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**HOUSE OF COMMONS  
OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY  
DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 10 March 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Monday 10 March 2025*

*The House met at half-past Two o'clock*

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Speaker's Statement

**Mr Speaker:** I want to make a statement about Saturday's security incident. The safety and security of all who work on and visit the parliamentary estate is my top priority. I have asked for a review to be undertaken of Saturday's incident and will ensure that lessons are learned from it. I thank all those who were involved in helping to ensure that Saturday's incident was resolved safely. An individual has been charged, and the House's sub judice resolution now applies. Finally, I remind Members that we do not discuss the detail of security measures in the Chamber. I will not be taking points of order on this matter. If Members or others have concerns, they should contact the director of parliamentary security. Of course, I am always available to discuss these issues with colleagues.

## Oral Answers to Questions

### EDUCATION

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### Schools: Exceptional Funding

1. **Sarah Green** (Chesham and Amersham) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of exceptional funding for schools. [903073]

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** I am proud that while this Government have made tough decisions, we have protected key education priorities. There is additional investment in breakfast clubs, we are rebuilding and improving our special educational needs and disabilities system, and we are doing much more. After 14 years of decline, dither and delay, we are putting education back at the heart of national life and breaking down barriers to opportunity for every child in every community.

In response to the hon. Lady's specific question, exceptional funding will continue to be allocated through local authorities on a case-by-case basis.

**Sarah Green:** Chesham grammar school, in my constituency, has received exceptional funding from the Department for some years to facilitate the hire of the neighbouring leisure centre's sports hall for PE lessons. This year, the school's application has been denied, despite its circumstances not having changed; it still has no on-site sports hall, and it still needs to fund the £65,000 hiring fees each year. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this particular case to ensure that the students of Chesham grammar school have access to the PE curriculum the school is required to provide come September?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I would be happy to arrange a meeting for the hon. Lady to discuss this matter further. Buckinghamshire requested for a local authority-owned facility to be funded, and, in line with the published guidance, rental costs for local authority-owned facilities are out of scope of the exceptional funding. However, local authorities should organise such provision within the cost availability for schools. I would be happy to discuss the matter further.

**Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): Too many children in Southall go to school hungry, so I am delighted that the Chancellor and this Labour Government have chosen to triple investment in breakfast clubs, and that some of the first free breakfast clubs will open at Blair Peach and Wolf Fields primary schools in my constituency. Does the Minister agree that children learn better with a full stomach?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, which is why we are focusing our investment on breakfast clubs, which will ensure that children get not only a good start to the day with a full belly, but the support of a club that will help them to achieve and thrive.

#### Breakfast Clubs Early Adopter Scheme

2. **Sarah Bool** (South Northamptonshire) (Con): How many schools left the breakfast club early adopters scheme prior to 24 February 2025. [903074]

**The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):** Last month, Labour announced the first wave of primary schools set to offer the new free breakfast clubs. We were delighted that more than 3,000 schools applied to be early adopters, with 750 starting to deliver from the summer term, meaning that children will start the day ready to learn and parents will save up to £450. While Conservative Members cannot bring themselves to welcome the clubs, Labour is boosting parents' work choices and children's life chances.

**Sarah Bool:** Primary schools have been forced to pull out of the pilot or take a financial hit to participate in it. Does the Secretary of State really believe that the basic funding rate for breakfast is 60p?

**Bridget Phillipson:** No, I do not, because that is not actually the case. I am afraid that is not the only area where the hon. Lady is mistaken. The Conservatives should swallow their pride and welcome these breakfast clubs, which will transform the life chances of children across our country, are incredibly popular with parents, and will ensure that all our children get a brilliant start to the school day.

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Wickham) (Lab): I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I welcome Opposition Members' interest in breakfast clubs. Can the Secretary of State confirm that all primary schools and all primary school students will have breakfast clubs by the end of this Parliament?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I recognise the incredible work that the early adopters will be taking forward, but it is the case that all primary schools will offer a universal free breakfast club under this Labour Government. Opposition Members can raise the previous schemes

that they left behind all they like, but those schemes were far less generous. This Labour Government are trebling investment in breakfast clubs.

### Regional Improvement for Standards and Excellence Teams

3. **Andrew Cooper** (Mid Cheshire) (Lab): What progress her Department has made on establishing regional improvement for standards and excellence teams. [903075]

**The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):** Labour's RISE teams have hit the ground running. The first wave of advisers—professionals with a proven track record of driving up standards—are now drawing up improvement plans with schools. The Tories left more than 600 stuck schools teaching over 300,000 children with no plan for improvement. Labour will drive high and rising standards, turning those schools around and creating a system where every child can achieve and thrive.

**Andrew Cooper:** In my area, the Government have identified six stuck schools in Cheshire East and two in Cheshire West. Can the Secretary of State explain the support that will be made available to them to drive up standards? What levers do RISE teams have if schools choose not to follow their advice?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Universal support will be available to all schools to drive up standards, but we expect all schools to engage in mandatory, targeted RISE intervention. We will not hesitate to act where there are concerns. Unlike the last Conservative Government, we will not stand by as children pass through schools that are not delivering, year after year.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): The attainment gaps in the south-west are the largest in England, across the primary and secondary sectors. In the past, local authorities have played a big role in improving education. What plans do the Government have for local authorities to be involved in closing that attainment gap?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The hon. Lady is right to identify the disadvantage gaps that exist in many parts of the country, and the challenge in her part of the country. We believe that local authorities have an important role to play, working with trust leaders and others to drive up standards. That is why, through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill, we are bringing forward measures to ensure that the system works together more effectively, including in areas such as admissions and place planning.

### Curriculum and Assessment Review

5. **Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): When she expects the interim report on the curriculum and assessment review to be published. [903077]

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** Under the Tories, young people felt underprepared for their futures, and employers agreed that too many were leaving school lacking the skills needed in the modern workplace and ill-equipped for an ever-changing world. Through the independent curriculum and assessment review, Labour will bring forward a cutting-edge curriculum

that ensures that all our children leave school ready for work and for life. The interim report will be published in the spring.

**Nick Timothy:** Parents and pupils will think that Ministers are on another planet when they hear such answers. SATs in years 2 and 6 mean that primary schools can be held accountable, and that we can measure progress data through secondary education, but the National Education Union says that SATs “do not benefit learning” and wants the Government to abolish them. Will the Minister rule out abolishing SATs in primary schools—yes or no?

**Catherine McKinnell:** Assessment clearly has an important role to play in supporting achievement and development within schools. We will consider how the reformed curriculum and assessment will affect schools. We recognise the importance of supporting schools through any changes that come forward in the interim and final report.

**Alistair Strathern** (Hitchin) (Lab): From the rise of Andrew Tate to the re-emergence of Tommy Robinson, lots of young people I speak to are concerned about the extremism and conspiracy theories that they are encountering online. Last month, an important report from Public First and the Pears Foundation highlighted the need to do more to empower schools and teachers to tackle those things in the classroom. How will we use the curriculum review to make the most of this moment to empower young people to feel safer in online spaces?

**Catherine McKinnell:** My hon. Friend raises an important point. We already provide guidance and resources to help and support teachers to recognise some of those challenges, to intervene swiftly where necessary, and not to tolerate a culture that excuses harm and the experiences of women. Schools must be places where all young people can thrive and be ready for work and life. We will ensure that the curriculum and assessment review reflects that.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): One reason why England's schools rose up the international league tables in recent years is that they spent more time on core academic subjects such as English and maths. Having fallen sharply under the last Labour Government, the share of pupils doing double or triple science at GCSE has also gone up from 70% to 98%. Can the Minister reassure the House that time will not be taken away from the core academic subjects, and that their content will not be cut back, as a result of the curriculum review?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The Government entered office to unprecedented challenges, including crumbling public services and crippling public finances. In the face of a significant financial black hole we are taking tough decisions to fix the foundations, but we are protecting key education priorities, rebuilding schools and rolling out breakfast clubs, and we will continue to do so.

### Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Funding

6. **Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase funding for SEND provision. [903078]

16. **Margaret Mullane** (Dagenham and Rainham) (Lab): What steps she is taking to ensure adequate levels of high needs block funding. [903091]

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** The Government inherited a “lose, lose, lose” SEND situation. The Tories even described it as such in their own words, with the Deputy Chief Whip saying that they should hang their heads in shame over what they left behind. Since entering government, Labour has restructured the Department to put SEND at its heart. We have invested £1 billion into services, and £740 million to create additional specialist places. But we are under no illusions that reform to the system is desperately needed, and we have brought in expert advisers to help us achieve that.

**Bob Blackman:** In London alone, the deficit for this year is estimated to be £313.8 million, but that will grow to £502 million next year unless more money is put in. Clearly, there is a problem that we need to address. Ideally, those with special educational needs should be taught in mainstream education. However, it is much cheaper for local authorities to have in-house provision and special needs schools in the borough, rather than send children to another more expensive borough. Harrow was granted a new special educational needs school under the last Government. Will the Minister confirm that it will proceed? It has the support of all the headteachers and cross-party support.

**Catherine McKinnell:** The hon. Gentleman described the challenge that resulted from 14 years under the previous Government. We recognise the strain that the rising cost of SEND provision is putting on local government, which is why we will be setting out plans to reform the SEND system, with further details to come this year, including how local authorities will be supported to manage their historical and accruing deficits. Decisions on new school provision and buildings will also be made in due course.

**Margaret Mullane:** Has the Department give due consideration to updating the allocation policy? It is currently based on historical funding, which leaves boroughs such as Barking and Dagenham at a disadvantage for SEN provision compared with inner-London boroughs.

**Catherine McKinnell:** The structure of the high needs funding formula is largely unchanged in 2025-26, as we take time to consider what changes might be necessary to ensure a fair system that directs funding to where it is needed and that will support our future SEND reforms. We will continue to consider where changes to the formula will be required. The Secretary of State visited a school in Dagenham in December and saw at first hand its excellent work and the difference it is making to children with special educational needs in my hon. Friend's area.

**Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): I draw the attention of Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. I have a school in my constituency that is very good at helping students with education, health and care plans—so much so that it is struggling

with the number of students who have EHCPs. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this issue and wider SEND issues in my constituency?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The Government want to ensure that education, health and care plans are issued quickly, to help children and young people achieve and thrive. Officials work continuously with local authorities to offer support where there are issues with timeliness, to ensure that effective recovery plans are in place. I am sure that a meeting could be arranged for the hon. Gentleman to discuss his particular concerns in more detail.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Education Committee.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): The deep crisis in our SEND system, which is one of both funding and delivery, is letting down far too many children, and requires urgent action. Will the Minister update the House on the timing of the Government's plans for SEND, and provide assurances that there will be full engagement with parents, professionals and young people with SEND on any such plans?

**Catherine McKinnell:** We recognise the unprecedented pressures that local authorities are under and that the system does not currently deliver the best education possible for families, who want the best for their children, as quickly or thoroughly as it should. We will be announcing more details of reform plans this year. We consult continuously with families, representatives of families and local authorities, and we will work closely with my hon. Friend's Committee.

**George Freeman** (Mid Norfolk) (Con): Across the 46 schools in Mid Norfolk, SEND provision is the No. 1 issue for parents, teachers and staff. Contrary to the party political broadcast from Ministers, in the last 14 years I was lucky to secure £7 million from the Conservative coalition for a new school and Conservative county council funding for a new school in Swaffham. Officials in the Department for Education have also been constructive in working on a pathfinder for rural hub-and-spoke support. Parents in rural areas really struggle. What are Ministers doing to take that forward to support small rural schools to access specialist help in hubs?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I know that the hon. Gentleman raises his concern in all sincerity. We will continue to work with all partners, parents, teachers, local authorities and indeed the NHS on how we reform our SEND system and ensure that the support that is needed reaches every part of every community. Our ambition is for a more inclusive mainstream school system that draws on the right education and health specialists to ensure that every child receives the support that they deserve.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): Far too many children with complex learning disabilities and autism have been failed by the system and end up having a place not in their local community, but in institutions. That disproportionately affects black children, which is synonymous with the '60s and '70s when they were classified as “educationally subnormal”. Will the Minister explain what work is being done to identify the number of children who have been institutionalised? What work has been undertaken to review and amend those situations?



**Catherine McKinnell:** I know that this issue is important to my hon. Friend. She has, quite rightly, been raising it through a number of avenues. I will continue to work with her to ensure that we learn from the past, when far too many children were let down, and that, as we reform our SEND system, it is fit for purpose and serves every child.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD):** Some of the huge cost pressures on SEND budgets are being driven by the lack of state special school places, with many councils forced to send children with complex needs to private special schools that can cost two to three times more than local authority provision. There are many brilliant independent special schools providing value for money, yet we know that some private equity firms are profiteering with upwards of 20% profit margins from the schools that they run. Why will Ministers not back Liberal Democrat amendments to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill to include special schools in their proposed profit cap backstop for children's social care providers?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill is a landmark piece of legislation that the hon. Lady knows brings forward really important changes that will keep children safe as well as reform our school system so that it serves all. We are focused on improving inclusivity and expertise in mainstream schools and ensuring that we do have special schools that can cater for those with the most complex needs. Our priority is restoring the trust that parents should have that their child will get the support they need. We will do all that is necessary as part of our SEND reforms to ensure that that is delivered.

### Institutes of Technology

8. **Will Stone (Swindon North) (Lab):** What recent progress she has made on determining the future of the institutes of technology. [903080]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** The Department values the approach of the institutes of technology, which bring together education and industry to develop and deliver curriculums related to local employers and create sustainable pathways for talent development. We will continue to work with IOTs—including Swindon and Wiltshire IOT—in developing our strategy for post-16 skills.

**Will Stone:** I thank the Minister for her response. Would she consider meeting me so that we can work together on growing IOTs like Swindon, especially given their degree-awarding powers?

**Janet Daby:** IOTs bring together further education and higher education providers to deliver higher level technical qualifications including degrees and apprenticeships. I could offer to meet my hon. Friend, but I am sure he would much prefer to meet my noble Friend the Skills Minister from the other place. I will raise his request with her.

**Rebecca Smith (South West Devon) (Con):** The Stimulating Physics Network has been working to improve the knowledge, skills and confidence of non-specialist science teachers in secondary schools, with outstanding results: in schools that take part, there are 6% more A-level physics entrants, and 29% more girls taking physics. That compares with 13% in schools that do not take part. However, funding for the scheme has been cancelled from 31 March, which is a considerable problem for constituencies like mine, which has a need for science, technology, engineering and maths—STEM—skills, due to the needs of the defence sector. What plans does the Minister have to fill the gap left by the SPN, in order to ensure that the value of physics teaching in schools is maintained, and to reassure teachers, including my constituent Thom, who have been committed to delivering the SPN?

**Janet Daby:** We absolutely support girls and young women to take STEM subjects. It is interesting that the Conservatives did funding mid-year, which is unusual. As I am sure that they will be aware, hard decisions need to be made because of the difficult fiscal situation inherited by this Government. We will continue to do more to get girls into STEM subjects; we are absolutely committed to this.

### Reading for Pleasure

9. **Tulip Siddiq (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to increase the number of children and young people who read for pleasure. [903081]

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** High and rising school standards, and excellent foundations in reading, writing and maths, are a key part of our plan for change, which aims to ensure that every child gets the best start in life. Reading for pleasure is hugely important. Last month, Labour announced £2 million of investment in driving high and rising standards by embedding the success of phonics and ensuring that children and teachers develop reading skills. That includes children reading for pleasure.

**Tulip Siddiq:** When I was growing up in the 1980s, my nose was always buried in a book, and I let my imagination run wild. Nowadays, nine in 10 children have a mobile phone by the time they reach the age of 11, and statistics show that there has been a steep decline in the number of children reading for pleasure. Does the Minister agree that the likes of Roald Dahl and Jacqueline Wilson should not be replaced by a smartphone, and will she prioritise children's reading for pleasure in the school curriculum?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I am sure all Members joined in celebrating World Book Day in their schools. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and recognise how important it is to encourage children to read for pleasure. We know that reading for pleasure does happen in schools; teachers already encourage their students to listen to, discuss and read a wide range of stories, poems, books and plays. Importantly, this can also start at home, where parents can show how much they love reading. That is why I commend the LBC campaign, Kids Who Read

Succeed, an excellent initiative to encourage reading and ensure that all children, parents and teachers get that message.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): In all four libraries in my constituency this week, Mid Sussex babies and toddlers will be enjoying themselves at rhyme time; I hope that will be the start of many happy years of reading for my youngest constituents. Will the Minister join me in congratulating West Sussex library service on its 100th birthday last month, and will she commit to lobbying the Chancellor and the Deputy Prime Minister to ensure that my county council is sufficiently well funded to enable West Sussex to keep its 36 libraries open to the public for another 100 years?

**Catherine McKinnell**: I absolutely join the hon. Lady in congratulating the library service on its success. We all know how valuable our local libraries are in supporting and encouraging children and families to read. This is obviously a priority; we encourage reading for pleasure as much as reading for study, and it is something we clearly need more of—as is longevity, as she rightly says.

**Mr Speaker**: I call the shadow Minister, Neil O'Brien.

**Neil O'Brien** (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con): I completely agree with the hon. Member for Hampstead and Highgate (Tulip Siddiq). What is displacing reading for pleasure among children is smartphones and social media, including in schools. The Department for Education's own behaviour survey found that nearly half of pupils in years 10 and 11 report that in most or all lessons, mobile phones are being used when they should not be. The guidance is not working, so why are the Government continuing to block our proposals for a proper ban on smartphones in schools?

**Catherine McKinnell**: Last year, under the previous Government, we saw the steepest year-on-year drop in the number of children and young people enjoying reading. The hon. Member should look at the record of his Government before pointing the finger. Phones should not be out in schools; it is as simple as that. Heads have the power to impose rules that suit their school community. Just a year ago, his Government claimed that they were "prohibiting" mobile phones in schools, and that their guidance meant a "consistent approach" across schools. Those were their words. The then Secretary of State said:

"We are giving our hard-working teachers the tools to take action".

Was that Secretary of State right back then, when they backed the Tory Government's measures, or is the hon. Member?

#### "Break Down Barriers to Opportunity" Mission

10. **Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the plan for change mission entitled "Break Down Barriers to Opportunity". [903082]

13. **Josh Dean** (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab): What steps she is taking with Cabinet colleagues to implement the plan for change mission entitled "Break Down Barriers to Opportunity". [903085]

#### **The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):**

This Labour Government are determined to break the link between background and success, so that where someone is from does not determine where they end up in life. That work starts with the early years, which is when we can make the biggest difference to children's life chances. Through our plan for change, we will get tens of thousands more children—a record share—starting school ready to learn, because children growing up in our country deserve the best start in life, and nothing less.

**Warinder Juss**: What specific steps are being taken to ensure that the plan for change will help those in my constituency of Wolverhampton West who have historically faced systemic barriers to opportunity, such as those with special educational needs, those from ethnic minority backgrounds, and those from a background of lower socioeconomic status?

**Bridget Phillipson**: In Wolverhampton West and across our country, this Labour Government are determined to ensure that background is no barrier to getting on in modern Britain. That is why we will reform the special educational needs and disabilities system to ensure that all our children get the support that they need to thrive. Alongside that, we have delivered the biggest ever uplift in the early years pupil premium. We are rolling out breakfast clubs in our primary schools and will be launching the first phase of primary-based nurseries, ensuring that all our children have access to fantastic early years education.

**Josh Dean**: Last week, I visited Hertfordshire and Essex high school in Bishop's Stortford, Sele school in Hertford, and Hertford regional college in Ware. At each one, I met young people with exciting ambitions for the future. I welcome the action that the Government are taking to build our young people's confidence and open up opportunities for them. As we break down the barriers to opportunity, will the Secretary of State set out in further detail how the Government are supporting young people in constituencies like mine to discover a subject that they are passionate about, develop a new skill and find the path that is right for them?

**Bridget Phillipson**: My hon. Friend has evidently had a busy week in his constituency, and I know he champions young people and the need to drive up standards in education. Under our plan for change, we are starting learning earlier through accessible and affordable early years education. We are ensuring that all young people will have the skills that they need to seize opportunity, with strong pathways into post-16 learning. We also want to ensure that throughout people's lives, they have the chance to get on at work. The changes that I set out during National Apprenticeship Week—we are cutting red tape to create more than 10,000 apprenticeships—will make a big difference to adult learners in his constituency and right across our country.

**Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): This slogan word salad of a question talks about breaking down barriers to opportunity. Many of my constituents want to know how on earth implementing an education tax on the independent school sector breaks down barriers to opportunity. It puts up those barriers for parents who have scrimped and saved to put their children through

independent school. It is a policy of spite that will hurt the state school sector. What this Government are doing is far from breaking down barriers; it is putting up barriers to aspiration.

**Bridget Phillipson:** This Labour Government are aspirational and ambitious for all our children, including the vast majority of children who go to school in the state system. I was going to say that the Conservatives have not got much to say on education, and that is true, but the one policy that they actually have is to reverse the tax change that Labour has introduced in order to invest more in our state system. We need to hear from them where they would find the money to pay for the teachers and wider support that all our children deserve. Despite all the scaremongering that we have heard from the private schools lobby, at national offer day last week, more children got their first-choice place. What the scaremongers predicted has just not come to pass.

**Jess Brown-Fuller (Chichester) (LD):** The plan for change includes the mission to break down barriers to opportunity and build an NHS fit for the future, but many NHS trusts, including mine, which represents St Richard's hospital in Chichester, report that they are unable to offer level 6 and level 7 apprenticeships, due to a lack of backfill funding. That often results in them handing back the apprenticeship levy. What steps is the Department for Education taking to address that fundamental flaw in the scheme, and to ensure that apprenticeships deliver the nurses and midwives of the future?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Apprenticeships have an important role to play in our system, including in our NHS. I am working closely with the Health Secretary to ensure that we address the long-standing workforce challenges left behind by the Conservatives, as part of the workforce plan for the NHS. We want to ensure that all employers can take on more apprentices and that we drive forward in key shortage areas. The changes that we are introducing through Skills England will make a big difference in addressing and responding to the big skills shortages that we face in this country.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Minister.

**Neil O'Brien (Harborough, Oadby and Wigston) (Con):** Labour's plan says that the early years must be the top priority, but a survey by the National Day Nurseries Association finds that nursery fees are going up by 10% on average because the Government are not compensating nurseries for the cost of the national insurance increase. Will the Government rethink that decision, which the Early Years Alliance has described as "catastrophic", or will it be just another example of a tax on working people?

**Bridget Phillipson:** We are investing more in the early years system through the Budget; there are record levels of investment to support families with the expansion that they were promised by the Conservatives, but for which there had been no funding for delivery. We have also delivered the single-biggest uplift in the early years pupil premium, alongside an expansion grant, because we know that, in too many parts of the country, parents are unable to access the places that they have been promised. We are determined to turn that around.

Our ambitions to roll out primary-based nurseries will also make a big difference by supporting parents in the childcare deserts left by the Conservatives.

### Schooling Costs

11. **Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab):** What steps she is taking to help reduce the cost of sending children to school. [903083]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan):** Our Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will introduce free breakfast clubs in all state-funded primary schools in England, and measures to help with the cost of school uniforms. Breakfast clubs will save families up to £450 a year, putting money directly back into parents' pockets. Our action is urgent, which is why we are rolling out 750 early adopters from April—we are getting on with delivering the change that we promised. Limiting the number of branded uniform items will give parents more flexibility, keeping costs down for families and saving some parents over £50 on the back-to-school shop.

**Abtissam Mohamed:** I thank the Minister for his answer and congratulate the Department on its excellent work on the child poverty taskforce. Lesson time and learning are being significantly affected by high levels of child poverty. Schools in Sheffield Central tell me that many low-income families are really struggling financially. Will the Minister confirm what specific action the Government are taking to turn the tide on child poverty and put money back into people's pockets?

**Stephen Morgan:** There is no challenge more crucial for this Government than tackling child poverty. The taskforce has started the urgent work of publishing the strategy, which will look at levers across four key themes: increasing incomes, reducing essential costs, increasing financial resilience, and better local support, especially in early years.

**Shokat Adam (Leicester South) (Ind):** Parents whose children have special educational needs and disabilities do not wish to send their children to far-away schools, but they have to, because of a lack of local provision. If the children are over the age of 16, however, it is at the discretion of the local authority to decide whether to meet the cost of transporting them to school, even though education is effectively compulsory until the age of 18. Many local authorities, including in Leicester South, are now passing that cost entirely on to parents. Will the Minister commit to dealing with SEND transport costs in the Department's work to reduce the cost of sending children to school?

**Stephen Morgan:** I will happily meet the hon. Member to discuss those issues further.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Munira Wilson (Twickenham) (LD):** The Child Poverty Action Group estimates that the parent of a child in secondary school spends, on average, over £480 a year on school uniforms. The Government's move to limit the number of branded uniform items to three or four is well intentioned, but there is nothing to stop the overinflation



of the price of those items. A cap on costs, reviewed annually, would not just guarantee pounds and pennies saved for parents, but give schools the freedom to set their own uniform policies, rather than Ministers in Whitehall telling headteachers and school governors what to do. Will Ministers think again and back the Liberal Democrat amendment to the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill next week?

