welfare legislation, was first introduced under the last Government, and it is now slowly moving back through the legislative process. It received an unopposed Second Reading in the House of Commons on 29 November 2024, having been reintroduced by my hon. Friend the Member for Chester South and Eddisbury (Aphra Brandreth). I ask the Government to ensure that time is allowed for the Bill to progress as quickly as possible. This much-needed legislation would provide much comfort to many of our livestock farmers, because it aims to address the growing issue of livestock worrying by enhancing protections for farmers, introducing tougher penalties for offenders and expanding police powers. It would also expand the definition of livestock, introduce unlimited fines for offenders and grant the police powers to seize suspected attacking animals and to collect the DNA evidence needed for prosecution.

I reiterate the need for all our police forces to work collectively and collaboratively to deal with rural crime. Rural crime is often isolated, but as my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk indicated, we must enable cross-border interaction and ensure that police forces like mine in West Yorkshire, which predominantly have an urban base but also remote rural fringes, focus on rural crime just as much as more rural police forces.

It seems that rural crime is often a bottom priority for our local leaders and police forces. It is difficult to measure, it is often difficult to observe and it generally impacts fewer people. Rural crime can be reduced, but it requires not just investment but an understanding and prioritisation by decision-makers across all branches of local and national Government. The Opposition are

determined to put the prioritisation of rural crime in focus, and I hope that the Minister will be able to match our commitment.

Esther McVey (in the Chair): I ask the Minister to leave a few moments at the end for the Member in charge to wind up.

2.42 pm

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): It is a pleasure to serve under you this afternoon, Ms McVey. I congratulate the hon. Member for North Cornwall (Ben Maguire) on securing this debate, as well as on his private Member's Bill, which is before the House. I am grateful for how clearly he set out the serious nature of rural crime, particularly the involvement of organised criminal gangs. I am also grateful for the contributions of all Members to this debate, which has shown great insight; Members' passion for this issue has been very clear.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Ian Roome) mentioned the theft of a quad bike and chainsaw, and almost every Member who spoke in the debate mentioned such thefts. My hon. Friends the Members for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna) and for Redditch (Chris Bloore) spoke with a lot of knowledge of fly-tipping. They and a number of Members asked what more we can do to tackle fly-tipping.

I will take away some of the challenges that have been raised in this debate on fly-tipping, but I want to refer to the provisions in the Crime and Policing Bill, which had its First Reading this week. Through that Bill, there will be a power to issue statutory guidance to ensure consistency and robust enforcement of fly-tipping, but I very much hear the concerns about organised criminals who are involved and whether the Environment Agency is the most appropriate enforcement body. I will certainly write to respond to hon. Members' concerns about fly-tipping.

We all thank the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) for his work on the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act. We are working hard on the statutory instrument that is needed, and I will say something about that in a moment. As the Policing Minister, I am also concerned to hear his comments on the thefts around Chequers. We also heard from the hon. Member for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer) about the particular effect in her constituency. She spoke about hare coursing, which other hon. Members also raised.

The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) raised the funding issue. I fully accept that many are concerned about it, and I will say something about it in a moment. He also talked about the use of technology such as AI and drones, which is important in not just urban areas but rural areas.

Other issues, which we did not really touch on today, include domestic abuse and sexual exploitation, which are a problem in both rural and urban areas. The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) gave us the Scottish perspective, and talked about the need for cross-border work between Police Scotland and English police forces.

It is clear that this issue is important to many hon. Members and their constituents, and I take it very seriously as well. I visited North Yorkshire two weeks ago and had the privilege of meeting farmers who had

been subject to farm thefts and lost quad bikes, and we talked about how that made them feel. There is the issue of safety and security, but these thefts are also a loss to their businesses. I also talked to farmers who are seeing hare coursing in their fields, crops destroyed and gates damaged about how they felt about that. I fully recognise that these are important issues.

I also met the officers who were policing that area in rural North Yorkshire, and one thing that struck me was that they talked about how the community—although it was dispersed—wanted to work with the police. Because of the nature of the geographical area they have to cover, WhatsApp groups have been set up to provide information and intelligence that they can use. That assistance from the community is quite important.

This has been a wide-ranging debate, and I want to deal with a few issues. First, it is clear that the offending we have been discussing affects the lives and livelihoods of decent, law-abiding people. Those who have been victims of crime in rural communities often indicate that they have been left feeling isolated and undervalued, and we need to change that. No victim of crime and antisocial behaviour should feel unsafe. Their concerns should be taken seriously, and if they report, action should be taken.

In the National Rural Crime Network's "Rural Crime" report in 2024, 49% of rural residents surveyed said they did not feel that the police take rural crime seriously, and they reported a sense of dissatisfaction with and lack of faith in rural policing. That may be because of the lack of visibility of policing in rural areas or negative experiences when a crime is reported. We will not stand for that any more, which is why we have made safer streets one of the core missions of our plan for change. It is why we are committed to restoring neighbourhood policing to communities across the country, including in rural areas. It is why we are taking action to crack down on criminals and protect the public. We will be implementing the new neighbourhood policing guarantee to deliver an additional 13,000 police officers, police community support officers and special constables in neighbourhood policing roles, ensuring that every community has a named officer to turn to. Those policing commitments will not just be about towns and cities; they will also be for rural communities, speeding up response times and building public confidence in all those areas.

As we all know, neighbourhood policing sits at the heart of the British policing model. It is a critical building block in helping communities to feel safe, and the public rightly expect their neighbourhood police to be visible, proactive and accessible to their community. The national policing guarantee will help us deliver our commitment to ensuring that greater visibility and presence in all of our communities and restoring confidence in policing.

Beyond that commitment, in the 2025-26 police settlement we have committed to provide funding of up to £19.5 billion for the policing system in England and Wales, which is an overall increase of up to £1 billion compared to this financial year. In January 2025, the Government announced in the final police funding settlement that they would double the funding available to a total of £200 million in 2025-26 to support the first steps of delivering on the 13,000 more neighbourhood personnel.

I take the point about the funding formula. I said in the main Chamber that the previous Government made two—but I now understand it is three—attempts at changing the formula. We have been in government for seven months, and we have made it very clear that we have an agenda around reforming policing to make it fit for the future and to give it the structures and capabilities it needs. That will, of course, involve a conversation about funding, and that will happen as part of our reform agenda.

The major investment that I have just talked about supports the commitment to making our country's streets, and our village streets, safer. It also reflects the scale of the challenges, which I fully accept that forces are facing and which this Government are determined to address.

I acknowledge the vital role of the national rural crime unit and the national wildlife crime unit. Those specialist policing units play a really important part in tackling crime, as well as in helping police across the UK to tackle organised theft and disrupt serious and organised crime groups. Both units have delivered a range of incredible successes. The national rural crime unit co-ordinated the operational response by several forces to the theft of GPS units across the UK, which resulted in multiple arrests and the disruption of two organised crime groups, as well as recovering over £10 million in stolen property, including agricultural machinery and vehicles, in the last 18 months alone. The national wildlife crime unit helped to disrupt nine organised crime groups, with a further nine archived as no longer active, as well as assisting in the recovery of £4.2 million in financial penalties. It also oversees the police national response to hare coursing, which has resulted, as we heard, in a 40% reduction in offending.

I am very clear about the excellent work of both units, and although we obviously have to wait for the outcome of the spending review, the Government are committed to supporting their ongoing specialist policing activities. I understand the urgency to confirm funding, but I hope we will not have to wait too much longer before we are able to update the House on this issue.

On the issue of taking a national focus on rural crime, we will continue to support the National Police Chiefs' Council on the next iteration of its rural and wildlife strategy for 2025 and beyond. I recently met Deputy Chief Constable Nigel Harrison and Superintendent Andrew Huddleston, who the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire praised in his speech, to ensure that the commitments made under our safer streets mission, such as the neighbourhood policing guarantee, will apply in rural areas.

I want to address a few issues on rural crime more specifically. The Government are committed to ensuring that countryside communities that are blighted by organised crime, rural theft and antisocial behaviour are protected. We understand the devastating consequences of these crimes and the fundamental impact they can have on perceptions of safety. Rural crime and the associated costs have a considerable impact on rural residents and business owners.

Significantly, the threat appears to be increasing. For example, we know the significant impact that thefts of agricultural machinery—in particular, all-terrain vehicles—have on individuals and businesses in rural areas, and the disruption that such thefts cause to essential farming work. That is why we are committed to implementing the Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act 2023 to fend off

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

these thefts and the resale of high-value equipment, and we intend to introduce the necessary secondary legislation later this year. We will shortly publish the Government's response to the call for evidence, which will determine the scope of that secondary legislation.

We understand the impact of cruel hare coursing, which many hon. Members mentioned; livestock worrying, which was also mentioned; and the serious issue of fly-tipping, all of which blight communities. In 2022-23, local authorities reported 1.08 million fly-tipping incidents. That figure, of course, excludes the majority of private land incidents, as my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch noted.

The same crimes that affect urban communities can also, of course, affect rural communities. I talked earlier about domestic abuse and exploitation, and the hon. Member for North Cornwall raised another issue we need to talk about: drugs, drug dealing and drug supply. We know that county lines is the most violent model of drug supply and a harmful form of child criminal exploitation. Gangs exploit children and vulnerable adults to move and store drugs and money, often using coercion, intimidation, violence and weapons. I reassure hon. Members that, through the Home Office county lines programme, we are targeting, and will continue to target, the exploitative gangs working in both rural and urban areas. It is absolutely the case that when someone reports a crime, no matter where they live, it should be properly investigated, with victims having faith that justice will be delivered and criminals will be punished.

In conclusion, I thank the hon. Member for North Cornwall again for securing the debate, and I thank all those who have spoken. Rural crime is, without doubt, a serious threat and must be dealt with as such. That is why we are taking the actions I have talked about and why we have the wide-ranging safer streets mission.

There is clearly much more to do, but we are determined to deliver the safety and security of all our communities, rural and urban.

2.57 pm

Ben Maguire: It has been a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair, Ms McVey. I thank all Members who have contributed to the debate; it is great to see such cross-party support and that all Members take rural crime especially seriously.

It was excellent to hear from the hon. Member for Sittingbourne and Sheppey (Kevin McKenna), who made an eloquent case regarding the severity of fly-tipping and how it blights so many rural communities. I again congratulate the hon. Member for Mid Buckinghamshire (Greg Smith) on his Equipment Theft (Prevention) Act, and I was delighted to hear the Minister confirm that the Government will take it forward, which is an important step.

It was excellent to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for North East Hampshire (Alex Brewer), who highlighted the violent crime that happens in our rural communities. Just because some of these crimes happen in quaint and beautiful rural settings, that does not make them any less serious. The hon. Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Patrick Spencer) made a series of excellent points, including about the need for increased technology, such as drones and AI.

I am pleased that the Minister is taking all those matters extremely seriously. I look forward to working on a cross-party basis with her and, given some of his excellent points, with the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore). This is such an important issue that it takes Members from across the House to tackle it.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered rural crime.

Women's Health

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

3 pm

Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered women's health.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq.

“Women's pain is too often dismissed, recorded as emotional, misunderstood and misdiagnosed. It's got to change.”

Those are the words of my friend, Professor Geeta Nargund—an expert in women's health, who joins us today. They sum up well the issues that we are here to talk about.

Ahead of today's debate, the House of Commons put out a public call for evidence. We have been overwhelmed by more than 800 responses in just a few days, which shows the strength of feeling on this matter and how much women in this country want to see more focus on and prioritisation for women's health.

Although I will focus my comments today on the state of women's health in this country, it is worth putting on the record our concern for the awful situation that many women around the world find themselves in. I will never forget seeing the maternity theatre run by Save the Children in Yemen, where women gave birth between airstrikes. In many parts of the world, women struggle to access the most basic care and the most basic of reproductive rights and healthcare. The struggle for better women's health does not stop at our borders.

We have heard stories from women up and down this country of not being believed, not getting diagnosed and then having difficulties obtaining treatment when they do finally get that diagnosis. Before coming on to some of the specific areas of women's health that need to be addressed, I want to highlight the underlying themes that are too common in so many of these cases. For too long, women have had to fight to be believed and to be taken seriously, which can result in them losing their jobs. Their relationships, mental health and wellbeing can be affected. So many women have got in touch to share their stories of going through endless appointments and referrals in search of a diagnosis. During the long waits, women wait needlessly in pain and in huge suffering. For some, sadly, the long wait has proved fatal.

As this Labour Government take welcome action to tackle long gynaecological waiting lists, we are committed to improving inequalities in many areas of women's health. It is worth pointing out that if we lined up the number of women currently stuck on the hugely long gynaecological waiting lists in this country, that line would stretch from London all the way to Exeter. What a shocking indictment of 14 years of Conservative failure!