**Stephen Morgan:** School uniform plays a valuable role in creating a sense of common identity and reducing visible inequalities among pupils. The Liberal Democrat spokesperson made a number of points in the Bill Committee, and the Department will certainly take forward her views and ideas.

### School Exclusion: Pupils with SEND

12. **Pippa Heylings** (South Cambridgeshire) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of trends in the number of school exclusions of pupils with special educational needs and disabilities. [903084]

**Stephen Morgan:** Every child has the right to succeed in education. We publish data termly and review trends, including where pupils with SEND are disproportionately affected by exclusions. We know that some groups of children are at higher risk of exclusion, which is why the Government are breaking down barriers to opportunity by ensuring early intervention in mainstream schools for all pupils, including those at risk of exclusion. We are clear that schools have a legal duty not to discriminate against pupils with SEND under the Equality Act 2010.

**Pippa Heylings:** Too many children with SEND in South Cambridgeshire are out of school, due not only to exclusion but to the long waiting times for specialist or alternative provision when mainstream schools cannot meet their needs. I was shocked to hear about Harry, a constituent of mine who has been receiving just two hours of forest school a week for the past 15 months as his only education—15 months! What urgent action is the Minister taking to increase specialist and alternative provision, so that children like Harry can get the full and adequate education they need and deserve?

**Stephen Morgan:** I thank the hon. Member for sharing Harry's story—I know she is a champion for such issues in her constituency. The Government's ambition is for all children with SEND to receive the right support to succeed. The curriculum assessment review will look at how barriers to exclusion can be removed and high standards supported for children, to support further the vision that the Department announced. There is also £740 million for the high needs capital block next year.

**Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Permanent exclusion from primary school should be an almost non-existent occurrence. Any primary-age pupils exhibiting difficult behaviours should undertake diagnosis for SEND, and best efforts should be made to understand any trauma that the child may have suffered. What is the Minister doing to ensure that we build a system that prioritises the early identification of needs and quick delivery of intervention, so that children do not fall behind?

**Stephen Morgan:** We are aware that some groups of children have a higher risk of exclusion, which is why we are breaking down barriers to opportunity, to ensure that every child can achieve and thrive. We are committed to ensuring earlier intervention in mainstream schools for pupils, particularly those at risk of exclusion.

### Multi-academy Trusts: Management Accountability

14. **Jack Rankin** (Windsor) (Con): What steps she is taking to improve management accountability at multi-academy trusts. [903086]

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** Accountability is non-negotiable for this Government, and we know that when standards slip, it is disadvantaged children who suffer. Through Ofsted reform, we are putting an end to high stakes, low information headline judgments, and in their place school report cards will provide clear detail on what schools are doing well, and where they must improve. High standards must be for every child in every school, so we are increasing the oversight of multi-academy trusts. Our focus remains on standards, not structures.

**Jack Rankin:** I have a case in my constituency where a governor feels that she was pushed out, having raised concerns about senior teaching staff. I understand from last year's Sky News report that that may not necessarily be an isolated incident, as the accountability process potentially involves trustees marking their own homework. I am a strong supporter of academies, but there must be a balance. Will the Minister commit to bringing in a system of accountability and transparency to prevent such things from happening?

**Catherine McKinnell:** Where concerns about an academy are identified or raised, the Department works closely with the trust to ensure that all statutory requirements are being met. We are legislating in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill for a more proportionate route to intervention in the event of trusts not complying with legal duties, or acting in a way that is not reasonable. I appreciate the complexity of the issue that the hon. Gentleman raises, and I would be happy to arrange a meeting to discuss it further.

**Perran Moon** (Camborne and Redruth) (Lab): In my constituency of Camborne and Redruth, a small number of multi-academy trusts are contributing to a high level of suspensions and exclusions. Will the Minister meet me to discuss that as a matter of urgency?

**Catherine McKinnell:** I appreciate the concerns that my hon. Friend raises, and I would be happy to arrange a meeting to discuss them in more detail.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State, Laura Trott.

**Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con): One of the key metrics for holding schools and trusts to account is pupil numbers; parents vote with their feet. Why is the Secretary of State stopping good schools from being able to expand in the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill? That will stop competition and accountability, erode parental choice, and drive down standards.

**Catherine McKinnell:** The right hon. Lady appears to have misunderstood both the aims and impact of the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill. We recognise that parents must have an opportunity to have good schools in their area, and that schools must be able to set admission numbers to meet the requirements of the local community. That is why we expect local authorities to co-operate with schools in their area, and expect all schools to co-operate with the local authorities, to ensure that the right number of school places are available in the areas where they are needed.

### Agricultural Education and Training

15. **Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): What steps she is taking to increase funding for agricultural education and training. [903087]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** Land-based colleges receive higher funding per student to support delivery of programmes in agriculture, horticulture and forestry, and animal care and veterinary science. The 16 to 19 national funding rate will rise by 3.78% in 2025-26, increasing the funding for those programmes.

**Edward Morello:** Kingston Maurward college in my constituency of West Dorset provides essential training in agriculture, offering degrees, apprenticeships and short courses to equip the next generation of farmers with critical skills. What measures will the Minister take to ensure that farming courses are not underfunded compared with other vocational courses, and that agriculture is promoted as a viable career path?

**Janet Daby:** This Government are committed to education for 16 to 19-year-olds, and beyond. Extra funding is available for all important skills in high-value and high-cost areas, including manufacturing and farming. We value farmers hugely and we are committed to investing £5 million in the farming budget over two years.

### Construction Apprenticeships

17. **Mr Tanmanjeet Singh Dhesi** (Slough) (Lab): What steps she is taking to increase the number of construction apprenticeships. [903092]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** Where the previous Government failed, Labour is getting Britain building again. Our pioneering new homebuilding skills hubs will deliver fast-track training, meaning more opportunity, new homes and stronger growth. Some 32 hubs across the country will create 5,000 more construction apprenticeship places and play a part in getting Britain building again. A homebuilding revolution requires a skills revolution, and Labour will provide more homes, greater opportunity and stronger growth.

**Mr Dhesi:** Having worked in construction for a couple of decades, prior to being elected, I am glad the Government recognise the importance of the industry and are firmly committed to house building, especially social and affordable housing, to make the dream of home ownership a reality once again for our young people. The Conservative

Government ducked the difficult decisions for too long, so will the Minister outline exactly how the Government plan to create the skills and apprenticeships that we need so that the homes that Slough families deserve can finally be built?

**Janet Daby:** I assure my hon. Friend that this Government are not ducking or diving the tough decisions that need to be made. Homebuilding skills hubs will create more apprenticeships in occupations where there are shortages, such as bricklaying and groundwork. The changes that we have introduced to English and maths will support thousands more apprentices to achieve each year, including in construction. This Government of action are building the skilled workforce this country needs, including in Slough.

**Blake Stephenson** (Mid Bedfordshire) (Con): Level 7 apprenticeships play a vital role throughout our economy, including in the construction industry, and support social mobility. I recently met young, hard-working apprentices in Mid Bedfordshire who would not be able to achieve their ambitions without level 7, but there are concerns about the future of those apprenticeships. Will the Minister take this opportunity to reassure employers and apprentices that she understands the value of level 7 apprenticeships?

**Janet Daby:** This Government have an extremely challenging fiscal inheritance. There are tough choices to take on how funding should be prioritised to generate opportunities for young people to start fulfilling careers. Learners who have started will be funded to completion and we expect to make a final decision on effective apprenticeships shortly. We are committed to level 7 apprenticeships and to people continuing their education to a good standard.

### School Building Programmes

18. **Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on school building programmes. [903093]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan):** We have committed £1.4 billion for 2025/26 to continue the current school rebuilding programme, which is rebuilding or significantly refurbishing buildings at 518 schools and sixth form colleges across England. All projects have been given indicative timelines for delivery, based on prioritisation of need. Around half have been commenced so far, and are at various stages of delivery.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn:** Cross Lane primary school, Shade primary school, Brooksbank school, Calder high school, Todmorden high school and Walsden Saint Peter's Church of England primary school are among 11 Calder Valley schools to be rebuilt under this Government, where the last Government failed. Will the Minister confirm that under this Government no children will be left learning in classrooms that are not fit for purpose?

**Stephen Morgan:** Along with my hon. Friend, I am delighted that so many schools in his constituency are receiving significant investment through the school rebuilding programme. Ensuring that schools and colleges

have the resources and buildings that they need is a key part of our plan to break down barriers to opportunity and ensure that every child gets the best start in life.

**Graham Stuart** (Beverley and Holderness) (Con): The Minister may remember that the last Labour Government had Building Schools for the Future. Some £55 billion was spent on buildings and IT to transform education—except buildings and IT do not transform education. There was global evidence to back that up, because building schools is not a new thing. Can the Minister reassure the House that we will never have a repeat of that extravagant and wasted programme, but that we will ensure we have functional schools with brilliant teachers able to teach our children?

**Stephen Morgan:** Ensuring that schools and colleges have the resources and buildings that they need is key to our mission to break down barriers to opportunity. I will take no lectures from the Conservative party on education.

### Topical Questions

T1. [903098] **Andy MacNae** (Rossendale and Darwen) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Education (Bridget Phillipson):** Last month, Labour announced the first 750 schools set to offer free breakfast clubs. Next month, through the clubs, we will boost the life chances of up to 180,000 children and begin to save parents up to £450. That comes as we improve the quality of early years education, alongside our Department's RISE advisers, support stuck schools, drive high and rising standards and bring schools together to improve attendance. In National Apprenticeship Week, we celebrated by cutting red tape to unlock 10,000 more apprenticeships every year. At the Department for Education, we are the Department for opportunity, and we are proving that we are the Department for delivery too.

**Andy MacNae:** On Friday, I met with the headteachers of all the secondary schools in Rossendale. They face many challenges, but they were unanimous that the single biggest issue they face is a lack of capacity in special schools and alternative provision in our area. Rossendale has no places, children's complex needs are not being met and huge additional pressures are being placed on our mainstream schools. That is the legacy of 14 years of neglect. What steps will this Government take to address special school and alternative provision in areas such as Rossendale and Darwen?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I understand my hon. Friend's concern and the concern of headteachers in his constituency. Sadly, I hear that story in every part of our country. We inherited as a Government a system that the previous Secretary of State described as "lose, lose, lose". We are investing more into the system and we want to ensure that there is more mainstream inclusion, but we recognise the need to invest in specialist provision for children who need it most.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State.

**Laura Trott** (Sevenoaks) (Con): How on earth can the Secretary of State justify spending £90 million on a one-year contract for advertising and media while cutting a £4 million Latin excellence programme mid-year that is helping to improve school standards in some of the most deprived areas of the country? Does that not show that the Secretary of State's priorities are all wrong?

**Bridget Phillipson:** The right hon. Lady was a Minister in the Treasury, and she was responsible for leaving behind the black hole that this Labour Government are having to sort out. We face unprecedented challenges. When it comes to Latin, we are working with classics associations to ensure that children can continue to study Latin. It is important that children in our state schools have that opportunity, but the Conservatives designed the scheme to terminate in February. Maybe the right hon. Lady can tell us why that was.

**Laura Trott:** The Secretary of State is spending £90 million on advertising. She is cutting not just Latin programmes, but computing hubs, language hubs and advanced maths. Are those also less important than her advertising budget?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Yet again, we hear a lot of sound and fury from the right hon. Lady, but no recognition of the mess that the Conservatives left behind, which it falls to this Labour Government to resolve. We are investing more in early years, more into our schools and more into 16-19 education. Yes, some of the investment we need to make is about ensuring that people come forward to train as teachers, particularly because of the chronic issues we face around recruitment and retention because of the mess left behind after the last Conservative Government.

T2. [903099] **Sonia Kumar** (Dudley) (Lab): Red Hall primary school in my constituency of Dudley is split down the middle by Zoar Street. The theft of lead from the Victorian roofs, leakages and no real playground do not make an environment for children to thrive. In 2010, the Conservatives shelved the plans to consolidate and repair the school on one side of the road. Will the Minister meet with me to discuss reopening those plans?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Stephen Morgan):** This Government have increased capital funding to improve the condition of school buildings to £2.1 billion for the next financial year. This will include funding for Dudley local authority to invest in improving the condition of its maintained schools, including Red Hall primary school. Capital funding and programmes for schools beyond 2025-26 will be confirmed following the spending review. I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend, who is a real champion for children in her constituency.

T9. [903106] **Rosie Duffield** (Canterbury) (Ind): The University of Kent, which is the largest employer in my constituency, is making yet more redundancies due to the enormous debt it owes to international banks. Will the Secretary of State commit to holding crisis meetings with desperate universities and their creditors, to help secure more sustainable terms and a potential way out of the financial emergency that they face?



**Bridget Phillipson:** I recognise the pressures that many institutions across our country face. The last Conservative Government regarded universities as a political battleground, not a public good. We face a big challenge in stabilising the finances of our universities, which is why we have refocused the Office for Students to ensure that it tackles much earlier the challenges that the hon. Lady describes. That is also why I took the difficult but necessary decision to increase tuition fees so that we have more revenue going into our universities.

T3. [903100] **Lloyd Hatton** (South Dorset) (Lab): The previous Government failed to build much-needed new school buildings at Dorset studio school, and failed for years to open the proposed Osprey Quay special school for children with special educational needs. Dorset studio school urgently needs a new home, and families in my patch are hugely in need of a SEND school at the Osprey Quay site, so can the Minister outline what steps the Government are taking to get those two crucial projects over the line?

**Stephen Morgan:** The feasibility and project costs for those projects are currently being reviewed, and the relevant approvals will then be sought. I will ensure that my hon. Friend is kept up to date on progress. Ensuring that schools and colleges have the resources and buildings they need is key to our delivery of the opportunity mission and to give every child the best start in life.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Great teaching and great policies saw children in England soar up the international league tables under the last Government to become the best in the western world. I think that the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill risks that progress. If the Secretary of State disagrees, will she put her money where her mouth is and resign if England falls down the international league tables?

**Bridget Phillipson:** That is the kind of hyperbole that we often get from the right hon. Gentleman. From that question, and from the shameless sense of pride—the misplaced sense of pride—that Conservative Members often have, you would not know that one in three children are not school ready, one in five children are regularly out of school, and our scores were dropping, contrary to what the right hon. Gentleman has suggested. We face big challenges around standards and a huge disadvantage gap. There is a lot that this Labour Government are having to turn around to ensure that all children get a great start in life.

T4. [903101] **Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): The Prime Minister's welcome announcement over the past couple of weeks of an increase in defence spending creates both an opportunity and a challenge for the Department, as well as for the whole skills system in this country. Will the Secretary of State please outline how she will work with the Ministry of Defence to ensure that gap is filled? In particular, how will she ensure that the Scottish Government in Edinburgh take proper action on defence skills, as they have failed to do over the past 17 years?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Education (Janet Daby):** My hon. Friend is right. The first set of statistics released under the Labour Government shows

that apprenticeship starts, participation and achievements are all on the up, compared with the same period under the Tories. We have celebrated by going further and faster to cut red tape, so that up to 10,000 more apprentices can achieve each year. That is a clear contrast to the failures that we saw under the Tories for 14 years and the continued failure of the SNP. It is time for change in Scotland, and only Labour can deliver that change.

**Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): Yesterday afternoon, a group of five and six-year-old special educational needs children had great fun running circles around their Member of Parliament on the football pitch at Matthew Arnold school in my constituency. Can Labour Front Benchers please use their good offices to encourage Surrey county council to continue to fund the star player programme, which provides great fun for the children and great respite for the parents?

**The Minister for School Standards (Catherine McKinnell):** That sounds like a lot of fun, and I commend the hon. Gentleman for participating. When it comes to supporting what we know are brilliant projects, local authorities are increasingly challenged as a result of the funding deficit that the previous Government left them, but I am sure they are keen to support those projects. We will work with local authorities on a continuous basis to ensure that children with special educational needs and disabilities get the opportunities they deserve.

T5. [903102] **Liam Conlon** (Beckenham and Penge) (Lab): A new report by London Councils predicts a collective decline in demand for reception and year 7 places over the next five years, causing concern about the impact on school standards and pupil attainment. Will the Minister meet me to discuss this important issue?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The Government are working closely with local authorities to ensure that consideration is given to all options for utilising space, whether that is for early years provision or SEND provision, including merging provision where that is in the best interests of the community, and we will continue to do so. I or the early years Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan), would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss the proposals.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): Will the Secretary of State confirm how many SEND children are forecast to have to leave the independent sector and go into the state sector because of the imposition of VAT on fees? What will be the cost of that to the taxpayer?

**Bridget Phillipson:** Labour's plans to end the tax breaks that private schools enjoy will invest significant money into state education. I am really surprised that the hon. Gentleman does not welcome the extra investment that will be going into schools in his constituency. When it comes to children with SEND, where the place is derived through an EHCP, there will be no additional cost. As I said earlier, the scaremongering that people like him have engaged in is just proving to be wrong.

T6. [903103] **Gill Furniss** (Sheffield Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I have often raised the importance of further education and the transformative impact it can have. I know that the Minister and the Secretary of



State share my belief in excellent education for all, instead of the broken skills system that the Tories left behind. To that end, what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that students without the necessary qualifications to get on to T-levels do not end up falling through the net?

**Janet Daby:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right to demonstrate her concern. We want a skills system that provides opportunity and delivers growth. The curriculum and assessment review is looking at how we can ensure that high-value qualification pathways are available for 16 to 19-year-olds. As we continue to reform qualifications, we will consider the review findings and publish them later in the year.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): After some delay, the admirable Hounslow school in my constituency has been promised a letter by the middle of March releasing funds for the replacement of its crumbling reinforced autoclaved aerated concrete roofing. If that letter fails to materialise within the next week, may I appeal to a Minister to intervene?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I will happily take away the right hon. Gentleman's concern and make sure that he gets a response as quickly as possible on the matter he raises.

T7. [903104] **Katie White** (Leeds North West) (Lab): I welcome the progress that the Secretary of State and her team have made. It is clear that she is moving at pace to increase opportunities for all. Will she update the House on what progress she has made on our commitment to deliver mental health support in schools?

**Stephen Morgan:** The Government are committed to improving mental health support, and access to specialist mental health professionals in every school, to help young people to achieve and thrive. We will work closely with colleagues in the Department of Health and Social Care and the NHS who will lead on services, including mental health support teams. They are recruiting 8,500 additional mental health staff to treat children and adults, getting on with delivering the promise we made at the last election.

**Tim Farron** (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): What formal assessment have Ministers made, or will they make, of the benefits to children's mental health and physical health, resilience and ability to learn of investing in more opportunities for residential outdoor education experiences?

**Stephen Morgan:** The hon. Member raises a number of important points. Enriching opportunities for children and young people are a key part of our breaking down the barriers to opportunity. I am happy to meet him if he has particular examples that he wishes to share.

T8. [903105] **James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): Parents in my rural constituency often express concerns about the limited school options, which almost always involve travelling some distance, but free transport is available only to the nearest school. What steps are being taken to review school transport costs overall? Will the

limited school options available to rural parents be considered when updating the home-to-school travel policy?

**Catherine McKinnell:** The Department's home-to-school travel policy aims to ensure that no child is prevented from accessing education due to a lack of transport. I am keen to understand how well home-to-school transport is supporting children to access educational opportunity. I am working closely with officials on that, and I will bear my hon. Friend's comments and concerns in mind as that work continues.

**Mr Gagan Mohindra** (South West Hertfordshire) (Con): I start by wishing you, Mr Speaker, and the House a happy Commonwealth Day.

Conservative-led Hertfordshire county council has done excellent work in supporting children with SEND, in my constituency and across the county, while seeing a 27% increase in requests for EHCPs in 2024. How is the Education Secretary directing her Department to provide further assistance to councils such as Hertfordshire, which is having to find more and more money from its budget to support students with SEND?

**Catherine McKinnell:** We recognise the challenges in the area that the hon. Gentleman represents. A SEND improvement board chaired independently by Dame Christine Lenehan oversees progress and provides challenge. We know that the system needs wholesale reform; we are working at pace and will make an announcement as soon as possible.

T10. [903107] **Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): Wednesday is Young Carers Action Day. Will the Minister join me in thanking young carers for all that they do, and commit herself to ensuring that there is greater awareness of them in schools? I must say that schools in my constituency do very well in that regard.

**Janet Daby:** My hon. Friend is right to mention young carers. The Government are committed to increasing their visibility and ensuring that they have the support that they need, at home and in education. We champion initiatives such as Young Carers Action Day and the young carers covenant, which further highlights the needs of young carers and the support available to them.

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): What resources are being provided to schools to support restorative justice initiatives in relation to knife crime, especially victim-led approaches such as workshops or peer mentoring to engage young people in conversations about its prevention?

**Catherine McKinnell:** We hear about far too many cases of young people being affected by knife crime, and I will take away the specific issue that the hon. Gentleman has raised. We are undertaking a curriculum and assessment review, looking closely at relationships, sex and health education, and considering how we can empower young people to be discerning and respect one another and create a society based on values and tolerance.

**Ian Lavery** (Blyth and Ashington) (Lab): In each of the past two years, 40,000 teachers have left the profession owing to burnout and excessive workloads. What concrete

steps will the Government take to address that, and how can we reverse the exodus from this fantastic profession?

**Catherine McKinnell:** Under the Tories teachers were overstretched and undervalued, so Labour is resetting the relationship with the profession. We are properly remunerating teachers by accepting the 5.5% pay rise that the last Government sat on. We are also keen to cut unnecessary burdens on teachers, harnessing artificial intelligence and supporting children with their mental health. The child poverty taskforce is determined to alleviate the burdens that originate outside the school gates.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): What steps are being taken to support voluntary organisations across the United Kingdom, such as AWARE in Northern Ireland, that offer education programmes to target depression and related mood conditions as part of mental health education in schools?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising the important contribution that voluntary and third sector organisations can make. Here in England, through the consultation about relationships, sex and health education, we are looking at what more we can do to ensure that all young people get the support that they need, including in the areas that he has identified.

**Chris Hinchliff** (North East Hertfordshire) (Lab): School staff in North East Hertfordshire work tirelessly in dilapidated facilities to support students with special educational needs while parents face absurdly long journeys to reach specialist schools, and in the meantime the old Roysia school site in Royston lies vacant. Will the

Minister meet me to discuss the school estate in my constituency, and how we can use the Roysia site to meet local special educational needs?

**Catherine McKinnell:** We are very open to ideas for how we can best use the school estate to meet the needs of young people, including those with SEND. We are determined to deliver a wide range of reforms, and I—or, indeed, the early years Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Portsmouth South (Stephen Morgan)—would be happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss how we can best use the resource in his constituency for the benefit of all the children who need it.

**Ian Sollom** (St Neots and Mid Cambridgeshire) (LD): Last week the Department announced that colleges would receive only two thirds of the funding that they were promised for the 35,000 additional 16 to 18-year-old students enrolled last autumn, a decision that could lead to thousands of prospective students being turned away this September. That follows a cut in the adult skills funding. Can the Secretary of State explain how cutting promised funds will help to address skills shortages in the economy and help to deliver the Government's growth mission?

**Bridget Phillipson:** I absolutely agree that skills are critical to driving growth. That is why we are now spending over £400 million more on 16-to-19 education—£100 million more than was announced at the Budget—including £87 million in in-year growth funding, to ensure that places are available where needed. Through the reforms that we are driving with Skills England, we will make sure that where there was once a fragmented skills system, we have a coherent system that supports all our young people and adult learners, too.

## Syria

3.40 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement on Syria.

Events in Syria over the past few days are deeply concerning. We are working as quickly as possible to establish from reliable sources of information what exactly happened and who was responsible, but reports that a large number of civilians have been killed in coastal areas in ongoing violence are horrific. As the Foreign Secretary made clear in his statement yesterday, the interim authorities in Damascus must ensure the protection of all Syrians and set out a clear path to transitional justice.

This is a critical moment for Syria, and for the interim authorities to demonstrate their intent to promote stability and to govern in the interests of all Syrians. Since the fall of Assad on 8 December, our priority has been to support a Syrian-led and Syrian-owned political transition that leads to an inclusive, non-sectarian and representative Government. We have been clear that anyone seeking a role in governing Syria should demonstrate a commitment to the protection of human rights, unfettered access for humanitarian aid and the safe destruction of chemical weapons stockpiles, and combat terrorism and extremism. This is the only way forward towards a more stable, free and prosperous future for Syria and for Syrians, who suffered for so long under the brutal Assad regime. We have consistently emphasised this message in all our diplomatic engagement with the interim authorities, and in concert with our international partners. We will continue to focus our diplomacy to this end.

The UK is engaging privately and regularly with the interim authorities at every level, including through Ministers and our Syria envoy. We are supporting them to take steps that will deliver a more stable, free and prosperous future for the Syrian people. We welcomed the announcement by interim Syrian President al-Sharaa on forming an inclusive transitional Government, leading to free and fair elections. We welcomed the national dialogue conference held on 25 February. But the violence over the weekend demonstrates that more needs to be done to bring Syria's different groups together, and we urge the interim authorities to urgently establish a clear process and timeline for the next phase of the transition. Representative figures from across Syria need to be appointed to the transitional Government and the recently announced legislative council.