In their submissions, several women shared their stories of having their symptoms dismissed by doctors or clinicians as being simply due to hormones, or even as having been imagined, only for the real diagnosis of a very serious rare cancer to come later on. I share one story of my friend—the late, great, Baroness Margaret McDonagh. Margaret attended her GP on several occasions complaining of painful headaches, but they were dismissed by her GP time and again as being related to her hormones.

Tragically, Margaret was later diagnosed with a brain tumour, a glioblastoma. We all wish that it had been caught earlier; Margaret could still be with us today.

Anyone who knew Margaret will be aware of what a force of nature she was. It shows the scale of the issues facing women in accessing healthcare that even she was dismissed. We have heard similar stories from women eventually diagnosed with ovarian cancer and blood cancer, with the delayed diagnosis damaging their chance of successful curative treatment.

Many women eventually diagnosed with endometriosis shared similar stories. In its 2024 report of over 4,000 women who had received a diagnosis, the charity Endometriosis UK found that almost half of the women had visited their GP 10 or more times before receiving a diagnosis. Some 70% had visited over five times and 20% reported seeing a gynaecologist 10 or more times before getting a diagnosis.

Another common barrier for women is the lack of research and data about women's health. We have all been made familiar with the gender data gap and the consequences for policymaking by Caroline Criado Perez's excellent book “Invisible Women”. The gender health gap is stark. The Women and Equalities Committee report published in December said:

“past research has shown that five times more research is conducted into erectile dysfunction than premenstrual syndrome. This is staggering considering that 19% of men are affected by erectile dysfunction, while 90% of women have premenstrual syndrome.”

Over-the-counter Viagra was available a full six years before chemists in this country were able to provide medicine over the counter for urinary tract infections.

It is clear that far more attention and focus needs to be given to women's menstrual cycles and treatment for conditions related to them, including the menopause. Why is it that in over a decade of being at school in this country, I learned all about many obscure topics like oxbow lakes, but never about the menopause, which affects 51% of our population? Everyone will be affected by it, whether they experience it as a woman or their mother, daughter or wife does.

We are rightly seeing more focus given to the menopause thanks to the work of many campaigners. I want to give particular mention to my hon. Friend the Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for her championing of the cause. She and many others have rightly highlighted the shocking delays for women in accessing hormone replacement therapy treatment—a medicine that plays a critical role in alleviating the symptoms of the menopause, helping millions of women in the UK manage what is a natural life transition.

One of my constituents, Kate, wrote to me to describe her struggle to access adequate treatment for the pain that she has been suffering and how she was not taken seriously by medical professionals. She says:

“At one point, I was experiencing such a high level of pain...that I was sent by the GP to A&E with suspected appendicitis. After tests confirmed what I'd said all along”—

that it was endometriosis—

“I was ‘confronted’ by a doctor...who demanded to know why I was there, and what I thought they should do to help me. When I said that I'd been clear that I thought it was related to endometriosis the whole time, she dismissed me and said ‘we don't deal with menstrual issues in A&E’. I left in tears and pain and have since avoided A&E despite experiencing acute pain”.

[*Helena Dollimore*]

Another area of great importance in this debate is maternity services. I recently had the chance to visit my local maternity unit at the Conquest hospital in Hastings and see the fantastic care that local midwives are giving women. Midwives are working really hard and have our full support. We need to ensure that we are doing everything we can to tackle the retention crisis in midwifery and encourage more young people to enter the profession. We have heard harrowing evidence in the numerous reviews commissioned into maternity services at a number of hospital trusts of the same mistakes being made over and over again and lessons not being learned, with tragic consequences of women and babies losing their lives or experiencing traumatic births. That has to change.

The landmark report of the all-party parliamentary group on birth trauma in the previous Parliament set out for the first time the shocking impact that traumatic births have had on women and their families and what needs to change to prevent that. Often, those tragic cases were a result of an unhealthy obsession in maternity units with not intervening. I must point out to the House how damaging that obsession has been for many women. The report made many important recommendations and I hope that the Government will look closely at them.

I pay tribute to those in that all-party group in the previous Parliament for the work that went into that report and to the women who shared their stories, and to all the women that have shared their stories as part of the House of Commons call for evidence. We have looked through all of them, and I know that many Members will be sharing stories about their own constituents' experiences.

It is also worth pointing out that some examples of brilliant women's healthcare have been shared as well. I want to particularly mention Dr Warner from the Rye medical centre in my constituency. She was mentioned by a number of women who got in touch with me who said she was a champion of women's healthcare; as a result, a huge waiting list of women were waiting for appointments with her because word of mouth had spread about how she prioritised this issue.

Maternity services, of course, are not the only area in which shocking scandals have been exposed regarding women's health. We will hear today from Members who have been campaigning for justice for the women who were victims of the mesh and sodium valproate scandals. We have also heard a number of shocking stories from women, as part of their submissions, about an inability to access basic contraception, about long waits to access the healthcare that they have the right to access and about challenges in women's mental health services.

Many Members wish to speak, so I will sum up by saying that it is clear that far more attention needs to be given to women's health. I am looking forward to hearing the stories from other Members' constituencies and how this Labour Government will be working to ensure that women get the support and treatment that they have the right to.

Several hon. Members *rose—*

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Everyone who wants to speak should be bobbing, because we will be calculating the time limit depending on how many there are.

3.11 pm

Alice Macdonald (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your leadership, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for securing this important debate. As we have heard for far too long, women have been paying the price of an NHS that simply is not working. Women know that; in a survey that I saw, half of women said that they believed that their health was treated as second class.

Our economy is also paying the price. There are many areas that we could mention, but I want to focus on one in particular: the often very challenging journey that people experience when trying to have a baby. More than 3.5 million people in the UK go through some kind of fertility challenge, and that obviously has a huge impact on women. It can happen for a variety of reasons and is often heartbreaking. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to addressing fertility, but the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines are clear that, for women under 40 with a clinical diagnosis requiring in vitro fertilisation, or with unexplained infertility for two years, three NHS-funded cycles of IVF should be offered. The guidelines also recommend that women aged between 40 and 42 should be offered one cycle of IVF on the NHS, subject to some conditions.

Yet the reality is a postcode lottery. It is down to local integrated care boards to decide their approach, and only around a quarter of ICBs in England offer a full three cycles. The east of England, where my constituency is, has the lowest proportion of NHS-funded cycles, and my own ICB of Norfolk and Waveney offers two cycles. In other areas—north-east London, for example—the full three cycles are funded, whereas in areas such as Hampshire only one is.

Recent data tells us that fewer than 27% of IVF patients receive NHS funding nationally. When we think about our NHS, that is a huge anomaly. It means that most patients are paying for their treatment. Other factors also come into play: inequalities are stark when it comes to access and outcomes for black and ethnic minority patients, as well as for those in female same-sex relationships.

The postcode lottery needs to end. We must address those inequalities in access to NHS funding. There also needs to be greater education for healthcare professionals around fertility, regarding diagnosis and treatment, and for people themselves, so that patients have the choice and know what to do when it comes to their own fertility.

Beyond medical treatment, there is also not enough support in the workplace. We really need a whole-of-Government approach to this issue. It is not just about the Department of Health and Social Care; there are so many other areas, including, importantly, the Department for Work and Pensions. There is no legal right to time off for fertility treatment and currently, under the Equality and Human Rights Commission's code of practice, fertility treatment is compared with cosmetic dental surgery. That means that many employers regard fertility treatment as a "nice to have"—an elective choice. Instead, it should be treated as a medical procedure that is needed.

I have heard stories of women losing their jobs simply because they have attended an IVF appointment. That needs to change. That is why I am campaigning, with Fertility

Matters at Work and others, for a change in the law, so that people—women, in particular—have a right to paid time off for fertility treatment. I have met the Minister for Employment, my hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Alison McGovern), to discuss the issue, and I welcome the continued engagement with the Government. I hope the Minister will meet us to discuss those demands. Many companies, including Centrica, E.ON and Cadent, already give women time off because they know it makes sense for productivity and happiness at work. Almost one in five people undergoing fertility treatment end up leaving their jobs because of the impact.

I also want to touch on miscarriage, another aspect of the journey; I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) will mention it as well. We need a right to time off for miscarriage before 24 weeks. It causes huge trauma, and women do not recover from it straight away. They need to be given time.

In the 30 seconds that I have left, I want to touch on gynaecology in my area of Norfolk. The situation is dire: we have the worst wait for gynaecology treatment in England. We are nowhere near the 92% target of 18 weeks: the figure is 44% in Norfolk and Waveney. Research from the House of Commons Library shows that more than 1,000 patients have been waiting for more than a year in Norfolk and Waveney, and that has a massive impact on women's health.

I have to stop there. I wanted to talk about women's health hubs, but I am sure that others will. There are so many issues to discuss, but when it comes to fertility and gynaecology, we simply cannot wait. Our manifesto promised that we will not neglect women's health again, and I am sure that we will live up to that promise.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): With a time limit of four minutes—the clock is counting backwards—I call Jim Shannon.

3.16 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for leading the debate and setting the scene incredibly well. I welcome the Minister to her place. I think this might be her first official engagement as Minister. If it is, I wish her well in her new role. I welcome the Conservative and Liberal Democrat spokespeople. The hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans) and I seem to spend every Thursday afternoon at about this time in these debates. It is a pleasure to be here.

I am my party's health spokesperson, so finding solutions and discussing these issues are of major importance to me. It is important to get the full perspective, so I will give some facts and figures about Northern Ireland, which will echo what the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye said.

Many will be aware that health is a devolved issue. That does not mean, of course, that our central Government allow the devolved Administrations to be left behind. The Department of Health back home launched a women's health survey in late 2024. The hon. Lady referred to a similar survey. The Northern Ireland survey, which closed on 31 January 2025, focused on women's healthcare needs and experiences to help shape planning for women's health services. Almost 80% of respondents to a separate

women's health survey undertaken by the Community Foundation Northern Ireland said that they felt unheard by healthcare professionals, and more than 30% reported that necessary services were inaccessible or very inaccessible, so we have real problems back home.

I have worked closely alongside many charities raising awareness of endometriosis and polycystic ovary syndrome care, and the challenges that women in Northern Ireland face in relation to gaining access to treatment. Endometriosis UK revealed in 2023 that there was an average diagnostic delay of nine years and five months—an increase on the eight-year delay reported in 2010—so we really have significant issues in the Province.

As of 2021, Northern Ireland had only one endometriosis specialist surgeon, and some 324 women were waiting a long time, in pain, for surgery. I ask the Minister whether it would be possible for her to have some discussions with the relevant Minister in the Northern Ireland Assembly to see how we can address these things together.

I want to speak very quickly about the menopause. The hon. Member for Neath and Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), who is not here—she is in the main Chamber speaking on St David's day—is a real champion on this issue. If she were here today, she would be adding to this debate. In my office, I employ six women of different ages, and I have always tried to make an effort to be understanding to ensure they are comfortable in the workplace. For menopause, there are adjustments that can be made in the workplace to support women, and I encourage employers to be mindful of that, especially in more male-dominated fields, where women can feel more isolated. Women are playing their part in places where men used to have all the jobs, such as engineering. It is time that employers grasped that and came up with something to help those ladies.

I have mentioned some of the issues, but there are many, many more. As the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye said, we in this place can do more as legislators to support more research into and funding for women's healthcare. We need to do more to ensure women can access what they need. I look forward to working closely with the responsible agencies and our respective Governments to see what more can be done. I thank the hon. Lady again for bringing forward this debate, and I look forward to contributions from many others who will add to it. I am here to help us do the best we can, and to bring a Northern Ireland perspective, because we are badly lagging behind. We need to step up and do more.

3.19 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Gateshead South) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship today, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for securing this important debate, and for her excellent opening speech. There are so many things that I want to talk about, but for time's sake, I will focus my remarks around the importance of women being believed by healthcare professionals, and the detrimental effect on women when that is not the case.

The UK has the largest female health gap in the G20, and that is attributed in part to the misdiagnosis of conditions in women. It is absolutely shocking that eight in 10 women in this country report not being

[Mrs Sharon Hodgson]

listened to by healthcare professionals. Those discrepancies extend beyond the confinement of the consulting room; they actively reinforce beliefs among wider society that women's symptoms, no matter how debilitating, are normal. That is likely to prevent so many women from seeking medical advice, ultimately putting them at risk. Therefore, that widespread problem does not just perpetuate systemic misogyny but directly impacts women's health outcomes and endangers their lives.