Our overarching objective is a stable Syria. In addition to supporting an inclusive political process, we are focused on preventing escalation of conflict in northern Syria, on tackling security threats, including the threat from terrorism, and on the destruction of chemical weapons. We are also supporting economic recovery by lifting some sanctions and scaling up humanitarian assistance.

The UK, like our partners, imposed sanctions on Assad's regime to hold him and his associates accountable for their oppression of Syria's people. In recent weeks, the Government have made changes to those sanctions: we issued a general licence to support transactions for humanitarian activities in Syria, and last week we revoked

the asset freezes of 24 entities, including the Central Bank of Syria, which had been imposed to prevent Assad from using financial assets in conducting his vile oppression. We keep all our sanctions regimes under close review, and we target them at those who bear responsibility for repression and human rights abuses. It is also important that we take steps to support the economic development that Syria's people desperately need.

The humanitarian situation in Syria remains dire, with over 16 million people currently in need of humanitarian assistance. We will continue to support those in need across Syria, where it is safe to do so. Through non-governmental organisations and UN organisations, we are providing food, healthcare, protection and other lifesaving assistance, in addition to agriculture, livelihoods and education programmes. Since December, the UK has announced over £62 million in additional humanitarian assistance to support vulnerable Syrians inside Syria and across the region.

In conclusion, this is a critical, fragile moment for Syria. The country faces significant challenges as it transitions after almost 14 years of conflict. Stability in Syria is firmly in our interests. The UK remains committed to the people of Syria, and we will continue to stand with them in building a more stable, free and prosperous future. I commend this statement to the House.

3.45 pm

**Priti Patel (Witham) (Con):** I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement.

This is the first statement on Syria offered by the Government this year, and frankly, it could not have come soon enough. It is deeply alarming that, in recent days, we have been witness to some of the deadliest violence in Syria since the beginning of this dreadful conflict. The Opposition have been raising questions, written and oral, about the Government's approach to Syria throughout the year, so it is with some disappointment that we have had to wait this long—and, to be quite frank, for these events—for a Minister to give an update.

Reports that hundreds of civilians have been killed in clashes, including Alawite civilians, is troubling. The Syrian people have suffered 14 years of conflict and decades of oppression. The country is now at a fork in the road, but these terrible events are a stark reminder that a better future for the people of Syria—for all groups and all minorities—is far from guaranteed. We should be clear that those who have ratcheted up the appalling situation in recent days should pull back from the brink, not jeopardise that better future.

The Labour Government have decided to establish contact with Hayat Tahrir al-Sham and the interim Administration in Syria, so can the Minister confirm whether the Foreign Office has raised this escalation in violence with interlocutors, and if so, whether the Government have clearly conveyed a set of expectations for how the temperature should be taken down and stability restored? Can he also confirm whether there has been any direct engagement between Ministers and HTS leaders at any point, and what is his assessment of HTS's response to this violence and the threat posed by remnants of the disgraceful Assad regime?

We note that the Government have announced they are lifting 24 sanctions on entities linked to the deposed Assad regime. Does the violence of recent days change



[Priti Patel]

the Government's assessment of the merits of lifting such sanctions? Before the Minister lifted those particular sanctions, did he consult US and European allies as well as partners in the region? Were the sanctions lifted at the request of HTS, and are there plans to lift further sanctions? Can the Minister also be clear with the House about precisely what conditions, criteria and evidence are being used to drive these decisions?

On the Minister's visit to Turkey last week, he said the UK is committed to working in partnership with Turkey

"to support Syria's transition to an inclusive and peaceful country", but what exactly does that mean in practice, and what does he see as Turkey's role? On security issues specifically, can he confirm that there remains no change to the Conservative Government's very firm position on foreign fighters—that they must not come back to the UK? What is his assessment of the Syrian state's ability to counter any ISIS cells in the east of the country, and has he seen any progress on securing borders in the region and the prevention of smuggling people, drugs and weapons?

The Government are right that Assad's chemical weapons stockpiles need to be secured and destroyed, and that needs to be verified by the Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons. However, is the Minister confident these weapons will indeed be destroyed? We acknowledge that the Government have put more funding into the OPCW's Syria missions following the fall of Assad's regime, but we still need Syria to meet its obligations under the chemical weapons convention in full. We need concrete actions as well as words.

Turning to the humanitarian situation, where does the Minister judge the need is most acute, and how is he mobilising UK aid to ensure that it is safely distributed and is genuinely reaching those innocent civilians in need? With the reduction of official development assistance to 0.3%, can the Minister confirm that Syria will continue to be a priority and that funds will be made available, given the security and strategic issues?

Finally, on the transition to representative and inclusive governance, we note the launching of the non-binding national dialogue conference by the interim Government of Syria, but does the Minister believe that this process will yield the kind of results we all want for the people of Syria, and has he discussed this through the channels he has established with the interim Government?

**Mr Falconer:** I will try to answer as many of the shadow Foreign Secretary's questions as I can. As she knows, we have had senior-level contact with the new HTS leadership. Our Foreign Secretary met the interim Foreign Minister on the margins of the Paris meeting. We have not yet sent Ministers to Damascus, as many of our partners will. We keep these issues under close review.

On whether we are consulting the Europeans on sanctions and other things, the Europeans have taken steps on sanctions slightly in advance of us. I cannot remember the precise date, but they relaxed their sanctions before we did. I can confirm to the shadow Foreign Secretary that we keep all decisions on sanctions under very close review.

The 24 entities for which sanctions were lifted on Friday are very much focused on the economic function of Syria. As the shadow Foreign Secretary knows well, Syria is in the midst of a very significant economic crisis—the Syrian pound has lost 99% of its value—and we want to protect the Syrian people from the consequences of that crisis. The relaxation of sanctions is very much focused on allowing normal Syrians and humanitarian actors to get on with their lives, but we will keep all further sanctions under close review.

The shadow Foreign Secretary asks about HTS's progress on borders and countering terrorism and drugs. She is exactly right to say that we must judge HTS on its actions, not its words. HTS has made some very welcome commitments on a range of questions. For example, we have seen a welcome commitment from the new interim authorities to work with the OPCW. The interim Foreign Minister has engaged with the OPCW, which has now visited Damascus. That is to be welcomed, but the shadow Foreign Secretary is right that actions, not words, will be how we judge our Syria policy.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I echo his horror at the killing of civilians in Syria this weekend. I agree that this is a critical and fragile moment for the country.

In a letter to me last week, the Foreign Secretary made it clear that the Government's policy is to push for an inclusive political process and accountability in Syria. This is, of course, exactly what is needed to deal with the tensions formed by decades of civil war and brutal dictatorship, but what are the Government actually doing to make sure this happens? We hear about aid and the loosening of sanctions. Is this the full extent of their plan? If there is more, can it be implemented properly when we do not have an embassy in Syria and when our special representative has visited Damascus only twice this year?

**Mr Falconer:** My right hon. Friend raises some important points, including about what the transitional Government will look like. And the answer is that all of Syria's diverse communities need to feel that they have a presence in the new Government of Syria. Of course, many Alawites, many Druze, many Kurds and many Christians across Syria feel very nervous at the moment, and we call on the interim Administration to do all they can through their actions, not words, to reassure those communities that they are welcome in the new Syria.

As the shadow Foreign Secretary noted, I discussed this with my Turkish counterpart last week. I can confirm that we have delivered these messages clearly and consistently to the interim authorities, that we have raised the most recent violence with them, and that we are seeking urgent clarification on the confusing events at the coast, which, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry) says, are absolutely horrifying.

On the question of a future British presence in Syria, I will return to the House when I am in a position to give a fuller update.



**Mr Speaker:** I call the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): The reports from the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights that at least 1,000 Alawites have been killed over the past few days are deeply concerning. This escalation in violence undermines Syria's fragile transition from dictatorial rule under Assad, and it harms efforts to encourage religious and sectarian tolerance.

At this stage, it is critical that we understand whether the violence represents spontaneous clashes between different sects or is the product of state-directed policy. This must inform the Government's position on whether to lift sanctions to support Syria's development and reintegration into the global community.

I note that the interim Syrian Government have announced the establishment of an independent committee to investigate the violent clashes, but this must be followed up with concrete steps to protect Syrians of all ethnic and religious groups and ensure they are represented in the new Administration, as well as action to bring justice to those who have perpetrated violence in this conflict.

The international community must also work with partners in the region to support Syria's transition away from dictatorial rule, including by emphasising the importance of embedding religious and sectarian tolerance, as well as the rights of women, in the new Syrian regime. Will the Minister update the House on what he is doing to engage with partners in the region, including the Syrian Government, to promote respect and support for religious and sectarian tolerance in Syria?

It is important, too, that this Government recognise that neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon have generously welcomed Syrian refugees, but they face immense challenges in providing food, shelter and essential services. Can the Minister outline how the cuts to international aid will impact our ability to support Syria's economic development, including the cuts to bilateral aid to neighbouring countries such as Jordan and Lebanon, where many Syrians have sought refuge?

**Mr Falconer:** The Liberal Democrat spokesperson poses many of the most vital questions. We need to very carefully determine the nature of the violence on the coast in order to make a full assessment of the most appropriate response. We consult closely with all Syria's neighbours—Jordan, Turkey and many others—and have raised with them the importance of Syria making this transition, which is vital for Syrians, the region and some of the global issues the shadow Foreign Secretary outlined, whether counter-terrorism or drug supply.

On aid, I can confirm that we will continue to play our full part in Syria. On Monday, there will be an international pledging conference on Syria in Brussels, and I expect we will be able to make further announcements in advance of that.

**Blair McDougall** (East Renfrewshire) (Lab): The interim Government in Syria have suggested that operations in the coastal areas are complete and that things have now calmed down, but human rights groups suggest that the violence is ongoing. Is the Government's assessment that this was a spike in violence or a continuing escalation in the security situation in Syria?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend rightly points to some of the confusion around events at the coast. We are monitoring the situation very closely and will update once we have more clarity. We are calling on the interim authorities to ensure that the violence stops now.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the Father of the House.

**Sir Edward Leigh** (Gainsborough) (Con): The Christian community in Syria is one of the oldest in the world. Up to the civil war, it was about 10% of the population; now, it is down to 2%. Aid to the Church in Need has described Friday as a "black and painful day" for Christians in the Latakia area, with Christians being murdered in their cars and in their homes. Will the Minister—representing, as he does, a Christian country—call out the new Sunni Muslim Government of Syria and say that they have an absolute duty of care to all minorities: Christians, Druze, Alawites or others?

**Mr Falconer:** I can tell the right hon. Gentleman, and my constituency neighbour, that we do, of course, call on the interim Administration to ensure the full representation of every one of the minorities in Syria—Christians, Druze, Kurds, Alawites and many others.

**David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and thank the Government for the support they have given to the people of Syria. The terrible events of this weekend bring home the vital importance of an inclusive process for all people in Syria. I am aware of the Minister's response to a previous question about our diplomatic presence in Syria, but are the Government also looking at ways we can increase our engagement with civil society in Syria? It is not just the Administration with which it is important to engage, but civil society. Civil society groups want to carry out a number of peaceful initiatives to build a more inclusive society, but they are struggling to get governmental and non-governmental funding and to have the right conversations. Is that something the UK Government could look at, as we build a more peaceful and inclusive society in Syria?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend has worked on these issues for many years, and he is right about the vital role of civil society. I was pleased to meet Syrian civil society organisations with him, and indeed separately. I am pleased to confirm to the House that we have been talking to a range of Syrians in Syria, including Alawites, after the events of the weekend.

**Mr Andrew Mitchell** (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The Minister is to be commended for bringing this statement to the House. He will be aware that Britain has been heavily involved, since we helped to set up the Zaatari camp, in supporting the 5 million people in the surrounding countries who we know wish to go home as soon as the situation allows. My plea to him is to ensure that, given all the other preoccupying crises around the world, the full force of the Foreign Office, with its long history of engagement in Syria, does not get distracted elsewhere but is brought to bear at this time.

**Mr Falconer:** I pay tribute to the right hon. Gentleman's many years of work on Syria as the Secretary of State for International Development and in many other capacities.

[*Mr Falconer*]

I confirm that I and we will remain focused on events in Syria, which are of vital importance to the region and to the UK. We will continue to give them the focus that they deserve.

**James Naish** (Rushcliffe) (Lab): I wholeheartedly welcome the UK Government's efforts to support the Syrian people on their country's fragile path to building democracy following the overthrow of the brutal Assad regime. Given the rapidly evolving situation, are the Government considering further boosting their foreign aid support and spend in Syria during this fragile period?

**Mr Falconer:** As I said in the statement, we have provided £62 million since the fall of Assad, and we will keep such questions under review. There is a pledging conference on Monday where we will be talking to our partners; as my hon. Friend knows, not all the aid will come from the UK, so co-ordination with our partners is a vital component. I expect to be able to say more in the coming days.

**Brian Mathew** (Melksham and Devizes) (LD): I have a Syrian family living in my constituency. The wife is from a small village in Tartus and her husband is from Salamiyah, a town in Hama. Both of their families are still there. They are both part of a religious minority, the Ismaili community, and come from a very diverse area that has Alawite, Muslim and Christian villages. The mountainous areas around Tartus are currently being ravaged by extremist Muslim groups, killing whole families. The area near the husband's family is preparing for an imminent attack. My constituents are terrified for the safety of their families. They are pleading for an urgent intervention from the international community to stop the killings and to protect civilians.

**Mr Falconer:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for that moving account. The family in his constituency are representative of Syria, which is a place of many different minorities and communities with a long history of working together. I confirm that I am working with international partners, including the United Nations, to do everything we can to ensure that the violence on the coast stops.

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): The Minister paints an extremely concerning picture of what is happening in Syria. On 9 December, the Government announced a temporary pause in accepting asylum applications from people from Syria, because of our hopes for the country's future. In the light of what he is telling us, what conversations has he had with his colleagues in Government about what should inform that assessment moving forward and what it means for people in our country?

**Mr Falconer:** The events over the weekend are still unfolding. I am not really in a position to provide any further commentary on what they might mean in relation to other parts of Government, but I will return to the House when I am.

**David Mundell** (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): Russia has obviously been significantly involved in Syria previously. As part of the Minister's investigations and getting an overview of what has

happened, will he look specifically at whether Russia played any role in these events, particularly through social media?

**Mr Falconer:** I will.

**Tulip Siddiq** (Hampstead and Highgate) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement and echo his sentiments and worries about the escalating violence in the region. He will be aware of the chronic underfunding of health facilities there, particularly maternity services and newborn care facilities. There are worrying reports of pregnant women losing their lives as they are shuttled between hospitals because of inadequate medical supplies. What conversations is he having with the interim Government about the health provision in the region, particularly women's health provision?

**Mr Falconer:** We have had initial conversations with the interim Administration about some more practical questions around social services. I am happy to write to my hon. Friend with further details.

**Brendan O'Hara** (Argyll, Bute and South Lochaber) (SNP): The Foreign Secretary is on record as saying that an inclusive political process that protects Syria's religious and ethnic minorities was his top priority, but these attacks on civilian and minority groups have never ceased, and they were increasingly frequent before this recent atrocity. How is that strategy of protecting religious and ethnic minorities being implemented on the ground? What protective measures have been put in place in the past three months to defend those minority groups from further violent attacks? How is that being assessed and monitored so that prevention can be put in place before they happen again?

**Mr Falconer:** It is important to highlight that the violence over the weekend is not what we have seen since the fall of Assad. This is a particularly acute spike in violence. The hon. Member is right that we must do everything that we can to prevent the kind of violence that we saw over the weekend, and to understand its causes, the perpetrators and whether it has fully ceased. When I am in a position to make that assessment, I will be happy to return to the House.

**Bambos Charalambous** (Southgate and Wood Green) (Lab): The Minister mentioned the attacks on Alawite and other minority communities, where civilians were attacked, killed and injured. Will he condemn the attacks? What support will he give those minority communities who feel incredibly under threat?

**Mr Falconer:** I condemn the attacks. It will be absolutely disastrous for the future of Syria and its people if sectarian violence spreads among communities in Syria. It is in everyone's interests—Syrian, British and regional—that Syria is stable and a chance to recover after all the years of Assad's oppression. I condemn them both because they are egregious human rights violations and because they threaten the future of Syria.

**Sir Alec Shelbrooke** (Wetherby and Easingwold) (Con): I congratulate the Minister particularly on his last answer. Unfortunately, world events and crises tend not to go consecutively. We have all the issues in Ukraine; I understand that this weekend the Prime Minister once again will meet the coalition of the willing on Ukraine.

Can we ensure that the vacuum in parts of Syria is not filled with third-party actors who do not have our interests or those of Europe at heart? I urge the Minister to speak to his right hon. Friend the Prime Minister about ensuring that we do not allow that to happen, for the security of the continent.

**Mr Falconer:** As has been said, clearly there have been malign third-party actors in Syria for some time. Russia and Iran have played a deeply malign role in Syria in all the years of the Assad regime, and we are glad that their influence is reduced. We will do all that we can to ensure that Syrians can stand on their own two feet without third-party influence, and that there is a stable and inclusive Government to take the next steps for Syria. That is a challenge for all the reasons that we have discussed.

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): Given the horrifying events in Syria over the weekend, does my hon. Friend agree that the time for warm words from the Syrian Government on protecting minorities has passed, and that actions to safeguard religious minorities such as Alawites and Christians are required? If so, what more can the United Kingdom do to prompt those actions?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend is right that actions, not words, must be the yardstick by which we judge the interim authorities, including the interim President. Following the violence, they have made some important commitments about holding the perpetrators to justice, being clear that this is not state-ordered. We need now to see the consequences of those words in those coastal communities in Syria. We will be watching very carefully.

**Richard Foord** (Honiton and Sidmouth) (LD): The Foreign Secretary wrote to the Foreign Affairs Committee last week about the importance of ensuring accountability for crimes committed under the Assad regime. Today's statement in the wake of the violence over the weekend calls on the interim authorities in Syria to set out a path to transitional justice. Has the UK's position on accountability for war crimes under Assad changed in the wake of that sectarian violence?

**Mr Falconer:** No, it has not. We announced a further £240,000 to ensure that vital evidence in relation to the Assad regime can be secured and preserved so that there can be accountability. Our attitude towards the Assad regime has not shifted in the light of the events over the weekend.

**Alex Sobel** (Leeds Central and Headingley) (Lab/Co-op): We are obviously all aghast at the deaths and terrible violence against minority communities in the western coastal region of Syria, but in the past few weeks we have also seen attacks on Tishrin dam and neighbouring areas by Turkish forces, including the bombing of areas where there are civilians. What discussions has the Minister had with our Turkish NATO allies about ceasing the violence in northern Syria, considering in particular that the PKK over the border in Turkey has declared a ceasefire?

**Mr Falconer:** I discussed these issues with my Turkish counterpart in Ankara last week. It is a shared position of the British and Turkish Governments that we want a peaceful resolution to the tensions in northern Syria

leading to an inclusive Government—including all the communities. The developments in Turkey are clearly welcome, including the statement from Mr Öcalan that the PKK will lay down its arms. We do not want to see Turkey threatened by foreign terrorist fighters from anywhere, including Syria, but, as my hon. Friend said, it is also vital that the violence in northern Syria stops.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): The collapse of Assad was always going to be a setback for Russia, but it was also always going to be a boost for the Islamist opposition. Even if there is only a 5% chance of forming an inclusive, democratic, stable Syria, the Government are clearly right to try to promote that, but they should also recognise that the real threats to us are chemical weapons falling into Islamist hands and the Syrian Democratic Forces no longer being able to keep under control those Islamists who are currently confined in camps. What happens when they are released?

**Mr Falconer:** The right hon. Gentleman is right about the vital importance of safely destroying the chemical weapons programme in Syria; I am glad that some progress has been made in that regard. We have increased our funding and co-operation with the OPCW and have been encouraging of those efforts in Syria to start the safe and full destruction of the chemical weapons programme. We remain clear-eyed about the continuing threats from ISIS in north and east Syria and we are conscious of the risk from those camps, as raised by the shadow Foreign Secretary. We remain closely engaged with all our partners on those questions.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his ongoing leadership on this issue. Our hearts go out to the victims of the terrible attacks and their families. Does he agree that when we talk about a pathway to a stable and inclusive Syria, it is important that we and our allies all speak with one voice?

**Mr Falconer:** I do agree. We have engaged closely with our partners and we have travelled extensively to the region. It is vital that the international community, both in the region and beyond, speaks with one voice to give the best possible chance for the inclusive Government that we all want to see in Syria.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): I thank the Minister for his statement and share his deep concern about the violence over the weekend. He mentioned the more than 16 million Syrians in need of humanitarian assistance and the pledging conference next week. Will he explain how the UK can support a safe, secure, sustainable transition in Syria given the recently announced devastating cuts to UK aid? What is his assessment of the security implications of those cuts in Syria and more broadly?

**Mr Falconer:** I do not want to sound unduly cheery given the stage of economic crisis in Syria, but in many respects access to Syria for humanitarian aid has got easier since the fall of Assad, so our aid programmes are able to make a difference. We have £62 million—that is not a small number—making a real difference to saving lives. We will be able to say a little more about how much further we can go on providing aid into the future at the Brussels conference, where it will be really important that we talk with our partners, too.



**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): The transitional Government have obliquely referred to what they call foreign parties in the coastal regions of Syria, but given Iran and Russia's long-standing alliance with Assad and the Alawites, it is not difficult to understand who is being referred to. Given the current uncertainty, will the Government be very circumspect about who they share intelligence, information and data regarding the region with, given where it may well end up?

**Mr Falconer:** I will not comment unduly on intelligence matters in this Chamber but, as I have said, we will look very carefully at the involvement of third parties in Syria in recent days.

**Sir Gavin Williamson** (Stone, Great Wyrley and Penkridge) (Con): Syria has been, and will continue to be, an incubator of terrorist threats, not just to the region but more widely. What work are the Government doing with allies to contain and degrade that threat?

**Mr Falconer:** The terrorist threat that emerges from Syria is very high on the agenda of this Government. We have been talking with our partners in the region, with our American colleagues and with many others about what we can do to ensure that, in this period of transition and uncertainty, ISIS is not able to take advantage.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I thank the Minister for coming to the House and making what is a very important statement today. Is he able to make any comment on the continuing presence of foreign troops in Syria? Russian, Turkish, American and Israeli forces are presently occupying at least the demilitarised zone just beyond the Golan heights. What pressure is being applied for the withdrawal of those forces and the cessation of their military activities within Syria, to give Syria an opportunity to bring this appalling period to a conclusion, hopefully with peace and justice in the future?

**Mr Falconer:** The right hon. Gentleman is knowledgeable on these issues and, as he says, there is a range of different military forces in Syria, under different auspices. When there is a new, full Syrian Government, it will be for them to decide which forces should be in their country. Let me be clear about the British position. We have been of the view for a long time that the Russian and Iranian presence is malign. It will be for the new authorities to work out whether they are prepared to accept a continued Russian presence, given all the damage that that Russian presence has done to the Syrians. In relation to the Israeli presence in the country, to which he alludes, we have had assurances from the Israelis that that presence will be temporary, and we expect them to stick to that.

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): Like the Minister, I was appalled by the events in Syria this weekend. The killings show that the international community needs to be more involved in Syria. Please will the Government consider pushing for a United Nations assistance mission to support a transitional Government, so that all Syrians can be protected?

**Mr Falconer:** I have been in contact with Geir Pedersen, the senior UN envoy in Syria, and there are ongoing discussions about what further support the United Nations might be able to provide to Syria. We will keep the House updated as they develop.

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): On 11 December, the Home Secretary gave a statement to the House on border security and collaboration, following the meeting of the Calais Group just after the collapse of the Assad regime. I made the point during that statement that it was critical that there should be safe routes to asylum for the most vulnerable, and the events of the past few days illustrate exactly why that needs to be the case. Are there safe routes to asylum for people? If there are not, will the Minister undertake to raise this directly with his colleagues in the Home Department?

**Mr Falconer:** As I said in answer to a previous question, we will make a close assessment of the developments in the coastal areas. At the moment the violence appears to be isolated to that area, but we will keep it under close review.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for the statement. As chair of the all-party parliamentary group for international freedom of religion or belief, I express my concern about the slaughter of Christians, Druze and Alawites in Syria. Before the civil war in 2011, Syria was home to approximately 1.5 million Christians. By 2022, tragically, that number had dwindled to around 300,000. Today, there are even fewer under the new regime. Given these horrifying developments, will the Minister review the planned £50 million of aid prepared for Syria in the light of the refusal of the interim Syrian Government to address the ethnic cleansing of Christians? Will the Government ensure that aid is delivered on the ground through reputable charitable groups, rather than those turning a blind eye to Christian persecution?

**Mr Falconer:** As I said before, we condemn any sectarian attacks and any actions to stoke intercommunal tensions within Syria. Syria has long benefited from its many minorities and its great diversity, and that is what we want to see in its future. We have given £62 million since the fall of Assad. We monitor that closely to ensure that it goes, as the hon. Gentleman says, through reliable channels with proper controls to ensure that there is no misuse.

**Shokat Adam** (Leicester South) (Ind): An Arab proverb goes, "Better a hundred days of tyranny than one day of anarchy." We saw the result of that anarchy over the weekend with potentially over 1,500 civilians killed. Would the Government support a well-resourced, integrated United Nations group with a beefed-up mandate, and potentially a new Syrian envoy familiar with the country and who speaks Arabic, to help resolve the issue?

**Mr Falconer:** As I said in response to a previous question, we are in discussions about what a UN role could be in a future Syria. I will not comment too much on what personnel might staff it.

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): Was the delisting of 24 institutions from sanctions on Friday the product of engagement with the interim Government? If so, in the light of the gruesome mass murders of Saturday, was that decision premature?

**Mr Falconer:** It is true that the interim Administration are asking for sanctions relaxation, but I want to draw the House's attention to the economic situation in Syria:



99% of the value of the Syrian pound has disappeared, and 90% of the population live below the poverty line. This is an acute emergency, and we want to see, now Assad is gone, Syria as a stable country that can stand on its own two feet. Those 24 bodies are involved in the basic functioning of Syria's economy. We will keep all our sanctions under review, as Members would expect, and once we have a clearer picture of the events over the weekend, I will return to the House.

## Points of Order

4.22 pm

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. In business questions on Thursday, I spoke about Tom Farr, the former leader of Harlow council, who passed away last week.—[*Official Report*, 6 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 456.] I have subsequently been contacted by a number of Tom's friends and have been asked to correct the record. Tom was not a secondary school teacher, but a social worker who worked with young people with disabilities. I would like to get that on the record.

**Mr Speaker:** That has been corrected well.

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance on how I may get a response to correspondence I have sent to Departments on behalf of my constituents, in particular His Majesty's Treasury. I was going to raise a case that had not been answered since August 2024, but coincidentally I received a response this morning. But I would like to raise a case on behalf of a small business that I wrote to the Treasury about in December. There has been no answer since December. I chased the Department on 12 February and was told that a response would be with me when they could possibly get it to me. I have still not had a response. The issues I have raised with the Treasury are important ones for a small business in my constituency that is being affected by this Government's adverse policies. How do I get an answer for my constituents from the Treasury, and how should I take this forward?

**Mr Speaker:** First, I thank the hon. Member for giving me notice of the point of order. The Chair is not responsible for ministerial correspondence, but the hon. Member has certainly put his comments on the record. I am sure that those on the Treasury Bench will have noted them.

I will be quite honest: as the Speaker of the House, I am very disappointed when Departments do not answer all Members, whichever side of the House they are from. Departments are doing the casework on behalf of Members. The least we can expect is a reply on time. If there is no further action, the hon. Member should come back. I will certainly be speaking with the Leader of the House and the Whips of the party to ensure that those replies come on time. It is totally unacceptable.

## Crime and Policing Bill

### Second Reading

[*Relevant documents: Fourth Report of the Women and Equalities Committee, Tackling non-consensual intimate image abuse, HC 336; correspondence from the Minister of State for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention to the Home Affairs Committee, on the Crime and Policing Bill, reported to the House on 27 February 2025.*]

4.25 pm

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

The Crime and Policing Bill will make our streets safer, put neighbourhood policing back at the heart of communities after years of neglect, give law enforcement the powers it needs to protect the public and tackle the most serious violence, help communities to take back their town centres from thieves and thugs, and support the Government's safer streets mission—a mission for the whole country—to halve knife crime and violence against women and girls in a decade and to rebuild confidence in policing and the criminal justice system by tackling the local crimes that most undermine our communities.

Across our countries, we have strong communities, a British tradition of respect for the rule of law and for each other, and a British policing tradition that goes back to Peel of policing by consent, with the police embedded in communities and residents pulling together to prevent and tackle crime. Yet, in recent years those traditions have become badly frayed. Too many town centres, neighbourhoods and public spaces are plagued by antisocial behaviour, and shoplifting and street theft have soared, while neighbourhood police have been heavily cut back. Too many families are forced to endure the agony of an empty chair at the dinner table night after night, having lost a loved one to knife crime, but it is easier than ever for children to get hold of lethal weapons online. There are barely any penalties for gangs who recruit children into crime—they get away with it.

Too many women and girls still face stalking, spiking, violence and abuse, and feel unsafe on the streets and in their homes, even now, nearly 50 years on from the first Reclaim the Night marches in Leeds. Too many children still experience sexual abuse and exploitation—including by grooming networks on the streets and online—and online abuse is getting worse and worse, yet the child protection reforms that we and others called for 10 years ago are still not in place. Trust in the police is undermined by vetting failures and abuses of power, but the action promised several years ago to raise standards is still not in place.

Across the country, too many of us just hear the same thing: people do not see the police on the streets any more, they worry that respect for law and order has disappeared, and they fear that if something goes wrong, no one will come and nothing will be done. That is why it is time for change and for the measures that we are setting out in the Bill. Safety and security are the bedrock of opportunity and the underpinning of every strong community. The safer streets mission is at the heart of our plan for change, because everyone has the right to live in freedom from fear.

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** The right hon. Lady makes an important point about neighbourhood policing. Does she agree that local police stations should be integral to this plan?

**Yvette Cooper:** Local police stations are a matter for local forces, but they can be a central part of neighbourhood policing, which, sadly, has been heavily cut back in recent years. In fact, in many areas of the country, neighbourhood policing has been cut by a third or nearly half. At the heart of the Government's plan is rebuilding neighbourhood policing.

We plan to put 13,000 more neighbourhood police and police community support officers back on the beat over the course of this Parliament, kick-started with £200 million of funding in the next financial year. We will reverse the damage done by the Conservative Government through years of cuts to community police. There are half as many PCSOs as there were 14 years ago, and many thousands fewer neighbourhood police officers. Some 54% of people say that they never see an officer on the beat—that figure has doubled since 2010, as too many neighbourhood police have just disappeared.

**Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con) rose—**

**Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op) rose—**

**Yvette Cooper:** I will give way first to my hon. Friend and then to the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty).

**Chris Vince:** A report by Harlow council in 2023 stated that fewer than half of residents in Harlow felt safe going outside after dark. Does my right hon. Friend see the neighbourhood policing guarantee as part of the way of solving that problem?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right: neighbourhood policing is crucial, but neighbourhood policing teams have been decimated, and even those that remained were often abstracted or merged with other teams. That has been deeply damaging. It is crucial to get those neighbourhood police back on the streets, back into our town centres, and back into our communities. I give way to the hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty), who I hope will apologise for the scale of cuts that his party's Government brought in.

**Ben Obese-Jecty:** The right hon. Lady mentioned 13,000 neighbourhood police, but 3,000 of those will be new warranted officers; I believe that 3,000 will be operational police officers brought back from other places. When will police forces find out what their share of those police officers will be? How will the 3,000 officers currently in other roles be reassigned, given that operational matters are the responsibility of chief constables, not the Home Secretary?

**Yvette Cooper:** We have started with £200 million of funding for the next financial year to kick-start the drive to put 13,000 more neighbourhood police and police community support officers back on the beat. Already, police forces have been working with the Home Office on plans for recruiting new police officers and new PCSOs, and for redeploying existing police officers and backfilling by recruiting other officers to take their posts. We will set out in due course plans for the next financial year and that £200 million.

The cuts to neighbourhood policing over the past decade were even worse than we had thought. The previous Conservative Government were so indifferent to neighbourhood policing that they did not even keep a proper count of who was doing that work. Too often, they treated neighbourhood police officers just the same as 999 response officers or local detective teams, and Home Office guidance allowed forces to report some of their response officers as neighbourhood police. The last Government did not have proper checks in place, and as a result, hundreds, even thousands, of officers and PCSOs were miscounted. Later this month, the Home Office and the National Police Chiefs' Council will have to publish revised force-by-force figures, so that communities can see properly what is happening in their area. This Government take seriously neighbourhood policing, which must be community-led policing in our towns and on our streets.

**Paul Holmes** (Hamble Valley) (Con): I thank the Home Secretary for giving way; it is courteous of her. On miscounting numbers, can I drill down on the point raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty)? Of the 13,000 new neighbourhood officers that the Home Secretary claims she is recruiting, 3,000 will be diverted from the existing workforce, so they are not new, are they? Will she also confirm that her police funding settlement will lead to 1,873 officers being withdrawn?

**Yvette Cooper:** Sadly, I did not hear an apology for the previous Conservative Government's massive cuts to neighbourhood policing, which meant that many towns and cities right across the country saw neighbourhood police numbers slashed in half. Communities were badly let down. I am sure that the next Conservative Member to intervene will begin their question with a huge apology for the damage that their party and Government did.

**Paul Holmes** *rose*—

**Yvette Cooper:** I am really pleased that the hon. Member is ready to give an apology for the deeply damaging legacy of his party in government.

**Paul Holmes:** I thank the Home Secretary for giving way, but I think she should apologise for not answering the question. There were record levels of policing under the last Government; 20,000 extra police officers were recruited. I ask her again: she said that she is recruiting 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers, but will she confirm that 3,000 of those will be diverted officers? They are not new, are they?

**Yvette Cooper:** Still no apology for the deep damage the Conservatives have done. Let us be clear: they halved the number of PCSOs, and they cut the number of neighbourhood police officers, probably by more than 10,000, but we cannot be precise about that, because their measuring of neighbourhood police officers was so ropey and all over the place that we cannot be certain what the cuts were precisely.

This Government are committed to increasing neighbourhood policing and PCSOs by 13,000. In the first year, the neighbourhood policing increase will be funded by £200 million. That funding is already delivering plans from police forces across the country, which we

will set out in due course, to increase the recruitment of new police officers and PCSOs, and redeploy some police officers, whose posts will then be backfilled through the recruitment of other new police officers and staff—*[Interruption.]* Conservative Members should hugely welcome these measures, because they mean that we will get police back on the streets, and into our communities and neighbourhoods, for the first time in years.

**Anna Dixon** (ShIPLEY) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour is breaking communities in places like Windhill, Baildon, Cottingley and Denholme. It is a direct result of the cuts made to neighbourhood policing by the Conservative party. When I speak to local residents, they express concerns about the misuse of fireworks, drug dealing, fly-tipping and the dangerous use of e-bikes and scooters. Will the Secretary of State reassure me and my residents that as part of the safer streets mission, the new neighbourhood police will tackle antisocial behaviour in communities like mine, as a matter of urgency?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is exactly right that we need the police back on the streets. Let us be honest: everyone can see this in their community. People know. Conservative Members may think that everything was hunky-dory at the end of their 14 years in government, but communities across the country can see the reality. As part of our neighbourhood policing guarantee, we need to get more boots on the beat, and we need more town centre patrols by officers who know the community and are trusted by them to go after local perpetrators and prevent persistent crime. These are not outlandish demands—they are just the basics. We need a return to the Peel principles that lie at the heart of British policing, including the principle that the police are the public and the public are the police. We need trusted officers in the community, working to keep people safe.

The Bill gives neighbourhood police more powers to tackle the local crimes that undermine and damage communities: antisocial behaviour, street theft, shoplifting, harassment in our town centres. In too many areas, those powers were too often weakened. Travelling around the country, I and many others will have heard the same story too many times—shop owners who say that thieves have become increasingly brazen; crime driven by organised gangs; elderly shoppers who say that they do not go into town any more because they do not feel safe; people who have had their phones stolen in the street, with all the details of their life ripped away from them; and residents driven mad by the soaring number of roaring off-road bikes and scooters driven in an antisocial and intimidating way.

In the two years before the election, shop theft went up by more than 60%. Snatch theft, mainly the theft of mobile phones, went up by more than 50% in two years. Thousands of such crimes were reported every single day, yet the police have been left with too few powers to act. Too often, because of changes made by the Conservative Government 10 years ago, they have been left with weakened powers to tackle those antisocial behaviours and crimes.

**Jo White** (Bassetlaw) (Lab): I welcome the introduction of a new offence of assaulting a shop worker. I have been in shops in Worksop where I have seen shop workers who are absolutely fearful of what will happen next,



[Jo White]

and I have seen food stolen before my eyes. Does the Secretary of State agree that local shops must become no-go areas for lawbreakers?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. The Bill introduces stronger action on retail crime. I thank the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers, the Co-op, the British Retail Consortium, the Association of Convenience Stores and more for their determined campaigning over many years to protect shop workers. They are the staff who kept their shops open and kept our local communities going through the pandemic, but in recent years they have had to face a truly disgraceful escalation in threats, abuse and violence. Our party has campaigned on this measure for very many years. Through the Bill, we will introduce a specific offence of assaulting a retail worker, sending the message loud and clear that these disgraceful crimes must not be tolerated, because everyone has a right to feel safe at work.

**Dr Luke Evans (Hinckley and Bosworth) (Con):** The Home Secretary has talked about neighbourhoods and communities, but I have not heard her talk about the rural communities that I represent, and the rural crime force. What will the Bill deliver for them? I am very lucky to be in Leicestershire, where we have a rural crime team, which saw crime drop by 24% in its last report, but machinery being taken has a massive impact. Can she talk me through any measures that are being brought forward that will benefit my community?

**Yvette Cooper:** The hon. Member is exactly right to draw attention to that. Our rural communities see different kinds and patterns of crime, but it is very often driven by organised gangs who think that rural communities will be a soft touch. We have sometimes seen that with GPS machinery for factories; we believe that stronger action is needed there. The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention is working with the National Police Chiefs' Council on a new rural crime strategy. I know that she would be happy to follow up on any specific issues that the hon. Gentleman wants to raise.

Too often, crimes are dismissed as low level, even though they leave residents in a living nightmare and corrode community life, so here are the things that this Labour Government's Crime and Policing Bill will change. We are introducing new respect orders that the police and courts can use to ban repeat offenders from town centres, or to put new requirements on repeat perpetrators in order to prevent them causing havoc in the community—for example, requirements to take up drug or alcohol treatment.

Currently, the police cannot immediately seize bikes or vehicles that are being used in a dangerous, intimidating or antisocial way. They give a warning and have to hope that they catch the same person again, but that means that there can be two, three, four or endless strikes against the person, and the bike will still be on the road. Frankly, one strike should be enough. Under the Bill, if the police find somebody using a bike or a vehicle in a dangerous or antisocial way, they can seize it straightaway and get that dangerous, damaging bike off the road.

We will give the police stronger powers to tackle the rising amount of snatch theft. We will all know constituents, friends or family members who have had their phone

stolen, and who could track it, maybe through Find My iPhone or a similar service, but when they told the police where their phone was, nothing was done. We will give the police new powers, so that where they have electronic evidence from tracking technology on the location of stolen goods, they can enter and search premises without waiting for warrants to be put in place. Ministers are also working with tech companies and the police to pursue stronger action on designing out and disincentivising phone theft, so that we can go after the criminal gangs making people's lives a misery by stealing phones on the street.

We will take stronger action on shoplifting. Some 10 years ago, the Conservative Government introduced a new £200 rule, categorising shop theft below that amount as low value. That sent the signal, which has shaped the police response ever since, that such crime should not be taken seriously. It became a Tory shoplifters' charter—a signal to thieves and gangs across the country that they could operate with impunity, wandering from shop to shop and stealing away because nothing would be done. That kind of crime spreads. It creates a sense of lawlessness, and huge anger and frustration among the law-abiding majority, who see criminals getting away with it and respect for the law hollowed out. This Government will finally end the damaging £200 rule.

**Amanda Martin (Portsmouth North) (Lab):** Does the Secretary of State agree that this is not just about the shoplifting, but about the fear it creates in our communities, including among our shopworkers? Our local corner shops and accessible shops are there for elderly people who cannot always get out to the big supermarkets or other people who have difficulty doing so, and shoplifting has put them in fear as well.

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. This is about the fact of the crime—the disrespect—but also the sense of fear that it can create and the huge frustration among shopworkers about the crimes that they see.

I am glad to see some signs of a change in heart on the Conservative Benches, with Conservative Members recognising how damaging their approach to town centre crime has been. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), has written on Facebook that the police

“must have ZERO TOLERANCE to shoplifting and phone theft in Croydon...otherwise it will escalate. Stealing, even less than £200, is illegal...The police must focus ruthlessly on catching criminals and always pursue every line of inquiry.”

Who would have thought it? If that is what the right hon. Gentleman now believes, why on earth did he not take the opportunity during the two years that he was the policing Minister to scrap the £200 threshold, which sent all the wrong signals to the police?

We do know one part of the shadow Home Secretary's remedy for the disappearance of neighbourhood police and the soaring levels of town centre crime. He has said that

“The wider public do have the power of citizen's arrest and, where it's safe to do so, I would encourage that to be used...including potentially a physical challenge”,

otherwise it “will just escalate.” Putting aside the intriguing suggestion that the shadow Home Secretary wanders around with handcuffs in his pocket, I wonder whether he has misunderstood the Peel principle that the police



are the public and the public are the police. What that principle means is neighbourhood police in the community, not leaving the community to pick up arms because the neighbourhood police have gone. As for Reform Members, it looks as if they are too busy dealing with their own internal antisocial behaviour to even show up. This Government will be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, something that has not happened for far too long.

Alongside the action on community crimes, the Bill introduces much stronger measures on some of the most serious crimes of all, including the knife crime that is destroying young lives—teenagers and young people who do not get to achieve their ambitions or fulfil their dreams, with parents and families left bereft.

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab) *rose*—

**Matt Rodda** (Reading Central) (Lab) *rose*—

**Yvette Cooper:** I will give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Wolverhampton West (Warinder Juss), and then I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central (Matt Rodda).

**Warinder Juss:** Last year, only four in 10 knife possessions resulted in any formal criminal justice outcome. Does the Home Secretary agree that by increasing police powers to seize, retain and destroy knives that may be legally owned but may be used in committing a crime, we will reduce the number of people carrying knives?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend makes a really important point. We need to prevent people—especially young people—getting access to those dangerous weapons in the first place, but also to make sure that there are proper interventions, including referrals to youth offending teams. We must not have a system that simply shrugs its shoulders when young people are caught carrying knives.

Knife-enabled offences recorded by the police rose by 9% in the two years up to last summer. Many people in this House will know the story of Ronan Kanda, who was just 16 when he was stabbed to death with a ninja sword just yards from his home. He was killed by two other teenagers who had bought, not just that sword, but more than 20 other lethal weapons online with no questions asked and no proper checks. It is because of the tireless campaigning of Ronan's mum Pooja that we have already launched plans to ban ninja swords, following this summer's implementation of the zombie knife ban, and commissioned Commander Stephen Clayman to do an end-to-end review of knife sales. That review was published a few weeks ago, and it is driving some of the new measures we are introducing as part of this Bill.

**Matt Rodda** *rose*—

**Ben Obese-Jecty** *rose*—

**Yvette Cooper:** I will give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Reading Central, and then I will give way to the hon. Member for Huntingdon, but let me just make a couple of other points first. The Bill increases the maximum penalties for offences relating to the sale and possession of offensive weapons from six months to two years' imprisonment. Following the Clayman review, we will also bring forward amendments to the Bill in this House to introduce stricter age verification checks,

with a stringent two-step age verification system for online knife sales, so that customers have to submit photo ID at the point of purchase and again on delivery. It will be a legal requirement to hand a package containing a knife to the buyer alone.

**Matt Rodda:** I thank the Home Secretary wholeheartedly for her work on this important matter. In my constituency, 13-year-old Olly Stephens was attacked and brutally murdered by two other boys. They had seen hundreds of images of knives online on 11 different social media platforms. I warmly welcome in particular the consultation that she has announced to look into the potential penalties for tech executives who fail to act responsibly in this important area.

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend raises an important point, and he has raised the terrible case of the killing of Olly Stephens with me before. I know how incredibly devastating that has been for the whole community. He is right that the online system has made it far too easy for young people to get hold of lethal weapons. There is also the content that too many of our young people are seeing online. That is why the measures as part of the Online Safety Act 2023 to strengthen the requirements on tech companies around material visible to children will be important, too. Those are expected in the summer.

My hon. Friend is also right that we will bring forward amendments during the Bill's passage to give effect to our manifesto commitment to introduce personal liability measures for senior managers of online platforms that fail to take action on illegal content concerning knives and offensive weapons. We will introduce a requirement for sellers to notify bulk or suspicious sales of knives to the police. We have seen cases where young people were able effectively to become arms traders, buying huge numbers of illegal weapons that should not have been sold to them and then distributing them in the community.

**Ben Obese-Jecty:** Knife crime is a grave issue, and I welcome any measures that can help to reduce it. I have a debate next Thursday on knife crime, and I hope to see good representation from all parts of the House in debating how we can reduce the number of children and young people involved in knife crime, whether as victim or perpetrator. The question I would like to ask is about knife sales online. Some 52% of fatal stabbings involve a kitchen knife, and only 3.6% involve a zombie knife. I appreciate that measures are in place to reduce the ability of people to obtain kitchen knives online, but everybody has a drawer full of knives at home. How can we take measures to reduce that?

**Yvette Cooper:** The hon. Member makes an important point. We know there is an issue with young people being able to get some of these lethal weapons. It becomes part of what they want to do, and part of the search for status is to carry particular kinds of weapons, but he is right that people can get access to dangerous knives in different ways. We need stronger prevention across the board. That is why the Young Futures programme we are working on is particularly important.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): The Government's commitment to introducing a Young Futures programme to prevent young people from being drawn into crime is welcome, especially as youth services and

[Catherine Atkinson]

hubs were hollowed out under the Conservatives. Does the Home Secretary agree that prevention must be at the centre of the mission to tackle knife crime in our communities and our country?

**Yvette Cooper:** My hon. Friend is right. To tackle this devastating crime, we must address prevention, whether online or in the community, and access to weapons. There is also the response when young people are found carrying knives, and the wider punishment and response as part of the youth justice system. There are the interventions to turn things around, too. We must also tackle the criminal gangs drawing young people into crime and violence in the first place. That includes drawing them into county lines, drug running and the kind of criminal activity that leads to violence, to the carrying of knives and to dangerous crimes at a later stage. For the first time, under the Bill, there will be a specific offence of child criminal exploitation, because gangs should never be able to get away with exploiting young people in that way.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): The hon. Member for Huntingdon (Ben Obese-Jecty) mentioned kitchen knives, which are the main weapons that are used. Will the Home Secretary look into the issue of pointed kitchen knives, which cause so many deaths? Existing knives can be blunted or rounded at the ends if there are incentives for that to be done, and manufacturers can be persuaded to sell knives with rounded ends, as some already do.

**Yvette Cooper:** That is an interesting point. It has been raised with us by the coalition against knife crime that we have formed, bringing together campaigning families and campaigning networks and organisations, and as a result it is being examined further.

A range of measures in the Bill, along with amendments that will be tabled, make up Ronan's law. Pooja, Ronan's mother, has said:

"I wish this was done years ago, and my son would be with me today."

We are taking action in memory of Ronan, but also as a tribute to Pooja and all Ronan's family who have campaigned so hard to keep other children safe.

The Bill also introduces stronger measures to tackle violence against women and girls, and the abuse and exploitation of children. According to the Crime Survey for England and Wales, one in four women have experienced domestic abuse, one in four have suffered sexual assault, and one in five have been stalked. Those are the most traumatic and appalling crimes, and it is high time we treated this as the national emergency that it so clearly is. Decade after decade, we have uttered warm words in the House, but too little has changed. It is imperative that we take action, not just through the Bill but across the board. This is part of our ambition to halve violence against women and girls within a decade, an integral part of the safer streets mission, because no one should live in fear.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): Those of us who represent Northern Ireland constituencies are very pleased to know about the 51 clauses that will affect Northern

Ireland through a legislative consent motion. It is important to recognise the benefits that that will have not just here, but in Northern Ireland. However, there are one or two others that we might like to see in the future. Has the Home Secretary had an opportunity to speak to the policing and justice Minister in Northern Ireland about that?

**Yvette Cooper:** We have had discussions with Northern Ireland Ministers, and I am happy for them to continue.

I am very conscious of the time, and I know that many Members wish to speak, so I want to make some progress now. Through the Bill we will protect people better by making stalking protection orders more widely available and introducing a new criminal offence of administering a harmful substance, for instance by spiking. I know that my hon. Friend the Member for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) has long campaigned for our measures to strengthen the management of offenders in the community and introduce enhanced notification requirements for registered sex offenders, as well as a bar on their changing their names when there is a risk of sexual harm.

We are also taking stronger measures to protect our children, which is one of the most fundamental responsibilities of all. The Bill will create a new duty to report child sexual abuse, backed up by criminal sanctions for those who seek to cover up abuse by preventing or deterring someone from carrying out the duty. That was recommended by the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, and the Prime Minister and I both called for it more than a decade ago. The Bill will make grooming an aggravating factor in the sentencing of child sexual offenders, because these are the most vile and damaging of crimes, and will introduce new criminal offences to combat the use of artificial intelligence technology in the making or sharing of child sexual abuse material, and stronger action against those who organise grooming online, where the scale of abuse and crime is increasing steeply.