Published in August 2022, the 10-year women's health strategy for England included a six-point plan on how to improve health outcomes and the way that the healthcare system listens to women. No. 1 on the list was to ensure that women's voices are heard. In the month of the first anniversary of the publication of the excellent Hughes report, there is no better time to speak on an apt example of what happens when women's voices are not heard. As the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on first do no harm, mesh, Primodos, valproate, I campaigned for justice and compensation on behalf of the thousands of women who live with the consequences every day of what happens when women's voices are not listened to. The mesh scandal in particular exemplifies that perfectly.

To set the scene, it is believed that 40,000 women in this country could be affected by mesh damage and complications, and 10,000 of those women have been left with disabilities, as the mesh has cut into their organs and nerves. I hear from mesh-impacted constituents who describe desperate situations of poverty, depression and isolation as a result. Many have lost their jobs, their marriages and their trust in a service that is supposed to be there for us when we are sick, not make us sick.

Perhaps even worse was the treatment of those women when they realised that it was the mesh that was causing their health complications. The women then report being gaslit, undermined and ridiculed when trying to sort out a mess they had no part in making, or even consenting to in most cases. Among the thousands of mesh-injured women is my own mam. I personally sat next to her at our local hospital and watched her be gaslit and undermined by her original surgeon when she first sought help with her pain and symptoms. Despite now having had her mesh removed by the wonderful Dr Suzy Elneil in London, the complications sadly do not stop there.

The way mesh attaches to our organs has been likened to the way that chewing gum gets caught in our hair, so it is almost impossible to fully remove it. As such, regardless of the removal, my mam, now 80, is still struggling and in her own words, will never be the same again. The important point is that had my mam and the thousands of others affected been men suffering horrendous pain as a result of a medical procedure, I do not believe that dismissal on such a scale would have occurred. Nor do I believe that compensation and recognition of the scandal would be such a painfully slow process.

Before I finish, I put on record my gratitude to my friend who recently retired from the other place, Baroness Cumberlege, for all her work on this issue. I will leave it there, as I am out of time.

3.24 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Ind): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Döllimore) on securing this debate, which is one of only a handful to tackle women's health in general. Since I came to this place, a big focus for me has been women's health, whether it is the devastating and shocking findings of the Kirkup review of East Kent Hospitals maternity care; the setting up of the APPG for birth trauma; the plight of women who now have no recourse to any healthcare or medical treatment in Afghanistan; the women whose health and wellbeing means precisely nothing to the warring factions in places such as Tigray; the tenacious mothers who have tirelessly fought for changes to sodium valproate labelling; female cancers; vaginal mesh; menopause; the mental stress and health toll on WASPI—Women Against State Pension Inequality—or 1950s women; female genital mutilation; or domestic abuse survivors. All of those and so many more are health issues that affect the majority of the population, who are female. And for the avoidance of doubt, let me be clear: by female I mean women, adult human females, the kind who have a cervix and who definitely do not have a penis.

Despite women being 51% of the population, women's health services are frequently deprioritised, with the healthcare model based on a default male, and women existing within a system built around men. The inequalities in health outcomes between men and women are scandalous. Compared with men, women are more likely to experience common mental health conditions, more likely to be misdiagnosed, more likely to receive less pain medication after identical procedures and more likely to be undertreated for pain by doctors.

A perfect example of how women must exist within a healthcare system built for men is that of heart attacks. I have recent experience of this, with my dear friend Nicky Clark experiencing a heart attack in January. She is now tirelessly campaigning, because compared with men, women are less likely to be admitted to hospital when they complain of chest pain and they have more than double the rate of death within 30 days following a heart attack. Medical professionals know that heart attacks present very differently in women, compared with men, and yet the classic symptoms listed in campaigns are specific to men only.

Recent trends in the collection of data highlight how vital the accurate recording of this is in a medical context. Women's health issues all arise from our specific biology. A man cannot get ovarian cancer and a woman cannot get prostate cancer, for example. It may be considered good manners, kind and courteous to refer to those who identify as a different gender in the way they prefer, but for the specific purposes of recording vital and potentially lifesaving data, we must accurately record patients' biological sex. Otherwise, trans patients may miss being called for screening for sex-specific conditions, and that has potentially fatal consequences. That has been highlighted by Professor Alice Sullivan, who was commissioned by the last Government to tackle the issue of recording sex data, including in the NHS. Her review is due to be published, and I would be grateful if the Government could confirm the date for that as soon as possible.

In the last seven years, we have had seven Secretaries of State for Health and Social Care. It is very hard to get even on the second rung of a ladder when we have to start all over again with explanations, evidence and examples relating to a campaign or specific health issue every few months because the departmental personnel and teams change so often, so women here will keep campaigning and holding debates to push women's health further up the agenda. I will keep working with the Birth Trauma Association, the MASIC Foundation and others to help to end the postcode lottery and extreme inequalities for black and south Asian mothers experiencing what should be straightforward and perfectly safe childbirth. I again thank all those parliamentarians, campaigners and activists who just will not take no for an answer and who fight every day to bring about better experiences for other women.

3.28 pm

Sonia Kumar (Dudley) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) on securing this important debate. Today, I want to talk about the stigma and embarrassment in relation to women's incontinence: stress incontinence, urinary or faecal incontinence, and double incontinence. It affects so many aspects of women's lives: where they go out, how much time they spend out, their relationships and their sleep patterns. And of course there are the effects on their mental and physical health.

Working as an NHS physiotherapist, I spoke to women about their incontinence when I did back screening, and I heard over and over again that women felt an overwhelming sense of shame—the fear of the smell, the sense of being dirty and the feeling of always having to check their pad to make sure that it is in place and has not leaked down their leg. It is estimated that a third of women in the UK are living with urinary incontinence. That means someone in this room will have those symptoms. A third of women suffer from a pelvic floor disorder after childbirth, including urinary incontinence and pelvic organ prolapse, but only 17% of women actually seek help. I would recommend to any woman who is suffering that she seek professional help from her GP or specialist. What we do not talk about for both faecal and urinary incontinence is the psychological problems, low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, sexual problems, social isolation, physical problems, skin breakdowns, and the falls when having to get to the toilet as quickly as possible.

At the moment, we also know there is an economic case that is also very compelling. Research shows that every £1 spent on women's health services will return up to £13 back into our emergency services by reducing women going to A&E and GP appointments.

So what do I, as a clinician, propose? As a physiotherapist, of course I propose physiotherapy. Physiotherapy is the first line of intervention preventing mild to moderate incontinence and prolapse. It is therefore essential that we have women's health physiotherapists in hubs locally as they are rolled out. We should also take a multifaceted approach to urinary and faecal incontinence, where women's mental health, physical health, lifestyle—their caffeine and dietary intake—and the incontinence all get addressed. We should also make sure that, when people need the most help, referrals to secondary care or a surgeon are optimal.

We also need to get the first line of treatment for incontinence on to our high streets, making it more accessible for women to get self-referrals as quickly as possible. We should not have a barrier to speaking to a healthcare professional or a GP; women should be able to go into a high street pharmacist and say, "I've got incontinence. What can be done to help?" I welcome the Government's steps for women's health hubs, but we need to go further by making sure that there is a national campaign so that women know that those hubs exist.

I say to the women listening to this Westminster Hall debate: you are not alone and there is no shame. As a nation, we cannot allow women to feel shame or embarrassment about this topic any longer. Incontinence is common, so will my hon. Members join me in my mission to break the silence, end the stigma and eliminate the anxiety around incontinence?

3.32 pm

Wera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for bringing forward this very important debate.

The UK currently has the largest gender health gap in the G20 and the 12th largest in the world. It is high time that we focus on these disparities. Let me start with breast cancer. Breast cancer does not only affect women, of course, but the vast majority of cases are in women, with one woman being diagnosed with breast cancer every 10 minutes.

Over the last 20 years, the prognosis for women diagnosed with breast cancer has improved significantly. Women diagnosed with primary breast cancer today are 66% less likely to die from the disease within five years. That is encouraging news, but we cannot stop there.

Detecting breast cancer in its early stages drastically improves a woman's chances of survival, but young women face huge challenges when it comes to being diagnosed. That is particularly harmful, because younger women are more likely not only to develop aggressive forms of the disease, but to be diagnosed at a later stage when the tumours are larger and have spread to the lymph nodes. As a result, younger women have a significantly worse prognosis, a higher risk of recurrence, and a greater chance of death compared with older women.

Even more alarmingly, cancer cases in women under 50 have increased by nearly 80% worldwide over the last 30 years. In the UK, breast cancer diagnoses in women under 50 have been steadily rising, and in 2013, we saw over 10,000 cases for the first time. Yet despite that growing trend, routine breast cancer screening still does not begin until women turn 50. Why do we start so late? It is an alarming trend and the Government must look at it. I know that the UK National Screening Committee advises on the decision about who to screen, and I have been assured that it will be looked into, but I mention it today to urge the Government to make progress.

Another issue affecting many women in Bath is gynaecological care. A new report from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists said the UK has a "gynaecology care crisis", with over 750,000 patients currently waiting for treatment for a serious condition.

Helen Maguire (Epsom and Ewell) (LD): My constituent, a GP, got in contact after she recently had to cut specialised contraception services in her practice due to

[Helen Maguire]

national insurance hikes and inadequate funding. The services were running at a loss, making them unsustainable. Does my hon. Friend agree that that lack of funding is short-sighted and will harm health outcomes, and that all women should have equitable access to contraception?

Wera Hobhouse: I could not agree more. We already have a crisis, which that will only exacerbate, so I thank my hon. Friend for rightly highlighting that issue.

My Bath constituents are at particular risk. A recent report said that appointment waits have doubled since the pandemic—another serious trend that the Government need to look at. A constituent recently reached out to me about the length of time it takes to get an endometriosis diagnosis in the NHS, which has already been mentioned today. That is not only a problem in Bath; far too many women wait far too long. The Government need to look at that.

In better news, the national maternity survey 2024 found that Bath's Royal United hospital received a top Care Quality Commission rating over its treatment of patients. The survey found that those giving birth felt confidence and trust in staff during their care at the RUH. There was also praise for the dignity and respect people that were treated with. I am grateful to the RUH and all its staff for setting such a brilliant example, and offer them my congratulations.

In such a debate, I cannot, as chair of the eating disorders APPG, leave out eating disorders. Although they affect more women than men, it is not only women who suffer from them. One issue of particular concern is online platforms recommending harmful eating disorder-related content to young users. The Center for Countering Digital Hate, whose representatives I met this week, recently published research on the dangerous eating disorder videos recommended by the YouTube algorithms. It set up an account for a 13-year-old girl searching for body image and dieting content, and found that, of the next videos recommended by the YouTube algorithm, one in four was harmful eating disorder content. That is alarming.

I urge the Government to look into that and to hold these powerful digital platforms to account. In 2025, it is not acceptable that there are continuing disparities in women's health and, in particular, young women's health on this issue. I urge the Government to take action.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): I am sorry to do this, but I am imposing a newly reduced time limit of three and a half minutes.

3.37 pm

Katrina Murray (Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) on securing this vital debate. In the time available, I will concentrate on the importance of delivery. The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) spoke eloquently about the experience in Northern Ireland; it is only appropriate that I, as a Scottish MP, talk about my constituency and my constituents' experience.

In 2021, the Scottish Government published its women's health plan, the intent of which was absolutely sound. In November '24, they provided the final report for this plan, measuring what it had delivered. I looked at that when preparing this speech, and in particular at one of the topics that comes up regularly in my inbox—endometriosis. People, particularly younger women, are living with pain. It is difficult to get on to the referral pathway, and long waiting times for people who do get there.

The Scottish Government's strategy detailed a clinical endometriosis pathway for women that was launched in January '23. It was rightly lauded at the time, but the Scottish Government have a habit of announcing and launching brand new shiny things that are then not delivered operationally. There is a review date of January '24 on the pathway, but I cannot find any evidence of that review having ever happened. It gives a set of criteria for women to be referred to specialist services, but when someone has those symptoms and declares them to their GPs, they are still do not getting that referral.

When people actually get on to a waiting list, it is endless. Unlike the experience in England, where waiting lists are starting to come down, in Scotland they are not. My constituency of Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch straddles the periphery of NHS Lanarkshire and NHS Greater Glasgow and Clyde. On average, 65% of people referred to specialist gynaecological services in Scotland wait more than 12 weeks for the first appointment—most wait an awful lot longer than that, as the number of clinics is certainly less than when I worked in the service 30 years ago.

One of my constituents informed me that after fighting for a year with her GP to get a referral to a specialist service, she waited over a year before deciding to go private. She travelled abroad for treatment because she could not stand the uncertainty and the pain. That is just one case from my inbox; there are many, many more. Pathways and strategies are good, but they need to be delivered. I know my hon. Friend the Minister, and I am assured that the Government are focusing on delivery, not just the strategy and a publication that can be held up. I welcome that.

3.40 pm

Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank my former colleague on Merton council, the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore), for securing this important debate. As the proud father of four daughters—the solitary man in a family of six—I am acutely aware of the inequalities between the sexes when it comes to health provision. The evidence is clear: our health system does not accord women equal priority to men. Their health issues are often ill researched and underfunded, with women more likely to be misdiagnosed and undertreated for pain, and have their symptoms dismissed.

From a lack of research funding into women's specific health conditions to medical textbooks using many more images of men, women's health is often marginalised. Women regularly report feeling unheard by doctors. Surveys have found that over 80% of women report not feeling listened to by healthcare professionals, with their symptoms being dismissed. As a constituent recently told me,

"Every woman I know has a story of their pain not being taken seriously."

That is simply not acceptable. As time is short, I will focus on two issues that I know are key for my constituents and my immediate family.

My constituency of Wimbledon has a particular concern around the levels and availability of breast cancer screening. Breast cancer is the most common cancer in the UK, with one woman diagnosed every 10 minutes. Every year in the UK that leads to, on average, 11,500 deaths. It is, however, one of the most treatable cancers if caught in its early stages, as I saw with my wife Samantha, who was diagnosed and successfully treated almost a decade ago. Breast cancer is a disease where screening programmes work and are cost-effective.

In Merton, however, where most of my constituency lies, there are genuine concerns about the effectiveness of the screening programme, with more than 40% of eligible women failing to attend when invited. That is partly due to the fact that Merton is one of the only boroughs in London not to have a specific breast screening cancer centre, despite its being recommended by NHS reports a number of times. I acknowledge that that is being worked on, as is the potential for using a mobile screening unit in the meantime, but there is still no firm commitment. Each day's delay means more breast cancer going undiagnosed and women's lives being jeopardised.

Finally, as it is Eating Disorders Awareness Week, I would like to focus on how this terrible disease impacts women, as women, particularly young women, are at the highest risk. As my wife and I have seen in our own family, those who take the often difficult step of reaching out for help are too often told that nothing can be done—that they are not ill enough to be treated as the resources are not there—with an underlying message that they should starve themselves more and wait until they are thinner. They will not be taken seriously until their condition has deteriorated further, at which point it is of course more dangerous, more damaging, more difficult, and more doubtful whether they will ever recover, as eating disorders have the highest mortality rate of any mental illness.

I have focused in my speech on the two aspects of women's health in which my family has the most experience. In finishing, I want to emphasise the broader point with which I began. We have an unequal healthcare system in which women are treated as second best and often marginalised, and that simply must change.

3.44 pm

Sarah Owen (Luton North) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the incredible Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for bring this important debate to Westminster Hall.

As Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, I will focus on our two reports on women's health because, as we have heard, we have some way to go to improve things. The first report followed our inquiry into the need for miscarriage bereavement leave. Campaigners from all parties have been calling for that for a number of years, and it is time the law caught up with public opinion. That is what our inquiry found and what our report clearly states.

We have tabled an amendment to the Employment Rights Bill that clearly lays out the need for time to grieve following miscarriage. It is not a sickness, so sick

pay is not an adequate replacement for time to grieve when it comes to miscarriage and miscarriage bereavement leave. That is what we heard from the brave women and families who gave evidence to our Committee. When I experienced miscarriage, nobody gave me a squeeze and told me to get well; they gave me a squeeze and said, "I am sorry for your loss." It is definitely time the Government caught up with public opinion on this issue.

There are good examples: the NHS offers bereavement leave for those who miscarry, as do Dentsu and the Co-op Group. They are not all doing it out of the kindness of their hearts. When questioned by two separate Select Committees as to how much it costs the largest public sector employer of women, which is the NHS, the response was that it is de minimis—it is negligible. It costs us nothing, and we gain everything. That is incredibly important.

The second report concerns medical misogyny, which we have already heard about. There is this constant feeling of not being listened to—being patted on the head, sent off and told to get a hot water bottle and some paracetamol and just crack on with it. Fortunately, that does not happen to men in the same way. When we were looking at a title for the report, it was said that medical misogyny seems quite hard, but it is really difficult to describe it as anything else: women are subjected to painful procedures, such as intrauterine device insertions or hysteroscopies, without any pain relief, and training is far too low in gynaecology. One of the report's recommendations is that gynaecology becomes part of mandatory rotation. More than half the population are women, yet our medical practices do not reflect that.

Women and girls on low incomes really struggle with period poverty. For example, one in three women and girls struggle with heavy bleeding, and one in 10 women and girls experience adenomyosis or endometriosis. The average wait for a diagnosis for endometriosis and adenomyosis is eight years. That is far too long. Our recommendation is to make that two years. That is still two years too long, but it would be a vast improvement. We know it is a chunky report, but I really look forward to the NHS's response to it.

Progress is not inevitable. This is not about making women wait any longer or about making progress at the expense of men's health either. We all benefit when we see women's health improve.

3.47 pm

Leigh Ingham (Stafford) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I extend my thanks to my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for securing this debate on such an important issue. I know it is really close to her heart.

For far too long, women's health concerns have been under-represented, underfunded and misunderstood. When reading the elective care reform plan, I was delighted to see that the Government are going to increase the funding available to improve capacity to tackle the waiting lists for gynaecological treatment, on which there are 260,000 women. The Government are taking sorely needed action to ensure that women across our country receive the care, respect and medical support they deserve.

[Leigh Ingham]

My constituent Suzanne is a campaigner for women's health and is director of the charity Bladder Health UK. She told me how woefully under-represented urogynaecology is in the medical sector. Suzanne told me that, similarly to what my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar) said, there is currently no NHS guidance for chronic urinary tract infections, leading to a troubling gap between the lived experiences of women and the way their conditions are treated. Urologists often fail to refer patients with chronic UTIs to urogynaecologists, despite the need for multidisciplinary care. Organisations such as Bladder Health UK have highlighted the importance of ensuring that patients receive comprehensive, specialist-led treatments, and I hope that will be emphasised by the Government.

More widely, we need a cultural shift in the way we approach women's health. There is a huge gap between research and study. Friends of mine have told me that they are left scouring the internet and American medical journals to find a cure for their chronic urinary tract infections, simply because GPs' approach to UTIs is so severely lacking. It is tough to understand the true scale of the problem because of how absent the research is.

The Government have stated that women are leading in senior positions in the National Institute for Health and Care Research, which is a really promising step. However, that must be matched by a laser-focused commitment to women's health. We need targeted research, better training for medical professionals and a system that listens to, and prioritises, women's concerns. Women make an immense contribution to our society—in our social networks, our economy and our institutions—yet far too many are doing so while in chronic pain and discomfort. What could they achieve if they had not held back by a scandalously poor understanding of their medical needs? If we get this right for women, everybody will benefit.

3.50 pm

Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you for your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for securing this really important debate.

In my first MP surgery I spoke to Debbie, a victim of the pelvic mesh scandal. I was horrified by her story, and by how thousands of women like her not only suffered enormous, life-changing pain, but many felt they were left without a voice, that their concerns were dismissed and that they were not being taken seriously. Since then, half a dozen women from Harlow constituency have come to me with similar stories.

The issue of women not being listened to goes far further than the pelvic mesh scandal. In fact, it probably goes far further than the issue of women's health. I am deeply disappointed—I would go as far to say I am ashamed—to hear so many women in my Harlow constituency and beyond tell me that their chronic pain is going undiagnosed. They are being told terrible things like, "It's just your period," or, "It's just your hormones," or, "You'll be fine. Go home, put your feet up, have a paracetamol"—despite the fact that 10% of women worldwide suffer from endometriosis.

The NHS website describes the symptoms of endometriosis as

"severe period pain, that stops you from doing your normal activities",

and

"heavy periods, where you need to change your pads or tampons every 1 to 2 hours, or you may bleed through to your clothes",

and pain when going to the toilet. The World Health Organisation describes how endometriosis can

"decrease quality of life due to severe pain, fatigue, depression, anxiety and infertility."

Some individuals with endometriosis experience debilitating pain that prevents them from going to work or to school. It is fair to say that a lay down and a paracetamol does not quite cover it. The situation is made worse by the fact that some women are having to wait for up to eight years for a diagnosis. The negative impact on women's mental health is unimaginable—it can result in the need for antidepressants—and, as we heard in previous speeches, young girls in particular are ignored. Nicola, an acupuncturist in my constituency, told me that a number of women patients had come to her feeling that they were being ignored. Frankly, in 2025, that is just not right.

My ask to the Minister is to let this Government be the Government who take women's health seriously. Let us have a charter that says that the concerns of women suffering from chronic pain cannot be dismissed.

3.53 pm

Ms Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, and to hear so many brilliantly powerful speeches. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for securing the debate. I am pleased to see the Minister and the shadow Minister, but I want to say in my speech why they should not be here. A Treasury Minister and their shadow should respond to this debate, because poor women's health is costing this country billions of pounds.

We have all talked about the stats. It is not just about lady issues or even to do with ladies' bodies—it is how women are thought about. A fifth of women report that they were called "dramatic" when they sought help for their mental health, and 27% of those who spoke up were told that their issues could be hormonal. We understand that, but even when we are not awake we are losing this battle. A 2022 study of trauma patients found that women were half as likely as men to be given tranexamic acid, which reduces the risk of death from excessive bleeding by up to 30%—literally a life-and-death division.

Women have longer life expectancy, but we spend more of our lives in ill health. As we have said, even when we go to the doctor's, we are not believed. It is also about provision. After all, abortion is healthcare, but it is not a given that anyone can access it in this country. Nor is it a given that anyone can access sexual health services, because they are not a requirement of general practice, even in 2025.

We do have to talk about lady parts and lady issues, but I want to make this more about wonga than wombs, because we are losing billions of pounds to our economy every single year by failing to support women's health. Absenteeism due to severe period pain, heavy periods,

endometriosis, fibroids and ovarian cysts is estimated to cost the UK economy nearly £11 billion per annum. Women have lost 14 million working days a year to the menopause. Painful periods cost an estimated £531 million in sick days. One in four women consider leaving their job due to their menopause experience; one in 10 do. If we changed that, it would generate £1.5 billion a year for the economy.

But this problem is not being talked about in terms of an economic loss. Two in five women said that their professional life has been negatively affected by the gender health gap, because they have missed out on important meetings, promotions or pay rises, but the same proportion said that they would never be able to mention it to a manager. That has to change.

We also have to recognise that experience is not equal. We know about the brilliant Five X More campaign on maternity services and the shocking experiences that women have. It is not just in maternity services where we see women from the global majority experiencing negativity. Women from those communities are twice as, and in some cases three times more, likely to experience long-term conditions that can negatively affect working, whether that is chronic pain, anxiety, hypertension, osteoarthritis, diabetes or morbid obesity.

Changing the record and making this an economic issue could change the lives of millions in this country—and help our GDP, which helps the lads as well. Every £1 of additional public investment in obstetrics and gynaecology services is estimated to deliver a return on investment of £11. In other words, every extra pound gets us 10 times more than that. The gender pensions gap currently stands at 35% because women are living longer. If we sorted out their health, they could work and we could get something back for our economy. Minister, please help us to make the case to your Treasury colleagues to get the money we need to get this country moving via the women.

3.57 pm

Juliet Campbell (Broxtowe) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) on securing this debate.

Menopause is a biological process that marks the end of a woman's menstrual cycle and fertility, and it typically occurs between the ages of 45 and 55. It is a universal experience for women around the world. The journey to that point is known as perimenopause, which can last for several years, and that is what I will focus on today. The perimenopausal stage in a woman's health remains in the shadows, under-prioritised and under-resourced by policymakers, employers and healthcare providers alike. Perimenopause is overlooked despite its relevance to health, education, employment and demography.

During the transition into the menopause, a woman's body undergoes various changes as it prepares to end its reproductive years. Typically, the transition begins in the mid-40s, but it can start as early as the mid-30s and last as long as into the mid-50s. It usually lasts for about four years, but it can extend to up to eight years. During the perimenopausal stage, oestrogen levels fluctuate, leading to irregular menstrual cycles, and as the ovaries gradually produce less oestrogen, it can cause various other symptoms.

Perimenopause is diagnosed based on symptoms and menstrual history, and the treatment focuses on managing the symptoms, including through lifestyle changes, hormone therapy—although less so—and other medications. The symptoms of perimenopause can affect daily activities. They affect work and relationships. Women in my Broxtowe constituency have told me that they have needed to take time off work due to the symptoms, which they did not understand and neither did their healthcare professionals.