**Tessa Munt** (Wells and Mendip Hills) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State greatly for giving way. I recognise what clauses 45 to 54 say about the mandatory duty in England to report child sexual abuse, and I wonder if I might draw her attention to the fact that there are exceptions dating back to 1603, under canon law, for confessions relating to treason. There is also precedent in section 38B of the Terrorism Act 2000, relating to terrorism, which covers faith leaders. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how we might help the various churches, faith leaders and volunteers in England to make sure that they mandatorily report when they come across this stuff in confession?

**Yvette Cooper:** The Policing Minister is happy to meet the hon. Member to discuss the detail. It is imperative that all institutions and organisations across communities take responsibility for tackling these appalling and damaging crimes.

We are also introducing measures around national security, including a new youth diversion order to help manage the increasing number of young people being investigated or arrested for terrorism-related activity. Counter-terror police have said that their case load of young people has trebled in just three years, and more action is needed.

There are further measures, which I am sure we will discuss later in this debate and in Committee, to strengthen standards in policing and ensure that chief officers and local policing boards have the right to appeal the result of misconduct boards to police appeals tribunals, to make sure that those who are not fit to serve can be removed from policing and that the standards of police officers, who do an incredible job across the country, can be maintained.

On accountability, we will bring forward amendments to establish a presumption that firearms officers who are charged with offences relating to, and committed during, their duties will have their anonymity preserved during the court process so that we can maintain their confidence, as well as the confidence of communities, in the work that they do.

Safety from harm is not a privilege; it is a fundamental right that should be afforded to everyone, no matter their circumstances. No one should be left to live in fear because of crime and antisocial behaviour in their community. Under this Government, safer streets is a mission for us all, to draw our communities together. We are putting police back on the beat, introducing respect orders and taking action on off-road bikes, shoplifting, street theft, stalking, spiking, grooming and child abuse, knife sales, terrorism and serious crime. We are taking stronger action against criminals, delivering stronger support for victims, restoring respect for the rule of law and restoring police to our streets. Ultimately, we are building a better, fairer Britain that is founded on safety and security for all. I commend this Bill to the House.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Before I call the shadow Secretary of State, I inform the House that because many people wish to contribute, Back Benchers will have a time limit of five minutes to begin with.

5.3 pm

**Chris Philp (Croydon South) (Con):** Let me start by paying tribute to the brave police officers up and down the country who, on a daily basis, put themselves in the line of danger to protect us and our constituencies. Every morning when an officer puts on their uniform, they do not know what they might encounter during their working day—they do not know whether they might be attacked—yet they take that risk to protect us. I am sure the whole House will want to join me in expressing our thanks and gratitude to those brave men and women for the work that they do on our behalf every single day.

When I was the Policing Minister a year or two ago, I was moved at the national police memorial service—I think it was held in Cardiff that year—marking the memory of the officers who had lost their lives in the line of duty. I remember meeting their families, whose lives had been devastated by losing a wife or husband, son or daughter, father or mother. I am sure that all of us have come across such cases in our constituencies. I am thinking particularly of Sergeant Matt Ratana, who lost his life in the Croydon custody centre a few years ago—I attended his memorial service—and all of us will be thinking of PC Keith Palmer, who lost his life not far from here, protecting us in Parliament. We owe them all a debt of gratitude.

I would like to start by addressing one or two of the broader points the Home Secretary raised in her speech before turning to the substance of the Bill. The first point is about the question of police officer numbers, which she spoke about quite extensively. I noticed that she picked out one particular subset of police officer numbers, and I wondered why she kept doing so. I think I know why: it is because the total of police officers last March—on 31 March—stood at a record ever number. There were 149,679 police officers, which is more than we have ever had at any point in our country's history.

**Navendu Mishra (Stockport) (Lab):** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Jonathan Brash (Hartlepool) (Lab):** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Philp:** What an appealing choice! I give way to the hon. Member for Stockport (Navendu Mishra).

**Navendu Mishra:** The shadow Home Secretary is making an important point, but does he accept that, between 2010 and 2024, the population of the UK increased and so did the complexity of crime? I often meet police officers in my constituency and across Greater Manchester who are stressed out and working very long hours, often covering for other officers. Does he accept that the argument he is making is slightly flawed because the population has increased, the complexity of crime has increased and the amount of time officers spend on tackling crime has changed?

**Chris Philp:** As I said, there was a record ever number of police officers, but if the hon. Gentleman wants to measure police officer numbers against demand, one of the relevant metrics to consider—

**Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab):** Can I have another go?

**Chris Philp:** I am just going to answer the question, if I may.

One of the relevant metrics to consider is the overall volume of crime that the police have to investigate. That might be the number that one looks at in deciding whether police numbers need to go up.

**Mr Brash:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Philp:** I am just going to actually make the point first, if I may.

According to the crime survey for England and Wales, which the Office for National Statistics says is the only statistically meaningful measure of crime, between 2010 and 2024—just to pick a couple of arbitrary dates at random—overall crime fell from 9.5 million to 4.7 million incidents, or a reduction of 51%. So over that period, we saw a 51% reduction in overall crime, but an increase in the number of police officers to that record number. Those are the facts.

**Emily Darlington (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab):** Does the shadow Home Secretary recognise that the number of reported crimes involving sexual violence went up by 300% under his Government? When he talks



[Emily Darlington]

about police numbers, would he also like to mention how many police officers left because of conditions in their police force and because of mental health and physical health issues?

**Chris Philp:** Attrition in the police forces is something we need to take very seriously. I am trying to recall the numbers, but from memory, each year approximately 3% to 4% of police officers leave owing to retirement, and a further approximately 3% to 3.5% leave before their retirement age. A 3% non-retirement rate of leaving is of course much lower than in most professions, but I am sure we would all like it to be lower. The last Government started doing work on mental health support for police officers, which I am sure the current Government will continue.

Let me say a word about the future, because having hit record ever police officer numbers, I am rather anxious to make sure—

**Mr Brash** *rose*—

**Neil Coyle** *rose*—

**Gareth Snell** (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op) *rose*—

**Chris Philp:** I am going to make some progress, but then I will give way.

I am rather anxious to make sure that those record ever numbers are maintained. The funding settlement for the police, announced by the Home Secretary and the Policing Minister a few weeks ago, increased by £1.089 billion, and they made a big play of that figure. However, when we go through the funding pressures that police forces across England and Wales face and add them all up, including the £230 million extra that police forces will have to pay in national insurance, the funding pressures add up not to £1.089 billion, but to £1.205 billion. The funding pressures in the coming financial year, which starts in just a few weeks' time, are about £116 million more than the funding increase. There is a gap, and the consequence is that the 43 police forces across England and Wales may have to cut 1,800 officers to make up that funding shortfall.

**Mr Brash:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Philp:** The hon. Gentleman is showing extreme enthusiasm, which I feel should be rewarded.

**Mr Brash:** I thank the shadow Home Secretary for giving way. He makes play of the numbers from 2010 and 2024. As a former councillor, I can tell him that the ward I represented in 2010 had a full-time police officer and two full-time PCSOs. When his Government left office in June 2024, the ward had one part-time PCSO and was a third larger. Would he care to apologise to the people of Hartlepool for that disgraceful record?

**Chris Philp:** I will not apologise for delivering record police numbers. If the hon. Gentleman's local force is not deploying those officers in the best way, he should take that up with his local police and crime commissioner. In the light of the number of Members who want to speak, I ought to get on to the Bill.

When I first picked up this Bill, I must confess to experiencing a frisson of excitement. The Home Secretary had been in opposition for 14 years—not quite long enough, but still 14 years—and I thought that, during those 14 years, she must have come up with lots of good new ideas. I picked up the Bill, excited to find out what new things it might contain. But as I turned the pages to scrutinise its contents, a strange feeling of familiarity came over me—almost a sense of déjà vu. I had seen quite a few of its measures somewhere before, mostly in the last Government's Criminal Justice Bill.

The Government's press release, which they modestly issued on First Reading a couple of weeks ago, highlighted 35 headline measures. I checked to see how many had been copied and pasted from the previous Government, and the answer was about 23 of them. Two thirds of this Bill has apparently been copied and pasted from the previous Government. Now, I know the Home Secretary works closely with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and views her as something of a role model, but emulating her copy-and-pasting is probably not the best thing to do.

These new measures—the spiking offence, the intimate image offence, the duty to report, the new criminal offence of possessing a bladed article with intent, and the new maximum penalty for selling dangerous weapons to under-18s—are all good measures introduced by the last Government. Of course, they would have been legislated for by now if not for the unfortunate early general election—[*Interruption.*] Yes, it was unfortunate. I congratulate the Home Secretary on using the ctrl-C and ctrl-V functions on her Home Office computer to emulate so many of the previous Bill's measures.

**Neil Coyle:** Is the right hon. Gentleman aware that it increasingly sounds like he is saying that—on police powers, on the measures in this Bill, on police officer numbers and on resources—the voters got it wrong? That sounds incredibly insulting to the public. Frankly, an apology would be better. Is he aware that, in Southwark, we had fewer officers at the time of the last election, which he says came too soon? It did not come soon enough for my electors, who still have fewer police officers in 2025 than they had in 2010.

**Chris Philp:** The Metropolitan police, as a whole, does in fact have record officer numbers, but it could have had about an extra 1,500 officers had its police and crime commissioner, Sadiq Khan, bothered to recruit them. In fact, Sadiq Khan was the only police and crime commissioner in the country to miss his recruitment target.

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that the record of Conservative police and crime commissioners is unlike that of some police and crime commissioners representing other parties in this House? In Devon and Cornwall, Alison Hernandez has overseen the reopening of 14 police front desks. Perhaps police and crime commissioners representing other parties might like to take lessons from that.

**Chris Philp:** My hon. Friend is quite right. Conservative police and crime commissioners do tend to have much better track records on keeping police stations open and delivering lower crime figures.

I want to ask the Home Secretary some questions, and maybe the Policing Minister will respond to them at the end of the debate. Some measures that were in the previous Government's Criminal Justice Bill have disappeared from this Government's Bill, and I would be genuinely interested to hear the Government's thinking on them.

One area that is conspicuously missing from this Bill is the measures on nuisance begging. The previous Government intended to repeal the Vagrancy Act 1824 using a statutory instrument once new replacement measures—contained in the old Bill—were on the statute books. I see that the new Bill, tabled by this Government, does not contain those nuisance begging measures.

Could the Policing Minister, either by intervening now, or in her winding-up speech, tell the House what the Government's plans are around repealing the 1824 Act—or not—and around nuisance begging? Of course, were they to repeal that Act using a statutory instrument without introducing any new measures, there would be a lacuna in the criminal law. I am sure the whole House would appreciate an update.

Secondly, the previous Government's Criminal Justice Bill contained a measure to compel perpetrators who had just been convicted of a criminal offence to appear in the dock for sentencing, with a power to use reasonable force to do so. There had been some distressing cases in which someone who had been convicted then refused to appear in the dock to face justice. That measure, as far as I can see, is not in the new Bill, and I would appreciate knowing the Government's thinking on that.

The third omission I have noticed so far relates to the new offence of assaulting an emergency worker—also announced by the previous Government, I might add. The criminal behaviour order for people who assault a shop worker is welcome, but the previous Bill, as announced, contained a measure that said if someone repeatedly assaulted a retail worker—I think it was three times or more—they would be subject to electronic monitoring: a tag. I do not see that particular provision in this Bill. Again, I would be interested in the Policing Minister's views on that.

I turn now to a matter that the Home Secretary made a great deal of in her speech, which is the change made in 2014 around shop theft involving goods worth £200 or less. Listening to the Home Secretary and Government communications around this matter, one might think it had ceased to be a criminal offence in 2014. That is, of course, not the case. Shoplifting goods of any value, including under £200, was and always has been a criminal offence, subject to section 1 of the Theft Act 1968.

**Dan Aldridge** (Weston-super-Mare) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Chris Philp:** I am just going to develop a point, and then I will be happy to take interventions—particularly from the Home Secretary.

In 2014, it was changed from being an either-way offence to a summary-only offence. Either-way means the offence can be tried in the magistrates court or the Crown court; summary-only means magistrates court only. It was still a criminal offence, and people could still be convicted and sentenced to up to a year in prison for committing it—it certainly was not decriminalised.

In fact, the Government's own impact assessment says that about 90% of the charges for shoplifting involved goods under £200 and were tried in a magistrates court. If it was ineffective, why did 90% of charges relate to goods under £200?

The Home Secretary claims that this alteration will herald some sort of extraordinary change in the way shoplifting is treated, but I would respectfully refer her to page 28 of her economic note 1007, which I am sure Members present have all read—silence. Paragraph 144 says that the central scenario in the Government's impact assessment assumes that the number of charges, with this change, will remain constant. According to the Government's own impact assessment, there will be no change in the number of charges as a result of this alteration. The Home Secretary points to this matter as some kind of silver bullet, but I am afraid to say that her own impact assessment says something very different indeed.

The measure has potentially adverse consequences too. This is a serious point, and I genuinely ask the Home Secretary to think about it carefully. When the offence is made either-way, rather than summary only, lots of people who are charged will elect to have a Crown court jury trial instead of a magistrates court trial. A magistrates court trial, for a not guilty plea, is generally heard in six to eight weeks—it is relatively quick—but a Crown court jury trial could take a year and a half to be heard.

The first adverse consequence that I would caution about is that, instead—[*Interruption.*] I am making a serious point, so it would be good for hon. Members to think about it. Instead of those cases being heard in the magistrates court in six to eight weeks, there could be a delay of one and a half years. I am sure that that is not the Government's intention, but that is what could happen if the change is made.

The second adverse consequence is that if lots of shoplifting cases that are currently heard in the magistrates court end up in the Crown court before a jury, valuable and scarce Crown court jury trial time that should be used for serious cases such as rape, murder and grievous bodily harm will be taken up with shoplifting. I understand that the Home Secretary wants to send a signal—I really do—but I ask the Government to reflect carefully on the potential unintended consequences. That is a serious point, and I ask the Government to consider it. The change may end up having the opposite effect from what they intend.

The Home Secretary raised one or two other things that I would like to talk about, the first of which is knife crime. There are some measures in the Bill that are designed to address knife crime. We will support those measures; I am sure that all hon. Members want to fight the scourge of knife crime, which is responsible for about a third of all homicides. Almost all hon. Members will have encountered a constituency case; I will never forget attending the funeral of 15-year-old Elianne Andam in Croydon. She was murdered at 8.30 am on the morning of 27 September 2023 on Wellesley Road in central Croydon by a 17-year-old perpetrator with a knife. I will never forget seeing the grief that her parents and her little brother Kobi suffered. I am sure that we would all want to fight knife crime for that reason.

In addition to the measures in the Bill, which we will support, I would be grateful if the Policing Minister could confirm that the patrolling of hotspots, started

[Chris Philp]

under the last Government, will continue in areas where knife crime is a problem, and that the funding will continue. That could make an important difference.

It is also important that stop-and-search powers are used. In my view, taking knives off the street is the most important thing. In London, in the past, stop and search took about 400 knives a month off the streets—knives that could have been used to kill someone like Elianne. I am concerned that stop-and-search numbers are down due to misplaced concerns about community tension. I encourage the Government to get police forces to use stop and search more, and to amend legislation, including PACE—the Police and Criminal Evidence Act 1984—code A, to make the use of stop and search easier.

I spoke to a police officer in Croydon last Sunday, and he said that he felt that the police were worried about misconduct proceedings if they used the power of stop and search. I would like to make it easier for police officers to use those powers to protect the public. I would like to hear the Government's views on that, but we are minded to table amendments in this area to give the police more confidence to use stop-and-search powers to save the lives of people like Elianne.

When I was Policing Minister about a year ago, I provided some funding to invest in exploring new technology to scan for knives at a distance of perhaps 10 metres—not very far. That would mean that people walking down the street in areas where knife crime is a problem could be scanned and, if they had a knife concealed on their person, it would be identified. About a year ago, that technology was emerging and I put the money behind it to develop it to the point where it could be deployed. I was told by the company doing that, and by Home Office officials, that by about spring 2025, a version of that technology would be available that could be used experimentally on the street.

I would be grateful to know, perhaps in an intervention from the Policing Minister now, whether that work has been carried forward and whether that scanning technology is ready to deploy. It could, I think, help to take knives off our streets and save lives. I would be happy to take an intervention now.

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson)** *indicated dissent.*

**Chris Philp:** The Minister will come back to it later.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): It seems to me that the Government's good work in this Bill in criminalising the possession of knives with intent will be undermined if the police have to wait for someone to take out the knife and commit an attack before they can discover whether they have a knife. Surely, if there is a separate offence arising from mere possession, as my right hon. Friend says, it is particularly important to enable the police to discover that someone possesses that knife before they have had a chance to do harm with it.

**Chris Philp:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. If we are to prosecute these offences, put more potential perpetrators in prison and, critically, protect the public,

we need to detect more of the knives that are routinely carried on our cities' streets. That means more stop and search and the use of knife-scanning technology of the kind I just described to identify those knives before they are used. My right hon. Friend put it very powerfully.

The Opposition may also be minded to table amendments on the setting up of a statutory national inquiry into rape gangs. For some reason the Government have only set up local inquiries in five areas. Some local authorities are refusing to hold inquiries, which is scandalous. About 50 towns are affected, so inquiries into just five of them is not good enough. Moreover, those local inquiries do not have the statutory powers under the Inquiries Act 2005 to compel witnesses to give evidence. The chairs of the Manchester local inquiry resigned last year because, even then, public authorities were covering this up. We need a national statutory inquiry, and we intend to amend the Bill to achieve that if the Government will not agree to one. Local councils and councillors, the police and the Crown Prosecution Service were all involved to a greater or lesser extent in ignoring or even covering up these terrible offences. We need to get to the truth.

**Amanda Martin:** Thank you for giving way. We as a Government are taking very seriously the culture of child grooming and gangs. In your previous role as Minister for crime and policing—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. You said “your”—I was not the Minister. A short and sharp intervention, please.

**Amanda Martin:** In the right hon. Member's previous role he attended 352 meetings. Could he please explain why not one of those was on child grooming?

**Chris Philp:** The hon. Lady will know that child grooming falls under the portfolio of the Safeguarding Minister who, during the Conservatives' time in office, had dozens of meetings on that topic. I had multiple meetings on Operation Soteria, which is designed to combat rape and serious sexual assault.

I think that you, Madam Deputy Speaker, are keen to move on to Back-Bench speeches, since there is so much interest in this Bill.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): There are a lot of really good things in this Bill that my right hon. Friend has not mentioned, particularly around tackling violence against women and girls, with the legislation on stalking. Some of that work was carried out cross-party over the past few years, such as on increasing the age of consent for marriage from 16 to 18, and tackling forced marriage issues, hymenoplasty and virginity testing, which I helped put through in the last Parliament. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we should try to convince the Government to introduce legislation around first cousin marriage—a very serious issue—and include in this legislation some of the sexual offences that relate to that?

**Chris Philp:** I support my hon. Friend's proposals around first cousin marriage. The health implications are deeply alarming. We could take that forward in the Bill and put it to a vote of the House.



Lastly, will the Policing Minister provide an update on the use of technology to combat crime, particularly the use of retrospective and live facial recognition, which enables the police to catch criminals who would otherwise not be caught? She knows that I support that strongly, and I would gladly support her if she wants to continue that work.

**Neil Coyle:** Will the right hon. Member give way?

**Chris Philp:** I have to finish now.

I am glad to see so many familiar clauses in the Bill. The Opposition broadly support the intent of the Bill, but what really matters is delivery—making sure that those record police numbers mean that we catch criminals and increase the conviction rate. Those police numbers and the results that they deliver are the yardstick by which the Government will be measured. I look forward to scrutinising the Bill as it passes through the House, and to tabling constructive amendments during its various stages.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** There is a five-minute time limit. I call the Chair of the Justice Committee.

5.30 pm

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I cannot possibly do justice to the Bill's many needed and well-crafted measures in the few minutes I have, so I will just talk about its effect on the justice system and raise a couple of specific concerns.

The Bill introduces a number of new criminal offences—I have counted 27—and makes changes to existing offences. The Bill is being considered at a time when there is significant uncertainty about how the criminal justice system will operate in the future. There are two reasons for that. First, the criminal justice system is in a bad way. Last summer, prisons reached bursting point, and emergency measures were needed to ensure that convicted offenders could be sent to prison, rather than released. Secondly, in December, it was announced that the Crown court backlog had reached a record level of 73,105 cases, despite the previous Government setting a target of reducing it to 53,000 cases by now.

In response to both those crises, the Government have commissioned wide-ranging reviews: one on the criminal courts, chaired by Sir Brian Leveson, and one on sentencing, chaired by David Gauke. Both reviews are likely to have a significant effect on the justice measures in the Bill. The new criminal offences in the Bill will come into effect at a time when the criminal justice system is in flux. Parliament will be asked to consider whatever proposals the Government decide to take forward from the reviews. We are legislating to create a number of new offences, but it is difficult for anyone to know what their effect will be. Those are both problems left for the Government by the previous Government, but those difficult matters need to be addressed, as both issues are going on at the same time.

I turn briefly to knife crime, which I mentioned in my intervention. Between April 2023 and March 2024, 262 people were killed by sharp instruments. Home Office statistics can identify the type of sharp instrument in 169 of those cases; in 165 of them, it was a knife.

Where the type of knife was identified, 109 were kitchen knives. In other words, two thirds of the identified knives used to kill people in that year were kitchen knives. There is a growing campaign to phase out kitchen knives with pointed tips as an everyday household item, and to introduce kitchen knives with rounded tips. Pointed knives are much more likely to pierce vital organs and sever arteries, and those injuries are far more likely to be fatal. Of course, there are millions of pointed knives in drawers all over the country.

The safer knives group, of which I am a member, supports a pilot scheme in which pointed kitchen knives would be converted into safer, rounded-tip knives. The Government could encourage manufacturers to replace pointed knives with rounded knives and discourage the sale of pointed knives by creating a price differential. They could also support the launch of a knife modification scheme to change pointed knives to rounded knives and collect more data on the types of knives used in any knife-related crime. That is now happening for homicides, but we ought to extend it. I am pleased to say that not all of that requires legislation—we do not need to add to the weight of the Bill—but those are all matters that need consideration. I am grateful for the indication that the Home Secretary gave earlier.

Finally, I will speak about something that should be in the Bill but is not: the law as it applies to Gypsy and Traveller communities, who face many inequalities and prejudice. They were seemingly sanctioned by the previous Government by the inclusion of part 4 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, which gave the police extra powers to ban Gypsies and Travellers from an area for 12 months, along with powers to arrest and fine them, and even seize their homes. A High Court ruling in 2024 determined that those powers were incompatible with the European convention on human rights. The Bill is the first vehicle that could rectify that injustice. Will the Minister, in winding up, indicate whether the Government will attend to that? They clearly have to, because of the determination of the High Court, so the sooner that is done, the better. The future of a very vulnerable community that is very much discriminated against depends on this. I hope the Government will, as they are doing in so many other ways, correct the faults of their predecessor.

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

5.34 pm

**Lisa Smart** (Hazel Grove) (LD): There are elements of this Bill that we Liberal Democrats welcome; there are also some that we would not spend this much parliamentary time on, and some that we raise a weary Liberal eyebrow at, while we dust off the well-worn reasons why civil liberties really do matter to all of us. The biggest disappointment for us is the missed opportunities—the topics not covered and the chances not taken. We welcome the opportunity to scrutinise the Bill as it works its way through Committee and beyond. We will push the Government to go further in some areas; in others, we will suggest that they take themselves off for a little lie down in a quiet room, as they seem to have got themselves a little overwrought.

The key thing that Lib Dems will be pushing for is a serious commitment to restoring proper community policing, because without that, we simply will not deliver

[*Lisa Smart*]

the frontline policing that my constituency and communities across the country need and deserve. We all agree that everyone should feel safe in their own home and their neighbourhood, but after years of Conservative mismanagement, that is not the reality in too many of our communities. The previous Government gutted neighbourhood policing by slashing over 4,500 police community support officers since 2015. It should come as no surprise that 6,000 cases are closed every day without a suspect even being identified, or that just 6% of reported crimes result in a charge.

**Dan Aldridge:** It is really important that we reflect on the impact of that under-investment in neighbourhood policing, and specifically on the cultural feeling of insecurity, and people's feeling that crime will not be responded to. That has pervaded every society. I hear that on the doorsteps every time I go out. It will take a long time for us to get back from that.

**Lisa Smart:** I completely agree with the hon. Member that while crime stats are important, the way people feel about crime also is hugely important for all our communities. The issues are felt acutely in constituencies like mine. In Hazel Grove, in towns and villages such as Marple and Romiley, shop workers report that they face a real surge in shop theft. Many tell me that they have no expectation that the police will respond. Even charity shops have been burgled. These organisations just cannot afford to absorb the losses.

Another persistent concern raised by my constituents is the blight of illegal off-road bikes. I know that problem is felt in all our constituencies. From Offerton to High Lane, residents feel intimidated by this antisocial and often dangerous behaviour. Local officers tell me that although they do not lack the power to act, they lack the tools, resources and capacity to enforce existing laws, so we will scrutinise the Government's proposals on this, especially as they relate to under-18s. The new Government must return to the neighbourhood policing model, with bobbies on the beat who are visible, trusted and properly resourced. Any element of the Bill that does that will receive Lib Dem support.