We know that absences from work have a significant impact on our economy. As has been said, it can cost billions of pounds per year. Some women need to reduce their working hours, to take extended leave, or to leave the workforce entirely. This can affect their career progression, depending on how young they are. At a time when the Government are focusing on growing our economy, we cannot ignore the economic costs of not helping and supporting women in their perimenopause.

Few women seek help or attention, and due to a lack of understanding they receive very little support if they do. Their symptoms might be subtle and they will come on gradually. They might not even know that they are connected to the hormone fluctuations of the menopause transition. Many women do not even understand the signs and symptoms of the perimenopausal stage, as the menstrual cycle continues. This lack of awareness and education about the perimenopause, among both women and healthcare providers, leads to underdiagnosis and undertreatment.

I raise this issue because I would like to go back to my constituency and assure people that perimenopause will be included in any future Government policy.

4.1 pm

Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD): It is lovely to see you in the Chair, Dr Huq, and I welcome the Minister to her place. I thank the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) for securing this important and timely debate, and for giving a passionate and well-informed opening speech.

Women's health has been overlooked for far too long, and today's discussion is an opportunity to highlight the urgent action needed to address the crisis in women's health, with International Women's Day due to be celebrated next week. The Fawcett Society found that nearly two thirds of women in the UK believe that their health concerns are not taken seriously, and more than half have had negative experiences with healthcare professionals. I start this speech feeling very frustrated, because during the debate I have had a message from one of my good friends who was ignored two years ago when she had pain in her leg, and she has just texted to tell me that she will now have to undergo a course of chemotherapy and extremely evasive treatment so that she can retain her ability to walk. My friend is in her early 20s—she was ignored, so I am very cross.

This is not just a health issue; it is an economic issue, as has been mentioned. The UK loses 150 million working days every year due to women's poor health and inadequate support. If we want a healthier, more productive society, we must take action to close the gender gap in healthcare. During a drop-in surgery that I ran in my Chichester constituency, a woman told me that when her daughter started experiencing extremely painful periods, with pain outside of her period, all she

[Jess Brown-Fuller]

could do was cry at the thought of her having to go through the same painful process with healthcare professionals that she had been through herself to get a diagnosis for endometriosis, which took that lady nine years.

Gynaecological waiting lists have more than doubled since 2020, which is the biggest increase of any medical speciality. At the end of last year, 755,000 women were waiting for treatment. Behind every number is a woman experiencing chronic pain, worsening mental health and a disrupted daily life. One in four women with a gynaecological condition will end up in A&E because they could not access the care that they needed in time, yet the NHS is failing to prioritise these urgent needs. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has been clear: the system needs a complete overhaul so that gynaecological care is given the attention it deserves.

An example is St Richard's hospital in my constituency, which does not have a specific gynaecological ward. That means that women who have gynaecological issues or have received treatment are placed across several other wards. That could negatively impact their treatment as it makes it more difficult for them to receive urgent specialised support in emergencies. Also, as the hon. Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen) said, clinicians do not have to do gynaecological training as part of their mandatory training.

Delays in female cancer care are alarming. Between April 2021 and March 2024, 2,980 people waited over 104 days to start treatment on the 62-day urgent suspected breast cancer referral route. My hon. Friend the Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) noted that younger women have a much worse prognosis, due to a lack of breast cancer screening before they are 50. For ovarian cancer, the average wait from GP referral to treatment is 69 days. That is one of the longest delays for any cancer. These prolonged waits are not just unacceptable—they have life-altering consequences.

For generations, women's pain, particularly in maternity care, has been dismissed. That has created a crisis of confidence in NHS maternity services. Several investigations have revealed fundamental flaws in our maternity care and how it is delivered across England. A Care Quality Commission inspection of 131 maternity units found that 65% of them were not safe for a woman to give birth in, and studies show that one fifth of all causes of stillbirth are potentially preventable.

The CQC has also warned of a normalisation of serious harm in maternity care. That cannot continue. I held a debate on maternity services earlier this week, calling for the Government to fully implement the recommendations of the Ockenden report. That is urgently needed to reform the maternity care sector for the better.

In 2024, the Patient Safety Commissioner estimated that 10,000 women in England had experienced harm as a result of vaginal mesh implants, although campaigning groups argue that the true figure could actually be closer to 40,000. One woman in my constituency asked me to go to her home because she does not leave it; she is a victim of the mesh scandal and she is totally isolated from her community because of it.

I am a member of the First Do No Harm APPG, which builds support and raises awareness of the recommendations of the 2020 Independent Medicines

and Medical Devices Safety Review, and I was really glad to hear the contribution from the hon. Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), who talked about the women living in poverty, isolation and pain, who are so often dismissed by the professionals. The review found that those suffering adverse effects from medical treatments including vaginal mesh found a system that was

“disjointed, siloed, unresponsive and defensive.”

So many of those women are still waiting for compensation. It is a national scandal and a grave injustice. I appreciate all the work that the hon. Member is doing with the APPG.

The Liberal Democrats would ensure that medical scandals that have disproportionately harmed women in the past can never be repeated, including through the introduction of a statutory duty of candour for public officials. We believe that every woman deserves high-quality, safe and accessible healthcare. We would try to tackle the maternity care crisis by addressing chronic understaffing, improving retention and modernising outdated facilities. We will continue to press the Government to expand access to screening for conditions such as breast cancer and cervical cancer. We would also make a serious commitment to investing in women's health research.

For too long, the gender gap in medical knowledge has left women without the answers or the treatments that they need. Faster diagnoses and better treatment pathways for women's cancers and gynaecological conditions must be a priority for this Government, not an afterthought, because this is not just about healthcare; it is about basic dignity, fairness and justice. Women should not have to fight to be heard when it comes to their own bodies. It is time to put women's health front and centre of the NHS.

4.8 pm

Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con): May I, too, welcome the Minister? Gosh, what a debate to come into—it is such a wide-ranging field. I am so glad that she has been ably supported by the hon. Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Doolimore) who put in a fantastic effort and managed to cover so many topics.

When I came to look at this debate, I thought about the best way I could try to touch on many of the topics. I thought a physiological view might be quite useful, starting with birth. Earlier this week, we had a debate on maternity services. The point is this: there is an explicit risk in pregnancy and birth, but we should do all we can to mitigate those risks. We know from the last 10 years that the maternal mortality gap has reduced from five times to two times, but much more can still be done. I am pleased that we heard that the Government are working through getting the Ockenden recommendations in place.

That leads me on to talk about postpartum depression, breastfeeding, and supporting recovery post-caesarean section delivery or episiotomy. We have heard about infertility and miscarriage. We have not even mentioned looking after a newborn. These are tough things to go through.

Young girls have to deal with body image, which is a personal hobby horse of mine. We heard about eating disorders. In 2023, we saw an investment of £4 million into new research, but there is still much more to do.

Of course, that leads us to cosmetic surgery and when we need to regulate there. There is the issue of menarche and managing periods, not only from the contraceptive angle, but what to do when they are too heavy, too painful, irregular or do not happen at all. All these things require time, dedication and compassion to find out what works for that individual and what can be done to support, inform and empower that woman.

Returning to medical problems, Members have spoken eloquently about incontinence, as well as polycystic ovary disease and endometriosis, which are really common problems that are hard to diagnose and even harder to treat. I hope that the roll-out of 161 community diagnostic centres, which the new Government commit to carrying on with, make a giant leap forward in allowing women to get the diagnosis they need.

There is, of course, screening. We talked about breast screening, but cervical screening has not been mentioned. Screening is so important, and I urge every woman to consider it. What about the successful roll-out of the HPV vaccine, over a decade ago, to dramatically reduce cervical cancer? From 2019, it has also been offered to boys to help reduce that further. We need support for both lobular and ductal breast cancer. We have not really mentioned ovarian cancer and how difficult it is to pick up, often happening far too late.

Working through life, there is the menopause and the impact it can have on women: confusion, depression, anxiety and sexual dysfunction. It is still not well understood. The last Government, along with many from across the House, campaigned for better understanding to create a supportive environment. This is still developing, and long may it do so. Choice is hard too. Non-HRT or HRT? There are pros and cons. Of course, we had difficulties with shortages during the pandemic. Linked to the menopause, and not mentioned today, is the risk in old age of osteoporosis and fractures. That is critical. We know that women are significantly more affected by that than men, and prevention is much better than dealing with a broken hip or a broken wrist. I could go on.

Women's health was rightly a priority under the last Government, which had almost 100,000 responses to their call for evidence to deal with the gender health gap. The last Government published the country's first women's health strategy in 2022, and expanded specialist women's health hubs across England to improve access and quality of care for services such as menstrual problems, contraception, pelvic pain and menopause. They improved access to hormone replacement therapy and addressed barriers to health services faced by women who suffered from trauma from things like domestic abuse. Further still, the Government appointed Dame Lesley Regan as the first women's health ambassador to step up efforts to improve women's health, and Helen Tomlinson as a cross-Government menopause ambassador to find out the experiences of women employed in different sectors.

Turning to the issues here and now, I have some questions for the Minister, and some context. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists wrote to me on 29 January, just before the announcement by the Labour Government, with the following:

"We express our deep concern about the speculation of the Government's decision to remove the target for all ICBs to set up and run a women's health hub in the planning guidance".

It went on to say:

"Removing the target may well lead to women's health hubs being closed down, and a worrying rollback on the progress made in improving women's health services for your constituents. It is self-defeating for the UK Government to close women's health hubs when they are a clear success story for reducing waiting lists and moving care closer to home—they should instead be given ringfenced funding and expanded."

I know the Minister cares deeply about improving women's health, but it is hard not to see this is as a potential row back.

My first question is: what commitment can the Government give, in the light of dropping these targets, that women's health remains a priority? Secondly, to help demonstrate this commitment, would the Government consider the call by the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists for sustained investment in expanding women's health hubs? Considering what we have heard today from the hon. Members for Walthamstow (Ms Creasy) and for Luton North (Sarah Owen), would the Department make a request in the spring statement and spending review to see that this would be the case? If not, why not?

I have spoken in the past in this Chamber about learning from previous work, so my third question is, how many times have the Government met with the women's health ambassador since the general election? Can the Minister set out how this role would work alongside the Government's new menopause ambassador? I hope that in asking these kinds of questions, it will kickstart the system into looking at how we can improve women's health.

In the short time I have left, it would be remiss of me not to pick up on some of the key issues at the moment: osteoporosis, menopause, workforce and waiting lists. There has been some concern about the Labour Government's commitment to their own promise of universal fracture liaison services by 2030. The Royal Osteoporosis Society has said:

"We all want to believe that Ministers will honour their promise, but people with osteoporosis tell us their faith is waning. It doesn't need to be like this—we appeal to Wes Streeting to restore trust and confidence in the specific, measurable pledge that he campaigned on, and for which many people voted."

Sonia Kumar: Will the hon. Member give way?

Dr Evans: I am really sorry; I am tight on time. Question No. 4 is, could the Minister kindly clarify, confirm and commit to that promise? If not, why not?

On the menopause, when the women's strategy was announced in 2022, the then shadow Health Secretary—now the current Health Secretary—said:

"I challenge the Secretary of State to go further than the proposal he outlined to train incoming medical students and incoming doctors. What plans do the Government have for clinicians who are already practising? We need to upskill the existing workforce, not just the incoming workforce. However, let us be clear: informing clinicians is no good if we do not also improve access to hormone replacement therapy, so where is the action in the strategy to end the postcode lottery for treatment?"—[*Official Report*, 20 July 2022; Vol. 718, c. 977.]

As we are now eight months into the Labour Government, question No. 5 is, when will the strategy document he talked about be produced and presented to the House? Has he made an assessment since July 2024 of HRT medication access in terms of locality?

[Dr Luke Evans]

Turning to workforce, we know that the demand for women's services is outstripping the supply of generalist and specialist support. The Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists has highlighted ongoing problems with maternity workforce staffing and agreed that the NHS long-term workforce plan was a good first step on the way to properly staffed maternity services. Therefore, question No. 6 is this: we know that the Government will be looking at a refresh of the plan this summer, so will the Minister give an undertaking today that women's health will be a priority in both primary and secondary care? Will she update the House on the obstetrics workforce planning tool, which the DHSC commissioned to help maternity units calculate staffing requirements, and when it will be rolled out across the country?

Given that time is tight, I will close by saying that I have heard it said that a healthy woman means a healthy family, a healthy community and a healthier world. That is hard to dispute that; it is now for the House to deliver it.

Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair): Finally, for what we think is her first outing as a Minister in Westminster Hall—although she is a veteran of the Chamber already—I call Ashley Dalton.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) on securing this really important debate on women's health. She and all Members who have participated today have raised a number of important points.

Let me begin by agreeing that reading the Ockenden review is harrowing, and progress on women's health has been far too slow. I want to address some of the key issues that Members have raised; I will attempt to cover as many as I can, but if I miss anything, please get in touch, and I will endeavour to fill any gaps after the debate.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye raised the story of our very good friend Margaret McDonagh and how her experience feeds into the medical misogyny that has been highlighted on a number of occasions. In addition, it was very powerful to listen to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson), who put an important focus on women's voices and said how important it is that those are heard in this space. Those voices can lead to the important cultural shift that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) raised and that underpins all of this.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch (Katrina Murray) spoke about the devolved Governments. We are committed to ensuring that we have closer working between the UK and devolved Governments so that we can share insight and best practice and cut waiting lists right across the UK.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld and Kirkintilloch and the hon. Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) raised issues relating to eating disorders and women in online content. The Government inherited a broken NHS, in which patients wait too long for

eating disorder treatment. The 10-year plan will overhaul the NHS, and the Online Safety Act 2023 will prevent children from accessing harmful online content on eating disorders.

The hon. Member for Canterbury (Rosie Duffield) raised the differences in heart attack symptoms between men and women. NHS staff can now access guidance through the British Heart Foundation, and there are learning sessions available to support training. NHS England ensures that there is clear messaging on atypical symptoms in women in all public campaigns, and training on heart attacks and the identification of gender and sex are a core part of the cardiology curriculum. The hon. Lady will be aware that the National Institute for Health and Care Research has a very clear definition of sex and gender, which has an important impact on delivering the right healthcare to everybody.

I was really interested to hear from my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley (Sonia Kumar), who has expert knowledge of perinatal pelvic health services, which are being rolled out across England to ensure that women have access to physiotherapy for pelvic health issues during pregnancy and for at least one year after birth. Those services incorporate a range of interventions aimed at improving the prevention and identification of perinatal tears and other perinatal conditions.

The Chair of the Women and Equalities Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Luton North (Sarah Owen), spoke about the Committee's recent report, which we welcome and take extremely seriously. We are grateful to everyone who gave their time and expertise to the inquiry, and to the Committee for its thoughtful recommendations. My Department has looked closely at the findings, however chunky they are, and has worked with NHS England to consider the recommendations and develop a Government response. I assure her that it will be published very soon.

The hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Helen Maguire) spoke about contraception. Let me make one thing really clear: we are committed to ensuring that the public receive the best possible contraceptive services, which are vital in helping women to manage their gynaecological health. Since 2023, the NHS Pharmacy Contraception Service has allowed pharmacists to issue ongoing supplies of contraception that have been prescribed by GPs and sexual health services. That service was relaunched in December 2023 and will be continued.

We have also talked about fertility issues. Access to fertility treatment across the NHS has been varied across England, and funding decisions are made by integrated care boards, based on the clinical needs of the people they serve. We expect those organisations to commission fertility services in line with the guidelines set by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. We recognise that provision is variable across England, and we intend to support ICBs to implement the updated evidence in the revised guidelines to benefit all affected groups.

We recognise the significant physical and psychological consequences of birth trauma and the devastating impact it has on women. I thank hon. Members for their contributions to the report of the APPG on birth trauma—the hon. Member for Canterbury was intrinsic to it. The Government will ensure that lessons are learned from the recent inquiries and investigations,

including the APPG report, and that the experiences of women and their families are listened to and woven into our efforts to improve services.

For too long, women have been let down by their healthcare. The system is broken—it does not work for them. This Government are committed to fixing women's health as a key part of building an NHS fit for the future. As a first step, we have delivered 2 million more appointments since July, in line with our manifesto commitment of delivering 2 million more appointments in the first year. We have achieved that seven months early. That includes appointments for breast cancer care, for gynaecological conditions such as endometriosis and for many other conditions.

However, we are still nowhere near satisfied with the state of women's healthcare. Kate's story, which my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye shared, is testament to that state.

Wera Hobhouse: I do not mean to be pompous, but the Minister did not mention me—it was me who mentioned the online harm.

Ashley Dalton: I am getting there.

Wera Hobhouse: May I ask whether the Minister would meet the eating disorders APPG to talk about online harm, particularly in relation to sufferers of eating disorders?

Ashley Dalton: I thank the hon. Member for her intervention, and I will get there and mention her. I am more than happy to have that conversation with her.

For the benefit of the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), I would like to clear something up and dispel some misinformation. We have not scrapped the women's health strategy, nor have we abandoned women's health hubs—far from it. We are using women's health hubs to beat the backlog. The future funding decisions around those health hubs will be taken in due course. I can also confirm for the shadow Minister that Baroness Merron is the Minister with responsibility for women's health, and she regularly meets Dame Lesley, the women's health ambassador. Dame Lesley attended the 10-year plan roundtable in January, which was chaired by Baroness Merron. I can reassure the hon. Gentleman on that.

When we came into government, we inherited an appalling legacy of nearly 600,000 women on gynaecology waiting lists. That is why the Prime Minister kicked off 2025 with our elective reform plan. The plan states our commitment to offer women gynaecological care closer to home, an approach that has been pioneered by those women's health hubs. As of December, nine in 10 integrated care boards had at least one women's health hub, and some have more.

Alice Macdonald: In Norfolk we had a virtual health hub. When we look at whether the health hubs are working and share best practice, can we talk about whether that is the best format for a health hub or whether a physical one would be better?

Ashley Dalton: That is something that we will take on board and consider as we move forward.

We have heard a lot about menopause and perimenopause from many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Broxtowe (Juliet Campbell). We are supporting women through the whole menopause process. Menopause and perimenopause symptoms can be wide-ranging and debilitating. NHS England is developing a range of tools and interventions to help upskill more GPs in menopause care, including awareness of mental health symptoms during menopause, and developing a menopause workforce support package for employees. I can also confirm that we are using community diagnostic centres to pilot pathways for women who suffer from post-menopausal bleeding.

Dr Evans: Can the Minister comment on HRT medication and making sure that there is equal access to it across the country?

Ashley Dalton: I will come back to the hon. Gentleman on that, but I thank him for raising the issue.

We have also talked a lot about what underpins this topic: research and innovation, and my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford raised that point in particular. We are taking strides in vital research. By the spring, the NIHR expects to launch its sex and gender policy, which will ensure that research is designed, conducted and reported in a way that accounts for sex and gender—a point raised by the hon. Member for Canterbury. That will support our understanding of how women might be impacted differently by health conditions.

The hon. Member for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) talked about eating disorders and also about breast cancer, which a number of people raised. As I am sure the hon. Lady appreciates, that issue is important to me, as I was diagnosed with a breast cancer when I was under the age of 42. It is an important issue.

Health in the workplace continues to be an important issue for us, and we are dealing with that through our make work pay strategy and the Employment Rights Bill, which will set out some of those steps, including support for women experiencing menopause in the workplace.

On sodium valproate and pelvic mesh, the Cumberlege review made nine recommendations, of which the then Government accepted seven. I can confirm that the national pause remains in place.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No. 10(14)).

Written Statements

Thursday 27 February 2025

CABINET OFFICE

UK Covid-19 Inquiry: Quarter 3 Response Costs 2024-25

The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds): The covid-19 pandemic impacted each and every person in the UK. The work of the UK covid-19 inquiry is crucial in examining the UK's response to and impact of the covid-19 pandemic. There are evidently lessons to be learned from the pandemic and the Government are committed to closely considering the covid-19 inquiry's findings and recommendations, which will play a key role in informing the Government's planning and preparations for the future.

The Government recognise the unprecedented and wholly exceptional circumstances of the pandemic, and the importance of examining as rigorously as possible the actions the state took in response, in order to learn lessons for the future. The inquiry is therefore unprecedented in its scope, complexity and profile, looking at recent events that have profoundly impacted everyone's lives.

The independent UK covid-19 inquiry publishes its own running costs quarterly. The chair is under a statutory obligation to avoid unnecessary costs in the inquiry's work—and she has been clear as to her intention to complete her work as quickly and efficiently as possible.

I would like to update the House on the costs to the UK Government associated with responding to the UK covid-19 inquiry.

Figures provided are based upon a selection of the most relevant Departments, are not based on a complete set of departmental figures, and are not precise for accounting purposes. Ensuring a comprehensive and timely response to the inquiry requires significant input from a number of key Government Departments, including, but not limited to, the Cabinet Office, the Department for Health and Social Care, the UK Health Security Agency, the Home Office and HM Treasury, many of which are supported by the Government Legal Department. While every effort has been made to ensure a robust methodology, complexities remain in trying to quantify the time and costs dedicated to the inquiry alone.

It should be noted that alongside full-time resource within Departments, inquiry response teams draw on expertise from across their organisations. The staff costs associated with appearing as witnesses, preparing witnesses and associated policy development work on the UK covid-19 inquiry are not included in the costs below.

Breakdown of staff and costs

The Government's response to the UK covid-19 inquiry is led by inquiry response units across Departments.

Q3 number of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: 287 full time equivalents.

Q3 cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: £5,674,000 (including contingent labour costs).

Financial year 2024-25 (Q1-3), total cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff: £16,026,000 (including contingent labour costs).

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Cumulative total
Cost of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff (including contingent labour costs)	£5,049,000	£5,303,000	£5,674,000	£16,026,000
Number of UK covid-19 inquiry response unit staff (full-time equivalents)	280	284	287	NA

Total inquiry response unit legal costs

Inquiry response units across Government Departments are supported by the Government Legal Department, co-partnering firms of solicitors, and legal counsel. These associated legal costs (excluding internal departmental advisory legal costs) for Q3 are below.

Q3 legal costs: £6,050,000.

Financial year 2024-25 (Q1-3), total legal costs: £16,104,000.

	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Cumulative
Total legal costs	£4,236,000	£5,818,000	£6,050,000	£16,104,000

[HCWS481]

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Independent Water Commission: Call for Evidence

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Emma Hardy): A secure water supply is essential for every home and business throughout the country. It is the foundation of our economy, our communities and our global security.

This Government inherited a water sector in disrepair. The rivers, lakes and seas that we all love have record levels of pollution. Droughts are set to leave parts of the country facing significant water shortages by 2050, particularly in the south-east, and it is forecast that the UK will need to find an extra 5 billion litres of water a day to fill the gap between supply and demand. A rising population and the increasing impacts of climate change are putting strain on the water system.

The water sector needs a complete reset. That is why, in October 2024, the UK and Welsh Governments launched the largest review of the water sector since privatisation: an Independent Water Commission, chaired by Sir Jon Cunliffe, former Deputy Governor of the Bank of England, and supported by a panel of experts.

This is the third stage in this Government's strategy on water. It follows the Secretary of State's immediate steps to better protect consumers when he came into office, followed by new legislation—the Water (Special Measures) Act 2025. This was signed into law this week as the most significant increase to enforcement powers in a decade.

The Independent Water Commission will explore the further changes needed to deliver a robust and stable regulatory framework that serves customers and the

environment, attracts the investment needed to clean up our waterways, and restores trust in the sector. It is part of this Government's determination to tackle the inherited issues in our water system head-on.

Today, Sir Jon Cunliffe is launching a call for evidence. This invites views from the public, parliamentarians, environmental groups, investors and all other interested parties on future changes.

The call for evidence will be live for eight weeks, with Sir Jon due to provide a final report to both UK and Welsh Governments in the summer. Interested parties can read the relevant documents on gov.uk at <https://www.gov.uk/government/calls-for-evidence/independent-commission-for-water-call-for-evidence> and share their views through DEFRA's online consultation tool, Citizen Space.

The Commission's final recommendations will shape further legislation that will transform how our water system works and clean up our rivers lakes and seas for good.

[HCWS475]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Alcohol in Licensed Pavement Areas: Consultation Results

The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson): The Business and Planning Act 2020 introduced a number of measures to allow businesses to continue to operate during the covid-19 pandemic. This included a temporary easement to the Licensing Act 2003 that allowed premises licence holders who were only permitted to do on-sales (i.e. to sell alcohol for consumption on site) additionally to automatically make off-sales (i.e. to sell alcohol for takeaway and delivery, and for consumption within an adjacent licensed pavement area) without having to apply to their licensing authority for a licence variation.

The previous Government launched a consultation, which ran from 16 May 2024 to 11 July 2024, that gave three options to maintain these easements on a more long-term basis. These options were to make permanent the alcohol licensing provisions in the BPA, to amend the wording in the Licensing Act 2003 to extend the definition of on-sales so that it includes consumption in a licensed pavement area, or to amend the Licensing Act 2003 to permit on-sales-only premises licence holders the right to make off-sales to any area for which there is a pavement licence.

There were 67 complete responses to this consultation exercise, from licensing authorities, trade organisations and residents' organisations, as well as members of the public. The majority of these respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with all three options proposed. In the light of those responses, the Government do not currently have a basis to proceed with any of the legislative options to maintain the temporary easements for the long term. As such, the off-sales measure will expire on 31 March 2025 and the Licensing Act 2003 will automatically revert to the pre-covid position.

While the Government must accept the results of the consultation exercise conducted under the previous Administration, we are disappointed that there was not a consensus in favour of retaining an easement from which many pubs and pubgoers have benefited, and which supports our objectives both to promote the growth of the UK economy, and specifically to support the nation's pub trade. We therefore want to make it as simple as possible for those pubs who wish to continue making off-sales to secure the licensing permission to do so from their local authorities.

To that end, the Government will be amending the guidance made under section 182 of the Licensing Act to advise licensing authorities that—where businesses have been benefiting from the current easement and wish to continue making off-sales beyond April 2025—applications to amend a licence should be treated as minor variations. This process is quicker and cheaper than major licence variations and, for example, does not require a local newspaper advertisement.

The Government will monitor the decisions made around the country by local authorities on these requests for licence variations, in liaison with the beer and pub industries, and will assess any evidence that pubs where the current easements have been working successfully are being denied the opportunity to continue making off-sales beyond April 2025 without reasonable cause. In those circumstances, and notwithstanding the results of last year's consultation exercise, we will consider what further steps may need to be taken through the licensing regime to support our local pubs.

A copy of the consultation results will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on gov.uk.

[HCWS477]

eVisas

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra): The Home Office is continuing to develop a border and immigration system that is more digital and streamlined, which includes the roll-out of digital evidence of immigration status, in the form of eVisas. eVisas bring significant benefits. They cannot be lost, stolen, or tampered with, unlike a physical document, and also increase the UK immigration system's security and efficiency.

We are committed to ensuring a smooth transition to eVisas for all status holders. On 4 December we published the first eVisa statistics, showing the number of people who had created a UK Visas and Immigration account to access an eVisa. Since that time, we have continued to see steady take up of UKVI account creations and our outreach is continuing to ensure awareness of the transition for those who have not yet set up their UKVI account, to encourage them to do so as soon as possible. While the eVisa is created by the Home Office for each person to reflect their immigration status, creating a UKVI account offers a number of benefits, including people being able to update personal details and being able to view and share evidence of immigration status with third parties, such as an employer or a landlord.

Since the first eVisa statistics publication in December 2024, we have further analysed the eVisa data to provide additional quality assurance and enhance our understanding

of who has not yet acted. Our analysis has shown that a number of people who opted to create a UKVI account during this period already had one in place as part of their visa application. While this should not usually present any issues for these individuals, it does mean that the published data includes a number of duplicate accounts. If people experience problems, they can contact the resolution centre using online webchat or by phone. In order to maintain consistency in the data, we are continuing to publish the total number of eVisa account creations, recognising that this contains duplicates. However, we are also clarifying our revised estimate of the numbers of immigration status holders who still need to take action and set up an account to access their eVisa.

We had previously estimated the number of biometric residence permit holders who needed to create an account to access their eVisa at over 4 million but have always been clear that this number is hard to establish accurately given the daily fluctuations in this data, with people's leave expiring, people leaving the country before their leave expires or leave being cancelled or curtailed. Further analysis has shown that the overall number of people with a BRP was in fact lower than we had estimated, because of how duplicate BRP cards were handled in the data. We have also confirmed that some BRP holders who have not yet created a UKVI account had permission which expired during January 2025, and will either have left the UK already or will have the opportunity to create an account as part of their application for further permission (e.g. students making applications for graduate study.)

Today we have published the latest eVisa statistics on gov.uk which show that just over 4 million people have successfully created a UKVI account to access their eVisa up to the end of January 2025. We therefore now estimate that around 600,000 immigration status holders who need to take action to access their eVisa are currently still waiting to do so.

This means that a significant majority of the immigration status holders who needed to take action have done so, but we continue to encourage and support those who have not yet made the switch to follow suit. We are conducting further analysis of the data to inform our approach to reaching those yet to access their eVisa, and to help make their transition as smooth as possible.

We have also kept under review the use of BRPs and EU settlement scheme biometric residence cards which expire on or after 31 December 2024 but which were permitted for continued travel to the end of March 2025. In line with our ongoing commitment to ensure a smooth roll-out, we are announcing today that this measure will be extended for a further two months, up to and including 1 June 2025. We advise people with valid immigration permission, but with a BRP or EUSS BRC that expired on or after 31 December 2024, to carry the document when travelling up to and including the 1 June 2025. From the 2 June 2025, expired BRPs and EUSS BRCs will no longer be acceptable for evidencing immigration status when travelling to the UK. This measure relates to travel only.

We encourage people to ensure that they have checked that their current passport or travel document is linked to their eVisa before they travel internationally. If people no longer have a BRP or EUSS BRC, or were not issued with one, their permission to travel to the UK will be checked through other means. People may also wish to

get a share code in advance of travel, which is valid for 90 days. This can be done by signing in to the view and prove service—

<https://www.gov.uk/view-prove-immigration-status>—and choosing the option to prove their immigration status for “anything else”. They can then print, write down or store the share code to provide it when needed. Other people with valid, genuine, physical proof of immigration status can continue to use these documents to evidence permission to travel to the UK. Carriers can also contact the 24/7 UK Border Force carrier support hub if needed.

We highly value the input and perspectives from stakeholders operating in this space or representing visa users, recognising their diverse experience and insights are essential to shaping the successful roll-out of a new digital border and we would like to pay tribute to those stakeholders who continue to work with the Home Office to provide valuable feedback. Their assistance has already played a pivotal role in shaping our approach, ensuring the visa system is responsive to the communities it serves.

We hope this announcement demonstrates the importance the Government place on ensuring a seamless shift to eVisas. We remain committed to an open dialogue and fostering collaboration to ensure sustainable and equitable outcomes for all. Finally, we will continue to engage with stakeholders, to help identify areas for continuous improvement and implement changes that enhance fairness, efficiency, and a beneficial experience for users.

[HCWS482]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Local Plan Making and Guidance

The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook): Planning is principally a local activity. It is local plans that set out a vision and a framework for the future development of any given area, addressing needs and opportunities in relation to housing, the economy, community facilities and essential infrastructure—as well as a basis for conserving and enhancing the natural and historic environment, mitigating and adapting to climate change, and achieving well-designed places.

Local plans are the best way for communities to shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development that their areas need and we know that areas with up-to-date local plans deliver more homes overall than those without one. For these reasons, the plan-led approach is, and must remain, the cornerstone of our planning system.

I am today updating the House on further steps the Government are taking to progress toward universal coverage of local plans and to realise the full potential of the planning reforms we initiated last year.

Responding to the 2023 consultation on implementation of plan-making reforms

While there are clear benefits to communities of having an up-to-date local plan, fewer than a third of local areas have one in place. That is partly the result of how inaccessible and cumbersome the plan-making process can be.

The current way of preparing plans is not optimised for community participation. Plans can be lengthy, hard to read and difficult for those without specialist planning knowledge to engage with. They also often take a long time to prepare, at least seven years on average, which means they can be out of date too quickly, and communities struggle to understand the many different consultation phases.

The Government want to make new local plans simpler to understand and use, so that communities can more easily shape them. We want them to clearly show what is planned in a local area—so that residents can more easily engage with them, especially while they are being drawn up. We want them to be prepared and examined more quickly to ensure they reflect current local needs. And we want them to make the best use of new digital technology, to enhance access and drive improved productivity and efficiency in the plan-making process.

Following detailed analysis of all the responses submitted, as well as extensive engagement with the sector, the Government are today publishing our response <https://www.gov.uk/government/consultations/plan-making-reforms-consultation-on-implementation/outcome/government-response-to-the-proposed-plan-making-reforms-consultation-on-implementation> to the previous Government's consultation on the new-plan making system. We intend to proceed largely as set out in that consultation, with necessary regulations, policy and guidance to be confirmed later this year.

Local planning authorities have also told us that they need clearer guidance and more practical tools to speed up plan-making. We are therefore launching today a new dedicated home for plan-making resources on gov.uk: "Create or Update a Local Plan" <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/create-or-update-a-local-plan>

This brings together all the essential tools and guidance councils need to quickly develop a local plan, underpinned by quality data. We will be adding more practical resources to this site over the coming months to help planners at all stages of the plan-making process.

Updates to green belt, local nature recovery strategies and effective use of land planning policy guidance

The Government are also revising planning practice guidance to support local planning authorities in their plan making.

We are clear that development must look to brownfield first, prioritising the development of previously used land wherever possible. However, we know brownfield development alone will not be enough to meet our housing need. That is why the revised national planning policy framework published in December 2024 included a new approach to the green belt, prioritising the release of lower-quality grey-belt land within it and introducing "golden rules" to ensure any green-belt development benefits communities and nature.

To ensure our green belt reforms are implemented effectively and to support a more consistent approach to assessing green belt land, we have today published new guidance <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/green-belt-for-local-planning-authorities>. This will support authorities with the production of local development plans whilst also making sure that planning applications and development on suitable grey-belt land can proceed in the short term in areas where up-to-date plans are not in place.

Guidance

<https://www.gov.uk/guidance/effective-use-of-land> has also been revised today on making effective use of land setting out how to apply paragraph 125c of the NPPF. This gives substantial weight to the value of using suitable brownfield land within settlements for homes and other identified needs, taking into consideration other policies including those relating to the protection of heritage assets when making decisions.

We have also published new guidance <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/natural-environment#local-nature-recovery-strategies> on local nature recovery strategies as part of updates to the natural environment and plan-making planning practice guidance. LNRs are new strategies being prepared across England to agree priorities for nature recovery and propose actions in the locations where they will have the greatest impact for nature.

They will also provide valuable evidence for plan making and may contain information to support decisions on planning applications, so the updated guidance provides clarity on how local planning authorities can have regard to LNRs in both the plan making and decision-making process. One of the 48 LNRs has been published (West of England Combined Authority) and the other 47 are expected to follow during 2025.

Funding support for local authorities

Alongside the publication of the revised NPPF in December 2024, we announced funding <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/funding-to-support-local-authorities-with-the-costs-of-local-plan-delivery-and-green-belt-reviews-successful-local-authorities>

to support local authorities with the costs of carrying out green belt reviews. Eligible local authorities were invited to submit an expression of interest to request a share of this funding.

We are today announcing that 133 local authorities will receive £70,000 of pump-priming funding each to contribute towards the costs of carrying out green belt reviews in their areas. This will be paid to those local authorities shortly. We are keen to hear feedback from local authorities as to whether this is a sufficient level of funding and we will be reaching out to affected local authorities in due course.

We also want to help local authorities continue to drive forward their local plans whilst taking new policy into account. That is why on 14 February 2025 we announced new funding to support local plan delivery for authorities at regulation 18 stage. This is in addition to the funding for local authorities with plans at regulation 19 stage, announced in December 2024. Eligible local authorities are invited to submit an expression of interest form by 28 February 2025 to request a share of this funding, and we will announce which local authorities will receive both regulation 18 and regulation 19 local plans funding in due course.

Pathways to Planning funding

The Pathways to Planning programme provides local planning authorities with a pipeline of talented graduates, adding value to local authority planning teams and contributing to the sustainability of the planning profession. Almost 90 graduate planners started work through the programme last year, and the current recruitment process has seen more than 2,000 graduates apply.

The Government remain committed to enhancing the capacity and capability of local planning authorities. We are therefore allocating £4.5 million for the Local Government Association's latest Pathways to Planning initiative to fund salary bursaries for new planning roles in councils. We are setting ambitious targets for the programme, where we are hoping to exceed the 300-planner target by the end of 2026. Local planning authorities can indicate their interest in a salary-funded role on the programme's expression of interest form

<https://forms.office.com/pages/responsepage.aspx?id=7uRi4U8FPEuNOXVSTKjy6Q3gBMH2WphCmXSUOX7QdS9UQkJQUUhRU05URUCxTkpQN0MxSTVaQVdURS4u>
and can learn more about the programme here.

[HCWS480]

SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY

Independent Pornography Review: Baroness Bertin Report

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Science, Innovation and Technology (Feryal Clark): I am repeating the following written ministerial statement made today in the other place by the Minister for the Future Digital Economy and Online Safety, my noble Friend Baroness Jones of Whitchurch.