What else do we support in this Bill? Part 4 deals with the criminal exploitation of children and others, and it is welcome. Part 5 seeks to update the law on sexual offences. These parts will of course need close scrutiny to make them as effective as they can be, but they have Lib Dem support.

If this were a Lib Dem Bill, we would not be talking quite as much about criminalising those who climb on specific war memorials, and we would protect the important right to protest, rather than making it harder for this right to be exercised. We are surprised and more than a little bit disappointed that there is no mention in the Bill of bringing in domestic abuse aggravated offences. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde) for the work he has done in this area. We all agree that domestic abuse devastates lives, and that the criminal justice system must properly recognise its severity. Too many abusers escape appropriate justice because domestic abuse is prosecuted under general offences such as common assault or grievous bodily harm, which fails to capture the full nature of the crime.

We urge the Government to back this change and ensure that victims and survivors receive the protections that they need and deserve. I am sure that my hon. Friend will have more to say on the matter in due course.

**Gregory Stafford** (Farnham and Bordon) (Con): I want to be clear about what the hon. Member said a moment ago. Is she saying that climbing on and desecrating our war memorials is acceptable behaviour, and that she would be happy for that to carry on? That seems to be what she is saying. I am sure that is not the case, but I would love to hear her clarification.

**Lisa Smart:** It is always a genuine pleasure to be intervened on by the hon. Gentleman, and I am grateful to him for rising to his feet. What I said was that if this was a Lib Dem Bill—I look forward to one coming forward in the fullness of time—we would not spend as much time talking about this as a criminal act. There are many priorities for the Government, and I will talk about a number of measures that we were disappointed not to see included in this 340-page Bill, at the expense of the issue he raises.

For example, we have waited with bated breath for the new Government to crack down on water companies that pollute our rivers with impunity. Nowhere is that issue clearer than in my community; sewage has been dumped in our rivers, and part of the Chadkirk country estate, a beloved green space in my constituency, was turned into a sewage swamp after heavy rainfall in the new year. The field beside Otterspool Road, which the council planned to transform into a well-kept community meadow, was flooded with raw sewage. Current laws allow the water companies to get away with that. Liberal Democrats will continue to push to make sewage dumping a specific criminal offence, so that water company executives can be held accountable for the damage they do to our communities.

The Government's failure to reference rural crime even once in the Bill is unacceptable. I heard the Home Secretary's response to the intervention by the hon. Member for Hinckley and Bosworth (Dr Evans), who is no longer in his place, and it is indeed welcome that a rural crime strategy is on the way, but we Lib Dems will push for a commitment to this issue in the Bill. Rural crime is not an inconvenience; it is a growing crisis. The National Farmers Union reported that the cost of rural crime soared to over £52 million in 2023, with organised gangs targeting farm machinery, vehicles and GPS equipment, yet fewer than 1% of police officers are in dedicated rural crime teams. I heard that for myself when I met a dozen local farmers at Far Benfield farm in Cowlshaw Brow last week. I clearly heard about the impact that organised fly-tipping and organised equipment theft has on farming families.

Finally, there is a gap in the Bill where a discussion of regulating or legislating for live facial recognition should be. The Liberal Democrats have been clear that the technology is a threat to privacy, is discriminatory and does not make our streets safer. The previous Government pushed ahead with its use, despite serious concerns from human rights organisations, legal experts and even their own independent biometrics commissioner. The police should focus on evidence-based crime prevention, not rolling out flawed and biased surveillance technology. Any use of it by the police must be transparent, unbiased

and regulated. We can see police forces coming up with their own rules within which to operate. It is long past time for the Government to set the framework.

**Chris Philp:** The system being used is not biased. It has been tested by the National Physical Laboratory, and the bias problems that existed seven or eight years ago have been resolved. The hon. Lady says that the technology is unregulated; it is not. A Supreme Court case set out the parameters, and they are now enshrined in authorised professional practice, which is national College of Policing guidance.

**Lisa Smart:** I do not recall hearing a question from the shadow Home Secretary, but I am sure that he would welcome the matter being further clarified in the legislation. He said at the Dispatch Box that live facial recognition is not mentioned in the Bill. I agree. I am sure that we would both welcome scrutinising it, perhaps from different starting points, but ending up with a situation in which our police forces were confident that they knew exactly what the rules were, and exactly how to make best use of any new technology coming through.

The Government and this Bill have the potential to deliver real change, but only if the Government listen. That means a return to proper neighbourhood policing, to giving rural police the resources that they desperately need, and to protecting civil liberties. It is time for the Government to show that they are serious about preventing crime and enabling our police to act when crime has been committed. All our communities across the whole country deserve nothing less.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** The time limit on speeches is five minutes.

5.44 pm

**Shaun Davies (Telford) (Lab):** There are many areas in which the British people have had to put up with decline and decay over the past 14 years, but the breakdown of law and order might be the most profound. Victims have felt unprotected, criminals have gone unpunished and crimes have simply gone unchecked. Meanwhile, the law-abiding majority has looked on in horror and police officers have felt frustrated without the tools to act. I am delighted to support the Bill, which will start to turn the tide on 14 years of neglect.

I welcome the Government's plans to introduce 13,000 extra neighbourhood police officers and put a named officer in every community; to introduce respect orders and real punishments for the so-called low-level crime, such as antisocial behaviour and off-road bike crime, that has plagued our communities because of the Tory amnesty; and to protect retail workers, including by scrapping the Tory shoplifter's charter, which decriminalised theft below £200. I remember speaking to shop workers in my constituency during the general election campaign. They talked about yobs walking into shops, nicking items off the shelves and walking straight out, because they knew that the police would take no action.

I welcome the Government's plans to create a new duty to report child sexual abuse, and increase sentencing for the monsters who organise child grooming; to crack down on knife crime and the sale of weapons to under-18s;

to give police the power to seize and destroy bladed articles; and so much more—all within months of the Home Secretary taking office.

I urge the Government to go further, however, by strengthening neighbourhood policing, which is at the heart of their mission to take back our streets. The increased powers for police officers to tackle antisocial behaviour are among the most important measures in the Bill, but we must not stop there. PCSOs and local authority enforcement officers do vital work to support the police and be friendly faces in our communities. They, too, should be given powers to deal with low-level antisocial behaviour and the yobs on our streets.

We can also make our streets safer by introducing stand-alone deportation orders for foreign national offenders who endanger public safety. The Government have deported more than 3,000 criminals since taking office, but often after several thousands of pounds have been spent in the criminal justice system.

I also welcome clause 105, which requires registered sex offenders to notify the authorities if they change their name. That is, again, about helping the public to feel safe and secure, as they will know that someone convicted of sex offences is not hiding among them, and victims will know that perpetrators are not repeating their crimes somewhere and going undetected because of that ridiculous legal loophole.

When we were elected, we promised our constituents that we would help them to take back control of their streets. The first priority of any Government is to keep their citizens safe—at home, at the border and around the world—and it has been a source of national shame that we have not done that for the past 14 years. There is a lot of work to do to restore public trust, but through the Bill we will make vital first steps towards protecting victims, punishing criminals and preventing crime.

Let me finish on this note. The shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), said that the general election was unnecessary or regrettable, but my Telford constituents voted for change, and I urge the Government to get on with it.

5.48 pm

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con):** I will be as brief as possible because I know that others want to get in.

Let me start with a general point. I have sat here long enough—not today, of course, but over the years—to know that every Government come in with a criminal justice Bill, then another a year later, and then another, before the next Government come in and start with a criminal justice Bill. I will not get into a political knockabout on that, but, as Members who have been here long enough will know, the reality is that there is always a reason why we need another criminal justice Bill, and so it goes on. To be a little more rational about it, if passing laws did the job of ending crime, we would have managed it long ago. This is about how we deal with the things that get behind the crime.

The Centre for Social Justice recently published a good report called the “Lost Boys”. It is about the generation, particularly post-covid, of young boys who have become dysfunctional with serious mental health problems, and who often end up on the street being sucked into gangs. The attitude and behaviour of those



[*Sir Iain Duncan Smith*]

boys gives rise to the violence and subsequent murders that take place on the street. Putting a knife into someone's hand does not make them a murderer; putting a knife into the hands of someone who has already been broken in the wrong attitude—that is where murder and violence come from. I recommend that Ministers read that report, because it makes staggering reading for us all.

Those young boys are becoming men. They will live in and out of prisons, and violence, drug taking and drug abuse will be a part of their lives, as will abuse towards women. It is boys and men who are responsible for the crime. Young women and girls are a tiny proportion of the criminals—the problem lies with men and boys. That is critical. If we want to get ahead of this problem and solve knife crime, we must understand that crime is committed in the heads and brains of those young boys, who are subsequently men, and the knife is only the final act. I say to those who recommend the rounding of blades, well perhaps, but a young guy will just go and grind that rounded blade into a sharp point and get on with it if that is what they want to do. Nothing will get in the way of that. I simply make that observation.

It is right that the Government are tackling assault on retail workers. I have struggled endlessly to get the police on to the streets and to arrest people who are shoplifting. People are not shoplifting for a sandwich; they are stripping stores of thousands of pounds' worth of goods. It is a serious offence of antisocial behaviour, and anything more that the police can do to crack down on that is important, because it is the first crime that most of our constituents notice, and indeed fear. Shoplifters threaten people in the shops and those serving them, and it is important that we get on top of the issue.

I tabled an amendment to the previous criminal justice Bill on cycling and dangerous cycling. Has that gone? I have also spoken to the Department for Transport, and we need to sort out e-bikes and those dangerous fast bikes and cyclists on the road who commit offences.

**Sir Julian Lewis:** It would also help if it were made mandatory for all cyclists to have a bell, so that they could at least warn pedestrians of their approach.

**Sir Iain Duncan Smith:** I take my right hon. Friend's point into consideration. The point I was making is that we have had deaths on the street yet cyclists could not be prosecuted for having killed someone, because we are still using a piece of legislation from the mid-19th century to address offensive and wild carriage driving. That is not acceptable and it hardly ever convicts anybody, so I encourage the Government to look again at dangerous cycling, because people genuinely abuse the Road Traffic Act 1988 and nothing ever seems to be done to them. That is particularly true for e-bikes, which are very dangerous when used on pathways. Even if people are not committing a criminal offence, they are causing major danger. Antisocial behaviour is a big thing which our constituents notice; they feel threatened by people who ride those bikes on the pavements. It may seem a small thing, but it is not.

I will end by congratulating the Government on introducing the offence of cuckooing. The Home Secretary will know that I tabled an amendment to the previous criminal justice Bill, and I am pleased that the Government

have picked that up and put it into this Bill. There are big issues regarding people who feel threatened by brutal individuals who take over their houses and commit criminal offences from there. In the end, some of those threatened people get arrested themselves, having had no control over that house. Many of them have mental health problems; many are stuck in backrooms and abuse themselves. Having such an offence allows the police—I have said this all along—to move into the house if they have a suspicion that such things are taking place and deal with the issue straightaway. I congratulate the Government on that. The previous Government accepted my amendment. Hopefully, we can all join forces.

I have one question for the Minister responding to the debate. Offenders often use coercion, grooming and manipulation. The Bill refers to an absence of consent. Does she think that an absence of consent alone will be good enough to convict people who have carried out coercion, grooming and manipulation? That is the point I am slightly concerned about. I raise it with the Minister and I hope she can respond at the end of the debate. At the end of it all, a criminal justice Bill is a good thing.

5.54 pm

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): This is a huge Bill with more than 300 pages of measures, but I wish to focus on the extra powers it contains to police protests, and particularly clauses 86 and 95, about which civil liberties organisations such as Liberty, Amnesty International and Big Brother Watch, as well as trade unions, have raised loud alarm bells. I also wish to take the opportunity to recognise more broadly the dangerous direction of travel of the increasing criminalisation of legitimate and peaceful protest in this country which, as many will recognise, is being mirrored around the world.

In recent years we have seen the introduction of a vast swathe of anti-protest measures, including new police powers that have been used increasingly to clamp down on freedom of assembly and expression. Those powers are being extended yet again in the Bill. The Tories' controversial Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022, the Public Order Act 2023 and the "serious disruption" regulations all brought in wide-ranging new powers. Those include allowing the police to impose "conditions" on any protest that is deemed to be disruptive or to cause "serious annoyance" to the local community, and sentences of up to 10 years in prison for damaging memorials such as statues. Those of us who fought those measures tooth and nail have now seen our fears realised, with clampdowns on the right to protest peacefully.

Last month the aggressive policing of the national Palestine protest led to the arrest of an estimated 77 protesters. Even Members of this House were called in for police questioning, as was an 87-year-old Holocaust survivor who was carrying flowers to lay for the dead children of Gaza. We cannot underestimate the chilling impact that that heavy-handed policing of peaceful protests will have on our basic rights and freedoms. From striking workers to the national Palestine demos and farmers' protests, huge demonstrations and protests are becoming more commonplace across the political spectrum, as people across the country and beyond feel that they are losing their voices in their workplaces and the political sphere. Instead of continuing down that dangerous road, we should be taking the opportunity

that the Bill presents to roll back some of those powers, defend our civil liberties, and restore our proud traditions of freedom of speech, expression, and assembly.

**Luke Taylor** (Sutton and Cheam) (LD): Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Kim Johnson:** No, I am not taking interventions—sorry.

In this country we have a proud tradition of standing up for what we believe in, but that has increasingly come under threat, and measures in the Bill continue on that trajectory. I hope that the Minister and Government will take those points on board and consider amendments in Committee to roll back some of the draconian anti-protest legislation and restore our civil liberties—moves on which I am sure we can find common ground across the House.

Lastly, I want to turn to the provisions in the Bill that will further criminalise Roma and Traveller communities, and the impact that certain clauses will have on Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities such as those living on the Tara Park site in my Liverpool Riverside constituency. In particular, I want to raise concerns around clause 3 in part 1 of the Bill, which extends police dispersal powers and, as the Traveller movement has stated, risks leading to even more heavy-handed policing of Gypsy, Roma and Traveller communities. As with the anti-protest provisions in the Bill, we must see such measures in the broader context of the increasing criminalisation of already marginalised communities. As such, I hope the Government will go back to the drawing board and consider using the Bill to repeal section 60C to 60E of the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994. This Bill is the first under Labour of its kind for a generation. Let us use it as an opportunity to protect our most marginalised communities and defend civil liberties.

5.59 pm

**Rebecca Paul** (Reigate) (Con): Thank you for giving me the opportunity to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. I want to thank Surrey police for all they do to keep us safe in Reigate and Banstead. I welcome much of what is in the Bill and I will not repeat what has already been said. Instead, I will focus my remarks on what I believe is required to tackle the scourge of commercial sexual exploitation in this country.

It is easy for people to think that sexual exploitation does not affect them and that it does not happen in their neighbourhood, but it is more common than many realise. It is happening behind closed doors on very normal, everyday streets. Sexual exploitation, often of young women, is an awful crime that destroys lives before they have barely had a chance to begin. Exploited repeatedly, day in, day out, those young people are treated as merchandise, with the sole purpose of turning a profit for pimps and traffickers. It is incumbent upon us to break the business model, starting by outlawing the advertising of individuals for prostitution. Classified ad sites, like Vivastreet, are rife with it. They are the Etsy of sexual exploitation, fuelling sex trafficking by providing a convenient centralised platform for sex buyers to access what they want in their local area. Buying sexual services can be as easy as ordering a pizza.

Although prostitution is legal, pimping, which is the provision of a prostitute to perform a sex act with a customer for gain, is not. There are often tell-tale signs on the adverts, like the same phone number being used for multiple ads, that the women are not acting freely and willingly, and that they are under the control of a pimp, who is profiting from their exploitation. Such sites have had years to get to grips with it, but still not enough is being done to weed out those adverts.

However, we must take some responsibility too. Hon. Members will no doubt be staggered to hear that such advertising of prostitution is entirely legal, because legislation has not kept pace with technology. Advertising prostitution in a phone box is illegal under section 46 of the Criminal Justice and Police Act 2001, yet when the same advert is online, it is not illegal. That is utterly absurd. In 2023, the Home Affairs Committee cited evidence in its report on human trafficking that 75% of victims of trafficking for sexual exploitation are advertised online. The cross-party group concluded:

“Websites advertising prostitution significantly facilitate trafficking for sexual exploitation.”

I strongly urge Ministers to take this opportunity to close that loophole.

There is a similar issue with the regulation of online pornography compared with offline pornography. Our current laws have not been updated quickly enough to recognise the huge shift online and the need to apply the same standards across the board. A survey by the Children’s Commissioner in November 2022 found that one in 10 children had seen pornography by the age of nine, with half having seen it before they turned 13. The impact of that travesty can be clearly seen, with 47% of young people between the ages of 16 and 21 stating that girls “expect” sex to involve aggression.

Huge damage is being done to young women and men by this damaging content, which normalises and sexualises the choking and strangling of women during sex—illegal in offline pornography but not online pornography. Although not illegal per se, degrading acts, like spitting on women, are commonplace in online porn, so is it any wonder that we are seeing such disdain for and poor treatment of girls in our society? If we are serious about tackling the issue and halving violence against women and girls, we must crack down on online porn and ensure it is regulated to the same standards as that which is offline.

The independent pornography review, led by Baroness Bertin, recommended that there be parity of regulation between online and offline pornography, which I very much welcome. The main statutory regulator of offline pornography is the British Board of Film Classification. It is responsible for classifying pornographic content before it can be published and ensuring it does not contain illegal content. Any such offline illegal content cannot be sold or supplied in the UK, and the same rule should apply online. That simple change could be transformational if effectively executed and properly enforced, although I recognise the technical and practical challenge of trying to regulate the worldwide web.

I thank the Secretary of State for listening to my two asks. I look forward to hearing from her whether she is receptive to accepting amendments to ban online prostitution adverts, and to bringing the regulation of online pornography in line with that for offline pornography.

6.4 pm

**Jonathan Hinder** (Pendle and Clitheroe) (Lab): When I was serving as a police officer, the demands on policing were changing rapidly, and they continue to do so. During my time in the police service, we saw big increases in the reporting of domestic violence and sexual offences. Neighbourhood policing was decimated as the police scrambled to keep up with the huge increase in the reporting of these high-harm, previously hidden offences that are now, thankfully, no longer tolerated in our society.

However, at just that time, the Conservatives were busy slashing police budgets. The policing workforce shrank by 20,000 officers across the country, a statistic that hon. Members will be very familiar with. Less talked about, but just as important, was the fact that our already ancient technology systems fell further behind the criminals we seek to catch. The police national computer, the database that holds arrest and conviction data for offenders across this country, celebrated its 50th birthday last year. The call handling system used by my old force, the country's biggest, was 40 years old last year. I welcome this Government's focus on policing, which is vital in creating a fairer country where everyone feels safe and secure in their local community. The Bill signals our commitment to rebuild neighbourhood policing, and to modernise our police service in order to provide the tools required to keep up with changing crime patterns.

I welcome the modernisation of our criminal law in the Bill. The legislation finally takes stalking seriously, makes it easier to tackle spiking and provides common sense powers to go after the thieves using tracking data. I also welcome the focus on shoplifting and antisocial behaviour in our town centres, with the introduction of new respect orders for persistent offenders, as promised in our election manifesto. Every frontline police officer knows that a huge proportion of crime is committed by a tiny proportion of the population. Through a relentless focus on those individuals, we can make small towns, like those I represent in Nelson, Colne, Clitheroe and Barnoldswick, safe and welcoming for the law-abiding public once again.

I hope the Bill is the start of a debate about what we want our police to do and where our services are best placed to act. We need our officers to have the backing of this place to tackle both the high-harm offences, such as serious violence, domestic violence and sexual offences, but also the common, lower level crimes that blight our communities. If everything is a priority, then nothing is; if we can be clear-eyed about where the police should focus their time and efforts, then we can set them up to succeed and we can rebuild the public's confidence that the police can keep them safe.

6.7 pm

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): I will use my time to talk about domestic abuse. My mum and I know all too well what domestic abuse looks like, but I am sorry to say that the law does not go far enough to recognise that crime. Currently, there is no specific offence of domestic abuse in the law, which leaves many survivors without the respect and protection that they deserve. Instead, many domestic abusers are convicted of offences such as actual bodily harm, grievous bodily harm, assault or battery that do not reflect the full gravity of the crime. Someone could be convicted of ABH for

domestic abuse, but they could also be convicted of ABH for a brawl in a pub with a stranger they had not met before.

The Domestic Abuse Act 2021 went some way towards recognising domestic abuse in the law. It defined it formally and created a number of offences, such as coercive and controlling behaviour, but it did not provide a specific offence of domestic abuse, leading to all sorts of problems. For example, the Government's early release scheme, which they had to implement in light of the state that the last Government left our prisons in, let out as many as 3,000 people early. The Government made a commitment to try to exclude domestic abusers from being released early, but it was not possible to comprehensively do that, in the words of the Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice, the right hon. Member for Birmingham Ladywood (Shabana Mahmood), because people can be excluded from early release only on the basis of the offence that they committed and nothing else. Well, there is no offence of domestic abuse in the law, so many domestic abusers—people who were convicted of ABH, say—were released early.

One survivor affected by that situation is Elizabeth Hudson. Her abuser, her ex-husband, held a knife to her throat, among many other terrible incidents at home. He was convicted of actual bodily harm, and he qualified for early release under the standard determinate sentences 40% scheme. Were we to create a specific offence of domestic abuse, we could exclude those people from such a scheme. Specifically, if we created an offence of domestic abuse-aggravated GBH, ABH, assault, battery, criminal damage or whatever it may be, in exactly the same way that we have racially and religiously aggravated hate crimes, we would be able to protect survivors.

Another advantage of being able to recognise domestic abuse in that way—which this legislation, in all its 106,220 words, does not yet do—is that we could properly cohort those individuals. I asked the Ministry of Justice how many domestic abusers are in prison at the moment and what their reoffending rate is. That is very simple and basic. The response was:

“It is not possible to robustly calculate the number of domestic abusers in prison or their reoffending rate. This is because these crimes are recorded under the specific offences for which they are prosecuted”—

that is, there is no specific offence of domestic abuse to convict those people of. In the light of those challenges, the likes of Refuge, ManKind, Women's Aid and many more organisations—whether it is lawyers, academics or survivors themselves—are backing my proposals to create a set of domestic abuse-aggravated offences in the law.

I also extend my thanks to those Members on the Government Benches who have privately written to me to express their support for the proposals that I am championing and for proposals that I hope the Government will accept in their Crime and Policing Bill throughout its passage. We need to ensure that we properly respect and protect survivors in Eastbourne and beyond, and I hope that Members across this House will work with me to help to make that a reality—my door is always open.

6.12 pm

**Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): Our communities deserve to feel safe on our streets, in our homes and in our shops. While I am referring to



shops, it is only right to place on record the tireless campaigning that USDAW has done to get a specific offence for an assault on shop workers. That just shows the best of our movement.

The profile, perception and presence of the police need to be restored. We need police on our streets; they need to have the powers to do their jobs, and people need to feel safe again. Our police station in Corby was closed down in 2017. The perception was that the police were gone and that their presence was disappearing, because all people did was drive through what used to be their police station and the profile that went with that. Where something was formally opened, all of a sudden it was shut. Our dedicated response unit was moved out at the same time, and all we had left was a police hub on the upper floor of a public building that was sometimes open only two days a week. We had people on bail being told to take selfies and send them to a number to demonstrate and prove they met the conditions of their bail. That is not good enough for the people of Corby and East Northants.

Many people have lost faith. Why? Because for more than a decade, they have been let down. They call 999 and no one shows up. They report a crime and nothing happens. They see criminals getting away with it again and again. Here is the truth: when policing is cut, crime goes up, and everybody pays the price. Thousands of officers were ripped off our streets, police stations were closed down, PCSOs were cut and entire towns were left without proper policing. That is not good enough for the people of Corby and East Northants. People feel like the system has given up and do not feel safe in their communities.

The Bill toughens up policing so that crime has real consequences again. It gives the police stronger powers to tackle antisocial behaviour by introducing respect orders and strengthening existing powers, as well as removing the need for the police to issue a warning before seizing vehicles being used antisocially. The Bill is a key part of delivering the Government's safer streets mission. Alongside it, the Government will recruit 13,000 extra neighbourhood police officers, ensuring that every community has one. The 2025-26 final police funding settlement also provides up to £19.6 billion for policing in England and Wales, including £193 million for Northamptonshire forces—an increase of more than £11 million.

As I said, this is about profile, perception and presence. That is why I am not only urging Members to back the Bill, but leading the campaign to bring a police station and dedicated response unit back to Corby. The Government have ensured that the money is there to use, and there is consensus in the constituency on the need. We have businesses lined up to support us and massive support from people in the constituency, who have signed a petition for the return of their dedicated response unit and police station. With this Government and this Bill, and the funding that they have provided, now is the time for us to deliver.

6.15 pm

**Jim Allister** (North Antrim) (TUV): There is much that is good and necessary in the Bill, and I welcome the fact that 51 of its 137 clauses will apply to Northern Ireland. I have some disappointment about some of the

clauses from which Northern Ireland is excluded—in particular clause 90, which relates to the desecration of war memorials. We have had a spate of such incidents in Northern Ireland; therefore, I am disappointed that that clause does not apply to it.