In 2023, the previous Government appointed Baroness Bertin as the independent lead reviewer to explore issues surrounding the regulation, legislation and enforcement of online pornography. Throughout the review, she reviewed evidence submitted from the public, academics and civil society, as well as stakeholders in law enforcement, the pornography sector and health service providers. The final report provided to the Government is insightful and timely.

The report has been laid before Parliament today and it will also be available on gov.uk.

Baroness Bertin's report highlights some of the harms caused by unregulated access to some online pornography. The review finds that online pornography can impact people's health and mental wellbeing, and is potentially fuelling violence against women and girls offline.

Baroness Bertin's review makes a case for bringing the regulation of pornography online into parity with offline regulation. In the time she has had to do the review, she has considered the existing evidence on the topic, but she has also highlighted where some issues are still poorly understood and more research is needed to understand the potential harms from pornographic content and how to mitigate those.

The review acknowledges the important protections that the Online Safety Act 2023 will put in place to protect young people from seeing harmful content online, including pornographic content. It also notes that the Act has made it a priority for in-scope services to proactively tackle the most harmful illegal content, which includes intimate image abuse, extreme pornography and child sexual abuse material.

This review has revealed shocking detail about the prevalence of violent and misogynistic pornography online, and the extent to which it is influencing dangerous offline behaviours, including in young relationships. Graphic strangulation pornography is illegal but is not

always being treated as such and instead remains widely accessible on mainstream pornography platforms. There is increasing evidence that "choking" is becoming a common part of real-life sexual encounters, despite the significant medical dangers associated with it. The Government will take urgent action to ensure that pornography platforms, law enforcement and prosecutors are taking all necessary steps to tackle this increasingly prevalent harm.

Additionally, the review's findings have noted that as technologies such as artificial intelligence continue to evolve and become increasingly sophisticated and accessible, they are reshaping the online pornography landscape. Individuals can now create sexual content, consensually and non-consensually, with nudification applications and other forms of software. Baroness Bertin has found that more needs to be done to protect those online from being victimised by non-consensual sexual content.

The Government are delivering our manifesto commitment to ban sexually explicit deepfakes: the Data (Use and Access) Bill introduces a new offence that will criminalise the creation of a purported intimate image, or deepfake, of an adult without their consent. It will also criminalise asking someone to create a purported intimate image, or deepfake, for you, regardless of where that person is based or whether the image is created.

We are introducing a package of offences in the Crime and Policing Bill to tackle the taking of intimate images without consent and the installation of equipment with intent to enable the taking of intimate images without consent. Through the offences at section 66B of the Sexual Offences Act 2003, the law already captures situations where intimate images, including deepfakes, are shared without consent.

Together these measures will ensure that law enforcement can effectively tackle this abusive behaviour. This demeaning and disgusting form of chauvinism must not become normalised, and as part of our plan for change we are bearing down on violence against women, whatever form it takes. We are putting offenders on notice: they will face the full force of the law.

The review has also made several recommendations related to the education system. This Government consider healthy relationships a key part of RSHE—relationships, sex and health education—and relationships education will support our mission to halve violence against women and girls in the next decade. This Government will support schools to tackle misogyny and promote healthy relationships and positive masculinity.

The relationship, sex and health education statutory guidance is currently being reviewed following a public consultation last year. As part of this, we are working with stakeholders and teachers to ensure that the curriculum covers all content that pupils need to keep themselves and others safe and to be respectful in their relationships.

This Government are equipping teachers with the information, resources and training to teach young people about healthy relationships and behaviour, which plays a significant role in preventing harmful sexual behaviours. We have recently published a new guide for teachers on incel culture on the Department's Education Against Hate website. Teacher training contains the teachers' standards, including high expectations of behaviour, and we are working with schools on what more we can do to support them to root out misogyny and ensure that young people treat each other with respect.

This Government have set out an unprecedented mission to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, and this will require a renewed focus on prevention—including ensuring that online content is not encouraging offline violence and abuse. We will therefore take forward the findings of Baroness Bertin’s review, which will help to inform the cross-Government violence against women and girls strategy to be published in the next few months.

I thank Baroness Bertin for her efforts in bringing this report together and shedding light on a complex yet deeply important topic. The Government will provide a further update on how they are tackling the issues raised in the review as part of their mission to tackle VAWG in due course.

[HCWS479]

TRANSPORT

Gatwick Airport Development Consent Order

The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander): The examining authority’s report on the Gatwick airport development consent order application was received on 27 November 2024. Under section 107(1) of the Planning Act 2008, a decision must be made within three months of receipt of the examining authority’s report unless the power under section 107(3) to extend the deadline is exercised and a statement is made to Parliament announcing the new deadline. The current deadline for a decision is 27 February 2025.

This statement confirms that today I have issued a “minded to approve” letter for the Gatwick airport northern runway development consent order under the Planning Act 2008.

Given that the examining authority’s report, for the first time, recommends an alternative DCO which includes a range of controls on the operation of the scheme and not all the provisions have been considered during the examination, I am issuing a minded to approve decision that provides some additional time to seek views from all parties on the provisions, prior to a final decision.

The deadline for the final decision is now extended to 27 October 2025—an extension of nine months. The decision to set a new deadline is without prejudice to the decision on whether to give development consent for the above application.

[HCWS476]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Pension Credit Applications and Awards: February 2025

The Parliamentary Secretary to the Treasury (Torsten Bell): The latest statistical release on pension credit applications and awards was published today. It includes data on the number of weekly pension credit applications received and cleared, as well as data on claims awarded and not awarded between 3 April 2023 and 23 February 2025.

Since this Government made the difficult but—given the challenging public finances—right decision to target winter fuel payments, we have been absolutely focused on maximising take-up of pension credit. The Government are forecast to spend £174.8 billion on benefits for pensioners in Great Britain in 2025-26. This includes

spending on the state pension, which is forecast to be £146.6 billion in 2025-26. Crucially, our commitment to the triple lock for the entirety of this Parliament means that spending on people’s state pensions is forecast to rise by over £31 billion.

We want to ensure that all pensioners get the support to which they are rightly entitled. That is why we took immediate action on pension credit and have been running the biggest ever pension credit take-up campaign, which has included adverts on television, radio, social media such as Facebook and Instagram, on YouTube, on advertising screens, including on GP and post office screens, as well as in the press. To promote pension credit through as many channels as possible, we have also engaged with key stakeholders and partners, including other Government Departments, local councils, housing associations, community groups, local libraries and service providers, as well as charities and third-sector organisations.

The new figures published today show that for the year to date 2024-25, the Department for Work and Pensions has received 300,000 pension credit applications. This represents the highest number of annual recorded pension credit applications seen by DWP since comparisons began.

Since 29 July 2024 when the winter fuel payment announcement was made:

DWP has received 235,000 pension credit claims—an 81% increase or 105,100 extra applications on the comparable period in 2023-24;

DWP has cleared 232,200 pension credit claims—a 92% increase or 111,100 extra clearances on the comparable period in 2023-24; and

of the claims which DWP has cleared, 117,800 have resulted in an award of pension credit—a 64% increase or 45,800 extra awards on the comparable period 2023-24.

It is important to recognise the volume of applications which the Department received during this period. We understand that pensioners expect their applications to be processed quickly and accurately, which is why we deployed over 500 extra staff to process this huge increase in claims. The latest statistics also show that outstanding claims have reduced from 85,500 in mid-December to just 33,700 by 23 February.

Finally, although around 1.4 million pensioners currently receive pension credit, too many are missing out. We must do more to ensure that pensioners receive all the help they are entitled to. Building on the success of our campaign, we are now exploring other options to drive up claims by:

Writing to all pensioners who make a new claim for housing benefit and who appear to be entitled to pension credit—directly targeting this group to make a claim;

In the longer term, the Government are committed to bringing together the administration of pension credit and housing benefit, so that pensioner households receiving housing benefit also receive any pension credit that they are entitled to;

Undertaking new research on the triggers and motivations that encourage people to apply for pension credit—learning from pensioners’ experiences, we want to build the evidence of what works to boost take-up; and

Working across Departments including His Majesty’s Revenue and Customs to use data more effectively to help identify pensioner households most likely to be eligible for pension credit, and to target them directly.

[HCWS478]

Written Correction

Thursday 27 February 2025

Ministerial Correction

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Draft Flood Reinsurance (Amendment) Regulations 2025

The following extract is from the debate on the draft Flood Reinsurance (Amendment) Regulations 2025 in the Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee on 26 February 2025.

Emma Hardy: By using existing capital, Flood Re Ltd is keeping the increase to 18%, while its reinsurance costs are expected to more than double. The reduction

from £140 million a year to £135 million a year three years ago also demonstrates Flood Re Ltd's commitment to its responsibility for keeping the levy as low as possible.

[*Official Report, Fourth Delegated Legislation Committee, 26 February 2025; c. 4-5.*]

Written correction submitted by the Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Haltemprice (Emma Hardy):

Emma Hardy: By using existing capital, Flood Re Ltd is keeping the increase to 18%, while its reinsurance costs are expected to more than double. The reduction from **£180 million** a year to £135 million a year three years ago also demonstrates Flood Re Ltd's commitment to its responsibility for keeping the levy as low as possible.

ORAL ANSWERS

Thursday 27 February 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CHURCH COMMISSIONERS	925	CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT—continued	
Archbishop of Canterbury Appointment	931	Small Theatres and Performing Arts Venues	920
Cathedrals: Local Economic Contribution.....	927	Television Industry: Wales	912
Church of Scotland: Declining Congregations.....	927	Topical Questions	921
Church Organs: Legislative Protection	929	Video Games Industry: Gross Value Added.....	911
Diocese of Jerusalem	929	ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE	931
Listed Places of Worship Grant Scheme	925	Strategy and Policy Statement	931
Rural Parishes.....	925	HOUSE OF COMMONS COMMISSION	927
CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT	911	Portcullis House.....	927
Creative Industries.....	917	RESTORATION AND RENEWAL	
Electronic Travel Authorisations: Tourism.....	912	CLIENT BOARD	930
Football Clubs: Financial Sustainability.....	913	Cost Drivers.....	930
Formula 1: 75th Anniversary.....	921	Parliamentary Staff Engagement.....	932
Grassroots Sport Clubs and Facilities	915		

WRITTEN STATEMENTS

Thursday 27 February 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
CABINET OFFICE	57WS	HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND	
UK Covid-19 Inquiry: Quarter 3		LOCAL GOVERNMENT	62WS
Response Costs 2024-25	57WS	Local Plan Making and Guidance.....	62WS
ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS..	58WS	SCIENCE, INNOVATION AND TECHNOLOGY ..	65WS
Independent Water Commission:		Independent Pornography Review:	
Call for Evidence	58WS	Baroness Bertin Report	65WS
HOME DEPARTMENT	59WS	TRANSPORT	67WS
Alcohol in Licensed Pavement Areas:		Gatwick Airport Development Consent Order.....	67WS
Consultation Results.....	59WS	WORK AND PENSIONS	67WS
eVisas.....	60WS	Pension Credit Applications and Awards:	
		February 2025.....	67WS

WRITTEN CORRECTIONS

Thursday 27 February 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>
MINISTERIAL CORRECTION	13WC
Environment, Food and Rural Affairs.....	13WC
Draft Flood Reinsurance (Amendment)	
Regulations2025.....	13WC

No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than
Thursday 6 March 2025**

STRICT ADHERENCE TO THIS ARRANGEMENT GREATLY FACILITATES THE
PROMPT PUBLICATION OF BOUND VOLUMES

Members may obtain excerpts of their speeches from the Official Report (within one month from the date of publication), by applying to the Editor of the Official Report, House of Commons.

CONTENTS

Thursday 27 February 2025

Oral Answers to Questions [Col. 911] [see index inside back page]

Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport
Church Commissioners
House of Commons Commission
Restoration and Renewal Client Board
Speaker's Electoral Commission Committee

Gaza: BBC Coverage [Col. 935]

Answer to urgent question—(Lisa Nandy)

Business of the House [Col. 945]

Statement—(Lucy Powell)

Backbench Business

War in Ukraine: Third Anniversary [Col. 965]

Motion—(Sir Iain Duncan Smith)—agreed to

St David's Day and Welsh Affairs [Col. 1014]

Motion—(Ruth Jones)—agreed to

Non-league Football Clubs [Col. 1044]

Debate on motion for Adjournment

Westminster Hall

Rural Crime [Col. 469WH]

Women's Health [Col. 493WH]

General debates

Written Statements [Col. 57WS]

Written Correction [Col. 13WC]

Ministerial correction