In relation to the all-important matter of child sexual abuse, part 5 of the Bill applies to Northern Ireland, with the exception of clause 36. I ask the Minister to look at why that is, because to apply the rest without clause 36 is quite incongruous. In clause 37 and so on, we will rightly make it illegal to have a paedophile manual to describe how to make child sexual abuse images, yet clause 36, which makes it an offence to possess a child sexual abuse image generator, does not apply to Northern Ireland. How can that be right? There is a logic that is absent there: clause 36 must apply if the rest of the part is to apply. I trust that that is an oversight that will be rectified.

In clause 123, we have hidden away something of particular interest to many in Northern Ireland: for the first time, it will be an offence to put something on a lamp post or to have a banner that glorifies a proscribed organisation. That is a good and necessary thing. I welcome the fact that that is the intent. The explanatory notes tell us that that is exactly the purpose of the clause: it would, for example,

“enable the seizure of a flag or poster which arouses reasonable suspicion the individual who displayed it was a member or supporter of a proscribed organisation”.

That is good, but it focuses attention on the failure of the Bill to deal with the inadequacy of the offence of glorification of terrorism, which is too limp and largely unused.

We will arrive at a situation in which somebody cannot legally put something on a lamp post or put up a banner that says, to use the republican mantra, “Up the Ra”, which means, “Up the IRA”—that organisation that murdered thousands of our citizens—and that is good, but under the glorification of terrorism legislation, they can say it.

That hideous, horrible republican mantra, “Up the Ra”, which is a chorus from a republican song that glorifies terrorism with lyrics like, “The Brits will never leave until they're blown away. Ooh ah up the Ra! SAM missiles in the sky,” is glorification of terrorism—of course it is. Yet under our legislation, it is not defined as glorification of terrorism, because a person has to be advocating that which they would emulate and encouraging others to engage in terrorism. Some might think that is the case. If we took the offence described in clause 123 and made it apply to “that which promotes the interests of a proscribed organisation”, we would have done the right thing, but that language needs to be transferred across to the glorification of terrorism legislation. Why should it be right for it to be illegal to have a banner that says “Up the Ra” but legal to address thousands of kids and sing “Up the Ra”, as happens every August in Northern Ireland? That disparity needs to be reconciled and dealt with.

6.20 pm

**Dr Lauren Sullivan** (Gravesham) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to speak in today's debate on this incredibly important Bill. Like many of my constituents, I welcome the measures the Government are taking to tackle serious crime and antisocial behaviour in order

[Dr Lauren Sullivan]

to make our streets safer. I pay tribute to the police—another public service that has been undervalued and underfunded for well over a decade. They put their lives on the line to keep us safe and uphold the law. Many measures in the Bill will directly impact them and my constituents, many of whom have become known to me through casework.

When I have knocked on doors in my constituency, residents have told me about the nuisance of off-road bikes that have blighted our streets and, often, our green public spaces—our parks—and intimidated the public. Often, those bikes and their owners were known to the police, but they lacked the powers to do anything other than give the owners a simple warning. I am pleased that the Bill would enable the seizure of vehicles that are being used antisocially.

The other issue that I heard about most often on the doorstep was fly-tipping—the disrespectful fly-tipping that is engaged in by so many organised criminals. A few years ago, Gravesham borough council started a fly-tipping enforcement team. It investigated many people and took many to court. Three years on, 386 community protection warnings have been issued, we have put people in prison, and 50 fly-tipping fines have been issued. That is incredible; it is what should be happening across the country, and I am grateful that the Bill looks to strengthen antisocial behaviour powers to deal with fly-tipping. That is incredibly welcome.

As a new MP, I hold many surgeries—as do many Members present—and I have been shocked by the terrible experiences that some of my constituents have had to face. I pay tribute to them for having the courage to come forward and tell their stories. I have heard from women dealing with stalking by an ex-partner who have changed their life routine for fear of attack and, as such, I welcome the Bill's strengthening of stalking protection orders. I have heard from a retired paramedic, Peter Sheehan, who was violently assaulted after simply asking people in his woodland to stop their dogs tearing up the forest floor—it was a simple ask. After three years of legal issues, the man who seriously assaulted Peter was given a two-year suspended sentence and fined £750. The impact on Peter, who already suffers post-traumatic stress disorder from his work as a paramedic, was significant, and that money still has not been received.

We must let people who have experienced crime see the justice they deserve. Their trust in the criminal justice system must be restored, and they must know that if they call the police, they will come. There are consequences for crime, and this Bill is the first step towards backing people, not criminals.

6.24 pm

**Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): There is much in this Bill that I welcome, because of course it was announced by the last Government. However, this Government need to go further, and we will push them to do so.

A major part of the Bill is its increased focus on neighbourhood policing, which is commendable. I have always advocated in this Chamber for greater levels of neighbourhood policing on our streets and more visible policing in our communities. I pay tribute to my own neighbourhood policing team in Aldridge-Brownhills, who serve my local community day in, day out. They

are truly locally based officers who care about our local community, and I thank them for all they do on our behalf.

Sadly, my neighbourhood policing team will soon find itself without a permanent, dedicated home, because the Labour police and crime commissioner has decided to sell off the family silver right across the west midlands. As well as selling off the police station in Aldridge in my patch, he is selling our next nearest police station in Sutton Coldfield. He has already sacrificed the next nearest one in Kingstanding—that building is going to become a Domino's Pizza takeaway. The Government want more police officers. That is great, but in the west midlands, their own police and crime commissioner does not want to house them. It is unacceptable that police stations across the west midlands are slowly being phased out, diminishing the role of neighbourhood policing, all at a time when more power is being sucked towards central Birmingham and the PCC headquarters at Lloyd House.

**Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): Will the right hon. Lady give way?

**Wendy Morton**: I will not, because of time.

That headquarters has benefited from a staggering £33 million-worth of upgraded decoration as a result of local communities losing their local police stations—including the former Brownhills police station—in phase 1 of the closure programme. Surely, that is not right.

I draw the Minister's attention to several written parliamentary questions to which I do not believe I have received a full answer—in particular, my question concerning the funding of the proposed 13,000 new neighbourhood police officers. While those new officers are welcome, as I have stated, the Government have not yet fully said how they will be funded after the first year, so I would be grateful for clarity on that. It is imperative that there is certainty that those are fully funded new officers who will be added to base budgets for future years, not a one-off Government expenditure, after which the local taxpayer will pick up the tab through an increase in the precept.

The Government face similar questions regarding their decision to fund national insurance increases. Once again, they have been circumspect in their responses to my questions in Westminster Hall and to written parliamentary questions. It is very important that the Minister comes clean today and clarifies that the grant given to police authorities to cover the Chancellor's job tax is not just a one-off, but will be added to those authorities' base budgets. As the Minister is very aware, if that is not the case, this will be yet another stealth tax by the back door by this Government, punishing our constituents.

There is so much in the Bill that I would like to talk about, but before I conclude I will touch briefly on knife crime. I welcome the Government's commitment to halving knife crime, which comes on the back of a series of measures passed by the last Conservative Government. Sadly, in 2017, my constituent James Brindley lost his life to knife crime in Aldridge. Since then, his parents have dedicated their lives to helping eradicate the scourge of knife crime. They have established the James Brindley Foundation to help educate young people across the borough of Walsall to turn their backs on carrying

a knife. Back in August 2022, I was really proud to be present at the unveiling of one of a number of knife bins across the borough, funded through that foundation with help from local businesses and sponsors. James's parents have a simple ask, and I will be a bit cheeky and press the Minister on it today: will she work with her colleagues in the Department for Education to see whether knife crime prevention could be considered for inclusion in the national curriculum?

My constituents demand safety, which is why the last Conservative Government fully funded 20,000 new police officers. We welcome the 13,000 new police officers, but my constituents want them to be fully funded and housed in the neighbourhood. The Bill fails to give all the guarantees that I am looking for. On that basis, I hope the Minister can provide me with some clarity when she sums up the debate.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Order. We have a very oversubscribed debate, so it is unlikely that everybody will get to speak. I am bringing in a four-minute time limit with immediate effect, just to try to get more people in.

6.29 pm

**David Taylor** (Hemel Hempstead) (Lab): Much within the Bill will bring significant positive changes to communities like mine in Hemel Hempstead, where crime and, in particular, antisocial behaviour continue to be a major issue. Under consecutive Conservative Governments, criminals got an easy ride. The Conservatives left a great mess, and this Bill helps to fix that.

I could speak at great length on many parts of the Bill, but I will focus on two that are almost always at the top of my postbag in Hemel Hempstead: antisocial behaviour and the current epidemic of shoplifting. I recently met a couple called Gary and Margaret—not their real names—whose case shocked me. For two years, Gary and Margaret have been harassed, including verbal abuse, trespassing and the damaging of their property, by an offender who lives on their street. The family feel unsafe and isolated, with the harassment worsening the mental health of their eight-year-old son, who suffers from severe anxiety and is too scared to play outside. They inform me that they have been in constant communication with the council and the police, but have faced rejection from the local council's antisocial behaviour department, which stated that they would not intervene due to the low-level nature of the antisocial behaviour.

It is not just antisocial behaviour affecting people in Hemel Hempstead; we also face an epidemic of violence against retail staff, as other Members have mentioned. I met employees from the Co-op in Queens Square in Adeyfield, and I have also met people from the post office in the same square. I was grateful to those from the Co-op for the time they took to show me their store, including their CCTV room, but I was shocked by what I saw there: an entire table of CD after CD, each containing evidence of shoplifting in the store, with many people brazenly walking out of the shop, not even attempting to conceal their theft. What is more disturbing is what one of the store employees told me. A shoplifter had been caught, and the store had managed to get the police and the criminal justice system to take the case to court. That brave employee had been to court to

testify against the shoplifter. Unfortunately, the case was thrown out and the perpetrator let off and able to walk free. Even more shockingly, the employee had to sit on the same bus home as the person she had just given evidence against.

Thankfully, provisions in the Bill will make a difference for that employee, for Gary and for others who have been the victims of crime and antisocial behaviour. First, clause 1 and respect orders will give the police and local authorities what they need. I have in the past asked for Hemel Hempstead to be considered for a respect order pilot, and I hope the Minister will forgive me for making another pitch for that today.

It disgusts me that hard-working people in Hemel Hempstead pay for their shopping while others can simply storm out without paying. It disgusts me that people in my constituency have to put up with antisocial behaviour on an almost daily basis, while the perpetrators walk away with impunity. I have been out with the police for ride-alongs, the purpose of which is to see at first hand the challenges that the police are facing. I have had meetings with Police Federation reps, so I am well aware of the extra equipment and support that they need. I will continue to do everything I can to support those brave police officers facing antisocial behaviour, and I am strongly in favour of this Bill, which I believe will give the police extra powers to do more to crack down on these yobs.

There is much more I would like to say, but much like our police force under George Osborne and Theresa May, I have had to subject my speech to brutal cuts, so I will finish there.

6.33 pm

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): There is much in the Bill with which my party agrees. In fact, many of its provisions were written by my party in government, so it was strange to hear the more partisan remarks from the Home Secretary earlier in the debate. After decades in which crime was falling, that happy trend has sadly begun to reverse. The Home Secretary noted that overall crime increased by 12% in the last year, but she did not admit that it is still far lower than when Labour was last in office. However, there is obviously much to be done.

The sentencing guidelines published last week explicitly instruct judges that a pre-sentence report will normally be considered necessary if the perpetrator of a crime is from an ethnic minority, cultural minority, faith minority community or is female, transgender, a drug addict or a victim of modern slavery, trafficking, or exploitation. The guidelines are clear that minorities should receive lesser punishments than white people, especially white men. The provisions about slavery, trafficking and exploitation are an invitation for lawyers to help illegal immigrants to escape the reach of the law.

That is not the first official direction to tell judges to put identity politics before the once sacred principle of equality before the law. Last July, the Judicial College's "Equal Treatment Bench Book" said that

"in order to treat some persons equally, we must treat them differently."

Putting that principle into practice, the bench book warns, for example, that the

"family impact of custodial sentences was particularly acute for black mothers, as far more black...families...are headed by a lone parent".



[Nick Timothy]

Similar attitudes exist in policing. The “Police Race Action Plan”, published by the College of Policing, promised to stop the over-policing of black communities and complained that such communities are over-policed, but under-protected. The action plan noted that black people are more likely than white people to be murdered and to be victims of knife crime, but it failed to add that black people are more likely to commit these crimes, too.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman that we are talking about the Second Reading of the Crime and Policing Bill and its contents.

**Nick Timothy:** Indeed. I find it baffling that we are debating the future of the criminal justice system and not talking about the erosion of the principle of equality before the law. Disparities in policing and criminal justice do exist—

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. I remind the hon. Gentleman again that, in order to speak in this debate, he needs to stay in scope of the content of the Bill in front of us.

**Nick Timothy:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was going to turn to some specific measures in relation to police reform and the Bill. According to the Government’s impact assessment, the Bill will “provide an additional 13 to 55 prison places”, yet the Government expect to see 5,000 additional crimes recorded by the police annually, resulting in 400 prosecutions and 300 convictions per year. Those numbers do not add up, unless the Government intend to continue their policy of releasing prisoners early.

Passing legislation is not a substitute for genuine and sophisticated police and criminal justice reform, and I will make some suggestions to the Government. First, we should abolish the National Police Chiefs’ Council, which represents centralised unaccountable power, and transfer its functions to more accountable entities. The College of Policing should be directed by the Home Secretary to ensure that forces focus more clearly on crime fighting. We need to reduce the size of the Met in London, with its national responsibilities transferred to the National Crime Agency. The Government need to give police chiefs the ability to clear out failing officers and recruit talent from all walks of life.

In the Met, there should be fewer deputy assistant commissioners and fewer commanders. Training needs to be professionalised and better recorded, and workforce planning needs to be improved. There should be better use of productivity-improving technology and streamlined processes from arrest to prosecution. We need to reform the police grant to make sure that forces focus on strategic threats. New technologies mean that fraud, identity theft and cyber-crimes will present a huge challenge. We can no longer expect police forces to recruit generalist officers, hoping that they can all offer the perfect blend of leadership, empathy, strength and investigatory skill. Instead, we need greater specialisation.

As I said, it seems crazy that we are debating this Bill without debating whether we remain equal before the law. There is much to be welcomed in the Bill, but I hope we will see far greater energy in the undeniably tough job of police reform.

6.38 pm

**Sarah Smith (Hyndburn) (Lab):** Crime in Hyndburn and Haslingden is currently out of control. Robbery has skyrocketed in my constituency by 75% in the past year, which is far worse than the already shocking 17% increase that we have seen across Lancashire. Shoplifting has soared by 70%, which, again, is significantly worse than the 23% rise across the county. Those numbers are not just statistics; they represent victims—business owners whose livelihoods are threatened, families who feel unsafe and communities torn apart by lawlessness. Indeed, just last week local businesses in Accrington saw around 10 break-ins. Almost half of my constituents—44%—will experience violent crime.<sup>1</sup> That is unacceptable, and I am speaking here today because I refuse to accept it any longer. Just over the weekend, an awful video has sadly been circulating on social media of yet another terrible incident of violent crime in Hyndburn.

This Government’s Crime and Policing Bill is the biggest crackdown on crime in decades. We are taking back our town centres from thugs and thieves and restoring respect for law and order, giving our communities and police the tools they need to fight back. For too long the crimes that have made Accrington’s town centre almost lawless, the so-called low-level offences, have been ignored. When shoplifting, antisocial behaviour and street crime go unpunished, our high streets suffer, our economy declines, and our community starts to lose hope. Accrington was once a thriving hub. It has been neglected for too long, but these new powers for the police are key to turning that around.

The Bill delivers real action. The police will no longer need a warrant to search premises when stolen goods are tracked electronically, and there will be no more safe havens for criminals. Respect orders will clamp down on public drinking and drug taking, ensuring that our streets are no longer places of disorder. Officers will have the power to seize nuisance vehicles—such as the off-road bikes I saw on Friday tearing up our parks in Rishton—on the spot. Crucially, the days of treating thefts under £200 with effective immunity are over. Stealing is stealing, and criminals will be held to account. It is also welcome that the Government listened to the campaign organised by the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers and other shop workers for the introduction of a new offence of assaulting a shop worker in this vital Bill.

The Labour Government are not just tough on crime; they are investing in solutions. I welcome the provision of 13,000 new police officers to ensure that every community has its named police officer. This is part of the Government’s £200 million investment, which will deliver a 6.6% funding uplift in Lancashire. Enough is enough: the people of Hyndburn and Haslingden deserve safe streets, a thriving town centre, and the right to live without fear. The Bill delivers that, and I am proud to support it.

6.41 pm

**Luke Taylor (Sutton and Cheam) (LD):** Crime and policing in London is at a crisis point. Figures show that Government funding for the Metropolitan police has fallen by more than £1 billion in real terms since 2010, and those cuts mean that we do not just need more bobbies back; we need more beats. Park police no longer patrol, and now we see the prospect of safer

1. [Official Report, 25 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 4WC.] (Correction)

schools officers across London being moved out of schools, where they would be working with young people at risk of gangs or county lines, to back-fill neighbourhood policing teams. Community policing is in tatters, officer numbers are insufficient, and PCSO numbers in London have fallen by more than 3,000 in the last 15 years, from 4,247 in 2008 to just 1,215 in 2023, which means that almost three out of every four officers have been lost in that time.

While we Liberal Democrats broadly welcome many aspects of the Bill, we are fundamentally concerned about the likelihood that without enough officers on the ground, community policing will continue to suffer. Over the years, successive Labour and Conservative Governments have introduced their own versions of a crime and policing Bill, but London nevertheless recorded more than 15,000 knife crime incidents, nearly half a million thefts and more than 24,000 cases of sexual violence last year. It is simply common sense that if we want to get a grip on these awful incidents, which undermine the very fabric of a trusting society, we must restore community policing.

For Londoners, that means sorting out recruitment in the Met across the whole of London. It means ending the practice of abstracting police officers from outer boroughs to assist inner ones, and instead focusing on recruiting more officers to be visible, engaged, and dedicated to protecting the communities that they serve. I cannot see the many welcome parts of this Bill being implemented effectively in my constituency and across London if that is not the case. The Bill, in its current form, should go further and faster in restoring proper community policing, reforming stalking laws to support victims, and implementing a meaningful public health approach to knife crime. I have spoken about both those issues a number of times in the House, and have received very positive responses from the Minister.

I am encouraged to see that assaults against retail workers are to be treated as the grave crimes that they are, but these provisions should go further to protect tradespeople from harm wherever they work. Tool theft is a devastating crime that cost tradespeople millions last year. Research from NFU Mutual shows that one in three tradespeople now live in constant fear of violent thieves. Some have been brutally attacked with crowbars and other weapons, just for trying to protect their tools from being ripped out of their vans. At a “Stop Tool Theft” rally in Parliament Square last month, organised by Trades United, I spoke to many tradespeople who had suffered thefts and attacks, and heard that they would not now let their vehicles out of their sight for fear of becoming victims. There have been discussions of better measures on the part of vehicle manufacturers to reduce the number of thefts, such as better locks and keyless systems security, but the descriptions of people literally cutting off the tops of vans to steal the tools inside demonstrate that such measures can only go so far to stop the thefts.

However, these attacks on tradespeople are more than just theft; they are an assault on their hard work and hard-earned livelihoods. It is time to acknowledge the escalating danger that they face and provide stronger legal safeguards to protect their livelihoods and wellbeing, and I hope the Government will take note of that in Committee.

6.45 pm

**Tonia Antoniazzi** (Gower) (Lab): This Labour Government have made the unprecedented commitment to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. I know that my colleagues on the Front Bench take it extremely seriously, and I agree with them that it will require a transformative approach. I welcome the measures in the Bill to tackle intimate image abuse, stalking, spiking and the sexual exploitation of children, which mark the beginning of the Government’s work to make good their ambition by giving victims the protections that they deserve and need.

In that spirit, I believe that the Bill presents an opportunity for the House to tackle commercial sexual exploitation—a key form and engine of violence against women and girls—in giving victims of the sex trade the measures and protections that they need, and I intend to table the appropriate amendments to reflect that. The majority of people exploited through the sex trade are women and girls, while the overwhelming majority of people who pay to exploit them sexually are men. Extensive evidence shows that most women exploited through this insidious trade were highly vulnerable before their involvement and suffer acute harms as a result, including a disproportionate risk of violence. I know that my right hon. Friend the Policing Minister, who chaired the Home Affairs Committee in the last Parliament, has done some excellent work in this area.

Sadly, the demand for sexual exploitation is not being deterred, and victims themselves face the threat of criminal sanctions. The Bill gives us an opportunity to change that: to end impunity for punters who pay to abuse women, to take concrete action against pimping websites, and to remove the threat of criminal sanctions from victims to offer those vulnerable women the support that they need. The Bill does much for victims of crime and abuse, and it is evidence of the Government treating violence against women and girls as the emergency that it is. I believe that by strengthening the response to commercial sexual exploitation we can make significant headway in halving that violence.

Speaking of highly vulnerable women—whose plight drives much of the work that I do—I want to say something about abortion. The law underpinning abortion dates back to 1861, before women even had the right to vote. Under that cruel and outdated law, about 100 women have been investigated by the police in the past five years alone, and another woman is set to go on trial in April. The women caught up in this law are very vulnerable and often desperate, but they are subject to the same laws that apply to violent partners who use physical abuse, coercion or poisoning to end a pregnancy without consent. The law should be a tool to protect those women, not to punish them for the effects of the abuse that they have suffered.

Westminster voted to repeal the laws criminalising women in Northern Ireland in 2019, but they remain in place in England and Wales. There should be parity in the law across the UK so that my constituents have the same rights as my colleagues’ constituents in Northern Ireland. Abortion remains a free vote issue, and I recognise that any changes in the law in this area must be led by Back Benchers. My right hon. Friend the Minister was committed to this change before the election last year, and Members on both sides of the House supported her

[Tonia Antoniazzi]

amendment to remove these women from the criminal law. I hope that the Bill will give us an opportunity to revisit this issue in the same collegiate way.

6.49 pm

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): I welcome many of the measures in the Bill, particularly those concerning knife crime and the protection of shop workers who all too often bear the brunt of antisocial behaviour. However, one of the biggest deterrents for criminals is the certainty of being caught, and reductions in police numbers nationally are as wrong as they are locally. In Avon and Somerset, the former Conservative police and crime commissioner cut PCSOs by a further 80 last year—a massive 28% reduction—and closed our Taunton police station.<sup>1</sup>

I welcome clause 4's provisions on public space protection orders, which I will come on to. I welcome the commitment to deliver 13,000 extra officers of various kinds, but worrying for me is the fact that my constituents have come to see me about their relatives who are serving police officers. Civilians have been replaced by officers in uniform doing the same civilian jobs, just so that it can be claimed that police numbers have increased. I hope the Minister will make sure that that does not continue to occur with the new recruitment, which is very welcome. Unless officers are seen in our communities and on the streets, they will not deter or catch the criminals we need them to catch.

Last autumn, I was contacted by businesses in Castle Green in Taunton, which are at their wit's end because of the antisocial behaviour in the historic centre of our county town. I contacted the chief constable straightaway. I am really grateful to Avon and Somerset officers for the efforts they have put in, as I am to the chamber of commerce in Taunton, which has raised the general issue of town centre crime and convened the safe streets forum that I attended last week, but it is clear that we need to deter antisocial behaviour and crime where it is taking place. That is proven by the fact that Lib Dem-run Taunton town council has just appointed a street marshal, who is on duty in our town centre. I spent the afternoon with Nick last Friday. He is doing an excellent job and covering a huge range of work, from people climbing all over the rooftops to retrieving thousands of pounds' worth of stock by simply asking the person responsible to hand it over. He must have been quite persuasive in asking the individual to do that.

I congratulate Nick, our street marshal, but when I returned to Castle Green with him, it was clear that the antisocial behaviour problems there have become intractable. I therefore suggest that we need to work with Somerset council to get a public space protection order, and I hope the Government will support its enforcement. Too many of our great community events are marred by the antisocial few, and we need to tackle that. We need the public space of Castle Green, with its superb independent market, our famous Castle Hotel, the scheduled ancient monument, which is the castle itself, and the Museum of Somerset where soon people will be able to see the Chew valley hoard of silver coins from the Norman conquest. I cannot use those coins to pay for the enforcement of the public space protection order, but I hope it will have Government support so that we can

ensure that key public spaces are not subject to conquest by those who would disobey the law, wreak havoc among local people, damage livelihoods and tarnish the generally superb reputation of our county town.

6.52 pm

**Chris McDonald** (Stockton North) (Lab): I promised my constituents more police officers in Stockton, Billingham and Norton, and we are delivering on that. I promised a crackdown on antisocial behaviour on the high streets, and we are delivering on that. I promised a named police officer in every neighbourhood, and we are delivering on that. This is a serious Government rolling up their sleeves and getting on with delivering on the issues that matter most to the people to Teesside.

I have visited corner shops picking up the pieces after being attacked by balaclava-clad thugs. I have spoken to unions and retail workers about the devastating impact of shoplifting, theft and assaults on shop workers. Our high streets should be thriving, but too often they are overshadowed by antisocial behaviour that keeps families away. Crime erodes confidence in our communities, leaving people feeling unsafe in their neighbourhoods and making it harder for businesses to thrive, and nowhere is this more obvious than in the illegal use of off-road bikes. For too long, these bikes have been a menace as they maraud through estates, intimidate residents and are used by criminals to evade police. People have had enough.

I promised to come down hard on crime, increase police numbers, and make our high streets and communities safe, and that is exactly what we are doing. With £2.4 million invested in neighbourhood policing, Cleveland police, under our Labour police and crime commissioner Matt Storey, are delivering on that promise with 40 new officers on our streets, increasing the visible police presence in our communities. They are using new tactics to stop crime in its tracks, deploying police drones to track off-road bikes in real time. If criminals think they can evade justice, they are wrong. Their bikes will be tracked, seized and taken off our streets.

**Luke Myer** (Middlesbrough South and East Cleveland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is giving an excellent speech about the challenges we face on Teesside. Just today, I heard from James in Easterside, who said that in two hours there was not 15 minutes when an illegal off-road bike, quad or e-scooter did not pass. Does my hon. Friend agree that we need to seize such bikes, crush them and make our streets safe again?

**Chris McDonald:** I am sure that James in Easterside will be pleased to learn that Cleveland police have seized 359 vehicles linked to crime and dangerous driving since January alone, which is already making a big difference. Crime across Cleveland is now at its lowest level in five years following a more than 9% reduction, which means nearly 6,000 fewer victims of crime. This is what a proactive police and crime commissioner, a Labour Member of Parliament and a Labour Government working together looks like. We are putting police back at the heart of our communities, and ensuring that they have the necessary powers and the backing of a justice system that actually works.

We are introducing respect orders to tackle the worst antisocial behaviour offenders, and stamping out issues such as public drinking and drug use to ensure that our

1. [Official Report, 17 March 2025; Vol. 764, c. 2WC.] (Correction)



town centres are free from harm and nuisance. New offences, such as child criminal exploitation and cuckooing, will crack down on drug dealing. We will protect our high streets by ending the effective immunity for anyone caught shoplifting goods worth below £200 and introducing a new criminal offence to better protect retail workers from assault.

Stockton, Billingham and Norton deserve safer streets, and we are delivering. It should be clear to my residents that this Government and I, as their MP, are on the side of law and order. Although we are seeing green shoots of progress, there is still much more to do to reclaim our streets and town centres. The job is not done yet, but we are making real progress. Together, we will take back our streets and ensure that our towns are places of pride.

6.56 pm

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): Today's legislation contains welcome provisions to address some of the behaviours that plague my constituents, which were allowed to flourish under the previous Conservative Government. My constituents will welcome a serious and renewed focus on combating shoplifting and antisocial behaviour, because the Conservatives decimated our police community support officers—in Surrey, they fell by 29% between 2015 and 2022—and eroded the close relationship between the police and the communities they serve. Ultimately, the provisions in this Bill that are intended to make places such as Esher and Walton safer must be backed by a genuine and sustained commitment to community policing, and by giving officers the time and resources to build trust and understanding with those they protect.

In the past 12 months, arrests made by Surrey police for shop thefts have more than doubled. This is not merely a case of officers solving a higher percentage of crimes; in fact, the number of thefts detected by the police has also more than doubled. Surging levels of shoplifting are utterly corrosive for high streets in places such as Esher and Walton. They impose costs on retailers and may undercut residents' faith in law enforcement and the ability of politicians to get things done, so I hope the Government will pursue this issue with urgency.

The same is true when antisocial behaviour is not dealt with. I have received far too many emails and letters from constituents struggling with the conduct of neighbours. In such cases, the actions of a few can impose severe strains on so many. As one constituent wrote to me, there is an issue of fairness: ordinary people come for a quiet life, have work to do and have been left exhausted by noise, disruptions and even threatening behaviour coming from a small group. I recognise that this Bill accordingly highlights housing providers as relevant agencies with a role to play in tackling antisocial behaviour. However, when people feel threatened, there is no substitute for recognisable neighbourhood police with deep links to the community. Given the criminal sanctions attached to breaches of a respect order, can the Minister assure the House that community police will receive funding in line with the vital role they have to play in ensuring that the Government's new orders do not become meaningless?

Finally, I will address the protection of police officers. The police deserve protection from abuse. The Public Order Act 1986 was enhanced in 1998 to allow racially

and religiously motivated abusive language or behaviour that is directed at emergency workers to be treated as an aggravating factor. However, there is a loophole in the legislation such that if this particular form of abuse occurs when both parties are in the perpetrator's private dwellings, it is not treated as an aggravating factor. That is wrong. It leaves the mistaken impression that there are some circumstances in which the racial abuse of emergency workers is acceptable, and it fails to deter such behaviour. Will the Minister therefore commit to re-examining that issue and exploring the possibility of finally removing the anomaly?

6.59 pm

**Matt Bishop** (Forest of Dean) (Lab): I have shared before with the House that I used to be a police officer, and I worked for three forces across England and Wales. That has given me a strong understanding of the challenges faced by both officers and the public in tackling crime. It is partly due to this experience that I fully support the Bill and the Government's commitment to making our communities safer.

In my constituency of the Forest of Dean, crime and antisocial behaviour have a direct impact on families, businesses and communities. It is crucial that our police forces have the right powers, support and resources to tackle these issues effectively. The Bill empowers our officers, giving them the tools and the confidence that they need to make swift decisions and restore public trust. Those are things I wish I had had more of when I was serving. The Bill also addresses persistent antisocial behaviour with the introduction of the respect order, which will help restore order and send a strong message to offenders. It strengthens measures against theft, allowing police to enter properties without a warrant to search for stolen goods that have trackers on them.

Another key aspect of the Bill is its focus on domestic abuse. In Gloucestershire as a whole, a third of all arrests made in January related to domestic abuse, and I think we would all agree that this is unacceptable. The Bill includes crucial provisions to support victims and improve the management of such offenders, which is vital for both victims and law enforcement.

Another important factor for me is that the Bill focuses on tackling child sexual abuse. By introducing the mandatory duty to report, it will ensure that no case is overlooked. Having worked in the police but also in schools, I have seen at first hand how important it is to act quickly when it comes to protecting children from sexual exploitation. Another mantra of mine, which I hope is reflected in the Bill, is that prevention is always better than detection. That applies to any crime, but it is especially true of this hideous one of child sexual exploitation. The duty to report will help ensure that children are less vulnerable.

Finally, I urge all Members to support the Bill. It will not only empower our police, but support victims, take strong action against those who endanger our constituents' safety and that of our children, and drive real change in our streets.

7.2 pm

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, and I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for their contributions.

[*Jim Shannon*]

On the whole, the Bill is to be welcomed. A number of the provisions are already in place in Northern Ireland, such as the offensive weapons penalty, and there are others that the Northern Ireland Executive is in the process of introducing. In my intervention on the Home Secretary, I welcomed the 51 clauses that require a consent motion, because they are the sort of provisions that we want in Northern Ireland as well. On the things that are outstanding, the Home Secretary kindly said that she would, through the Minister and the Assembly, take them further, so that is also good news.

There are other measures that I agree with and some that I believe do not go far enough, such as the provisions on policing and investigation. I think of the absolutely heartbreaking interview with David Amess's daughter about the refusal to carry out a public inquiry into her father's murder by an ISIS supporter. David Amess was my friend, as he was to many in this House, and we are the poorer for his passing. With all due respect, I believe that the decision not to carry out an inquiry is the wrong decision. I hope this Bill, and perhaps the clauses on investigation in part 13, may lead to further powers being available for families to seek an inquiry into why the police have ceased their investigations. David Amess's family deserve that inquiry and this House deserves that inquiry, but I will leave it at that.

I welcome the shoplifting provisions, and I very much welcome those on knife crime, which has been a scourge across this great nation, and the Government have accepted the need for such legislation. I wish the tightening of the provisions on child sexual exploitation was not necessary, but it certainly is. Between 2022 and 2023, recorded crimes relating to child pornography were up by 40.6%, which is a shocking figure. As a father and a grandfather, such statistics upset me, but as a parliamentarian, such statistics galvanise me to ensure that we shut down this horrific industry, including by jailing all those involved in sharing videos or producing them. None of those crimes are victimless, and we must take strides to address that. Consequently, I welcome those provisions.

No Bill can ever be perfect, and there are amendments to be made, but it is clear that our system currently allows too many criminals to slip through loopholes, and the police need greater powers of investigation and of drug testing as well. Security must, however, be balanced with—and the Bill should not impinge on—the existing rights of British citizens. The right to protest is a vital mechanism for freedom of speech, but it must be safe protest. I speak as someone who has protested for nearly all my life, and we have lived in a nation and a country where protesting became the name of the game. I have to say that those were always peaceful protests—I underline that very quickly—but a balance must be struck. I look forward to the Minister outlining how we can protect our freedoms in this Bill, such as the right to have a religious belief and to express it in a balanced way, and not be persecuted or discriminated against for that reason.

We also need protection for our service personnel, including by providing support in relation to the vexatious allegations that we are seeing in Northern Ireland. We will not recruit police services or armed forces personnel if they know they will be abandoned and hung out to

dry at the first hint of an allegation. The Bill must strengthen that protection. That is one of the things I look forward to trying to do.

There is much in the Bill that we should welcome, and the Home Secretary and the Government are definitely on the right road. We will also see a difference in Northern Ireland, and the Bill is good news for everyone in this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

7.6 pm

**Sam Carling** (North West Cambridgeshire) (Lab): I enormously welcome this Bill, in which there is so much that will make a real, positive difference for my constituents in North West Cambridgeshire. Due to time constraints, I will have to skip through a lot of the praise I had for the Bill and move straight to an area where I would like to have a conversation and a dialogue with the Minister about what we can do, and that is the area of mandatory reporting.

I enormously welcome the fact that this Bill will finally introduce a statutory duty to report the possible sexual abuse of children when those who have responsibility for children are made aware of it. It has been a long road. In March 2018, the previous Conservative Government said the case for mandatory reporting had “not currently been made” and that they would not introduce the policy. The independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, chaired by Alexis Jay, showed how misjudged that position was.

**Luke Myer:** I thank my hon. Friend for supporting me in my debate last week on Professor Jay's recommendations for the Church of England. Does he agree with me that, alongside the Government implementing those recommendations, it is critical that faith organisations implement them as well?

**Sam Carling:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend, and I thank him for that intervention. As a society, we must move towards ensuring that children are protected.

When it comes to the detail, I am not fully sure that the Bill, as currently drafted, delivers on the Government's pledge to implement the IICSA recommendations. That is mainly because, on my reading, it does not create criminal sanctions for non-compliance, which was a key part of the 13th IICSA recommendation. The only consequences spelled out in the Bill for failure to report are that someone could be referred to as their professional regulator, where relevant, or to the Disclosure and Barring Service, which, to quote the Bill's explanatory notes, will

“consider their suitability to continue working in regulated activity with children.”

That is all really positive, but we have to go a little bit further. As currently drafted, is the Bill enough to tackle the chronic under-reporting of sexual abuse identified by the Jay inquiry?

The new offence of stopping someone else from reporting child sexual abuse is very welcome. For example, it should stop managers pressuring people who work under them not to report such abuse, but I do not think that it will cover such cases in religious groups. As an example, I would like to talk about the religious organisation in which I was raised, the Jehovah's Witnesses. Most people know very little about them, but they are a very

insular religious community with a deep distrust, in many cases, of secular authorities, much of which comes from the fundamental nature of some of their beliefs. Witnesses have a mindset in which the first port of call for any issues with another member of the faith is their local congregation's body of religious elders, who are men—always men—appointed from within their ranks. The organisation denies that it stops these elders from referring allegations of sexual abuse to the police, but numbers speak louder than words.

Almost 10 years ago, the Jehovah's Witnesses were one of the case studies examined by an Australian royal commission on institutional responses to child sexual abuse. The commission found that, in Australia alone, allegations had been documented by religious elders against 1,006 individuals, and not a single one was reported to the police. In the UK, elders sometimes say that it is a victim's absolute right to go to the police, which is often the organisation's response to such criticism. But behind the scenes, they heavily discourage it, telling victims that publicity would bring reproach on God's name.

This secretive attitude is best exemplified by a recent speech by a member of the religion's governing body: "Suppose that someone is convicted and put in jail, or someone is found guilty by men, as Jesus was. It does not mean that he is guilty in the sight of God." I should flag that he was not specifically referring to child sexual abuse, but that attitude is pervasive. I describe this example to highlight just how critical it is that the duty to report is backed up by criminal consequences for ignoring it, because some of these organisations will do anything to avoid compliance.

Is the Minister willing to meet me to discuss this issue in more depth, and how we can address it? I would also appreciate it if she could comment on the scope of the individuals that the Bill places under a duty to report. I am not convinced at the moment that many religious leaders—who often hold very significant power and influence, as I have outlined—will be included. This goes back to the IICSA report, which recommended that the duty to report should fall on anyone who works in regulated activities, but also on anyone in a position of trust over a child, as defined by the Sexual Offences Act 2003. On my reading, the Bill does the former but not the latter, as currently drafted, and addressing this by using both criteria could significantly strengthen the legislation.

I welcome this Bill, which contains very powerful provisions to progress measures outlined in the manifesto on which Labour Members stood to make our streets safer and tackle crime. I look forward to voting for it this evening.

7.11 pm

**Tristan Osborne** (Chatham and Aylesford) (Lab): I rise to support this Bill, which will provide the necessary tools to restore public confidence in law and order. As a former warranted police officer, council portfolio-holder for enforcement and chair of Medway community safety partnership, I have been working with and within my community to challenge many of the issues that this Bill will counter. I thank Kent police and Kent county council staff for all the work they do every weekend, every day and every hour to help and support our residents.

However, this Bill does not come without context. For over a decade, the previous Government chipped away at our criminal justice system. They cut police funding. We all remember the Police Federation's "Cuts Have Consequences" campaign, and the previous Government slashed officer numbers before recruiting more officers to lower levels per capita. They slashed PCSO numbers and weakened council enforcement teams. Court delays skyrocketed. Probation was privatised, then nationalised and then privatised again. Legal aid was gutted. Prisons were left full. These reckless acts have fuelled antisocial behaviour and shattered public confidence in law enforcement.

**Josh MacAlister** (Whitehaven and Workington) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend share my shock that Cumbria police did not hand out a single penalty notice for disorder in 2023? That is down from 1,000 issued in 2010. Does he also share my enthusiasm for this Bill's measures to introduce respect orders?

**Tristan Osborne**: I could not concur more. Police funding and police officer numbers have resulted in fewer fines being issued for many types of crime. In fact, the Bill will give the police more powers to challenge nuisance biking and other offences. The Bill is an absolutely necessary first step.

**Clive Jones** (Wokingham) (LD): On Saturday, I visited quite a few retailers in Wokingham. There was no police presence at all in the town, despite crime occurring hourly in our shops. Someone is always shoplifting. Thames Valley police has only 198 police officers per 100,000 people, which is well below the national average of 245. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that is not enough?

**Tristan Osborne**: I agree that insufficient police numbers in recent years resulted in a shoplifters' charter under the last Government, when people were allowed to shoplift up to a set amount.

I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Tipton and Wednesbury (Antonia Bance) for her Westminster Hall debate last week, and I thank my hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Luke Akehurst) for his ten-minute rule Bill on nuisance biking. The number of reckless bikers and boy racers who tear through our streets and churn up our parks has significantly increased in previous years. Under the previous Government, the weak section 59 of the Police Reform Act 2002 effectively allowed these bikers to get away with a slap on the wrist.

I welcome the measures in this Bill that will allow these vehicles to be seized, which will send a message that those who are caught with these vehicles will lose that asset immediately. Kent police called for these powers when I went on an operation in November and witnessed the cat-and-mouse tactics of perpetrators and the resources needed to impose these extremely weak penalties.

Knife crime has surged since 2010 and disproportionately affects younger people. The Bill gives the police new stop-and-search powers in high-crime areas, allowing law enforcement to be much more proactive in intercepting potential threats. I welcome this measure, specifically in areas of high knife crime in the urban centres of Chatham and Aylesford.



[Tristan Osborne]

The digital age has produced new avenues for crime. As many colleagues have mentioned, that includes child sexual exploitation, as well as exploitation and violence against women. The Bill will introduce more powers to challenge stalkers and strengthen protections against child sexual exploitation. I am a former teacher, and I had to look at safeguarding cases involving online activity on a weekly basis. Without these additional powers, it will be increasingly difficult to catch the malign influences that are harming our young people.

I believe that the Bill will also enhance police transparency and accountability. It improves police training, focusing on de-escalation techniques and mental health awareness. It equips officers with the skills necessary to handle a wide range of situations with sensitivity and professionalism. We know police officers do this every day, but we also know that the diversity of challenges they face requires new training.

As colleagues have said so eloquently, domestic violence is often a hidden crime that leaves victims feeling trapped and powerless to escape. The Bill strengthens the legal framework for protecting victims by introducing new provisions for protective orders, including the ability to ban a perpetrator from returning to a victim's home even before their trial. It also mandates better support for victims, offering increased access to legal and social services.

This Bill is not just about laws; it is about lives, safer streets, protecting communities, and justice that truly serves the people. It represents a forward-thinking, balanced approach to law and order and public safety. It provides our police with the powers they need to combat crime, supports our justice system to deliver fair and effective sentences, promotes greater community engagement and, most importantly, ensures that victims of crime and our communities receive the care and protection they deserve.

7.18 pm

**Callum Anderson** (Buckingham and Bletchley) (Lab): I am pleased to support the Bill, which will be welcomed in urban and rural communities across Buckingham and Bletchley. Given the time constraints, I will focus my remarks on part 3, on the protection of retail workers.

I have a particular interest in Britain's 3.5 million retail workers, not least because my mum is one of them, having worked on the shop floor at Morrisons for over 20 years. During that time, she has seen it all—the good, the bad and the ugly. In my conversations with her, particularly over the last decade, two themes have become much more prevalent, and they have already been raised by Members on both sides of the House.

The first theme is the increasingly casual and habitual nature of shoplifting and other retail crime. Data from the British Retail Consortium suggests that this is already costing businesses across the country more than £2 billion a year. In the Thames Valley police area, retail crime rose by over a third between April 2023 and February 2024. This year alone, the Co-op store in Winslow has faced two violent raids aiming to remove its cash machine. This is not just petty crime; too often, it is organised. It is this kind of emboldened criminality that must be stopped. Such activity is not just a blot on a company's balance sheet; it punishes good-faith customers and demoralises the workers, who take pride in the work

that they do. That is why I welcome the repeal of section 176 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, to finally call time on Britain's open invitation to criminals to steal goods worth £200 or less.

Secondly, I want to touch on the growing occurrence of abuse and the threat of violence faced by too many shop workers in their workplace. In a 2024 survey of USDAW members, more than two thirds of retail workers revealed they had been verbally abused, almost half had been threatened, and one in five had been physically assaulted while doing their job. That is clearly totally intolerable. Nobody in this country should go to work fearing for their own physical safety. I believe that we in this House, with our security guards and our armed police, have a particular duty to ensure that those who work in our shops feel just as safe as we do.

**Clive Jones:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Callum Anderson:** I will not, just because there is so little time and too many people want to speak.

That is why the Bill's introduction of the new offence of assaulting a retail worker is so important. It is also why I welcome the new respect orders, which will give the courts the power to ban repeat offenders from retail premises. Ultimately, this is a Bill that delivers for retail workers and ensures they are given the respect and dignity they deserve. That is why I will be supporting it tonight.

7.21 pm

**Sarah Hall** (Warrington South) (Lab/Co-op): I begin by declaring an interest: I am proud to be married to a serving Cheshire police officer.

In the year ending September 2024, there were 1 million incidents of antisocial behaviour, 490,000 shop theft offences and more than 55,000 knife or sharp instrument offences. Those are not just numbers; they are real people, real businesses and real communities who were let down by the previous Government.

In my constituency, Cheshire police officers continue to go above and beyond. Day in, day out, they put themselves on the line to protect us, despite rising demand and the failure of the previous Government to support them. I thank them for their dedication, service and unwavering commitment to keeping my constituency, towns and villages safe.

Cheshire police has led the way in tackling some of the key issues that we are discussing today. In February, the force received praise following an inspection by His Majesty's inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services, which commended it

“on its excellent performance in keeping people safe, reducing crime and giving victims an effective service.”

I am in no doubt that that success is down to the leadership of Chief Constable Mark Roberts and the hard work of Cheshire police officers, staff and volunteers.

I welcome the tough new actions against perpetrators of stalking. The Bill takes a range of new measures to strengthen enforcement and better protect victims, such as making it easier for courts to issue stalking protection orders, introducing a new offence of spiking, and improving information sharing with victims. I pay tribute to Cheshire police's Detective Sergeant David Thomason for his many years of work in this area, including the creation of Cheshire's anti-stalking unit, which sees police, mental

health professionals, outreach workers and victim advocates working together to protect victims of stalking and give them enhanced support, as well as to tackle the behaviour of stalkers and the root causes of their offending. DS Thomason has long been a leading advocate in this area, and I am delighted to see the Government give stalking the attention it rightly deserves.

The theme of this year's National Stalking Awareness Week is "Health response: spotting stalking". Like other forms of violence against women and girls, stalking is a public health issue and requires a whole-system approach. Through training, guidance and improved referral pathways, the goal is to support the healthcare sector and ensure that no victims of stalking fall through the gaps. Will the Minister say what action is being taken to ensure collaborative working with healthcare colleagues and the delivery of a whole-system approach?

As a member of USDAW and a Labour and Co-operative MP, I also welcome the new offence of assaulting a retail worker, which will give workers in shops up and down the country the protection they need. This is an area I have long campaigned in. I have spoken to many retail workers in my constituency, including at the local Co-op store in Latchford, where I heard about the devastating impact that assault and abuse have had on their lives. For too long, retail staff have been working in fear of the next incident of abuse, threat or violence, and the Bill provides a great opportunity to make a real difference to the retail industry and to workers' lives.

This Labour Government are delivering where the Conservatives failed. This is a Bill that takes crime seriously. It is a Bill that rebuilds public confidence, makes our streets safer and gives our police the power, support and resources they need to protect our communities.

7.25 pm

**Linsey Farnsworth** (Amber Valley) (Lab): The 317 pages of the Bill make satisfying reading for this former Crown prosecutor—satisfying because I know it is packed full of measures that will make the streets safer for my constituents. Amber Valley is a brilliant place to live, but sadly it is not without incidents of antisocial behaviour. That is an important issue to my constituents, which is why I will focus what little time I have this evening on part 1 of the Bill.

I have heard the concerns of residents in our towns and villages about cars and off-road bikes being driven in an antisocial manner. I have listened to the frustrations of police officers, who explain to me how they are hamstrung, unable to do anything but issue warnings. The Labour-controlled borough council has made good use of the public spaces protection orders available to it, including by issuing fines for car cruising across Amber Valley and dispersing troublemakers in Heanor marketplace. The Bill will mean that troublemakers can be dispersed for longer and that the police will finally have the power to immediately seize and crush their cars and bikes, giving residents confidence that the police will, at long last, have the tools they need to crack down on such antisocial behaviour.

Antisocial behaviour comes in many forms and is often a legacy of Tory austerity. Youth provision has been drastically cut back by Conservative-controlled Derbyshire county council. Youth services are a crucial

pillar in Amber Valley, linking young people with the wider community and the neighbourhood police, as I saw recently at the Railway Carriage in Ironville. This environment helps to steer young people away from choosing crime. This Labour Government understand that we need to give our young people chances, which is why, alongside the Bill, we are working at pace towards our opportunity mission, providing more apprenticeships and skilled jobs for our young people.

We know that antisocial behaviour is often committed by a small number of repeat offenders, young and older alike. The Bill will make it possible for individuals who persistently commit antisocial behaviour to be made subject to a respect order without waiting for them to be convicted of a criminal offence, thus speeding up the response, not least because it will avoid the huge backlogs in the Crown courts that we inherited from the Tories.

We must not forget that people who repeatedly act in an antisocial manner often have underlying issues or trauma driving their behaviour. Whether with alcohol awareness classes for those who persistently drink and are aggressive in our parks, or drug treatment orders for those who steal to fund their habit, these tough new orders will tackle the root causes of such behaviour. The 13,000 additional police officers and respect orders are central to our safer streets mission, but the orders will work only if the resources are available to support offenders to deal with their issues and change their behaviour, and I urge the Government to ensure that such provision is in place.

Antisocial behaviour is often described as low-level crime, but it does not feel low level to the people who have to endure it. The people of Amber Valley can be confident that this Government have acted on their concerns and that the antisocial behaviour will be stopped. I wholeheartedly support the Bill.

7.29 pm

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): I speak in full support of the Bill, which is a crucial piece of legislation that will help to deliver on the Government's safer streets mission. I was incredibly proud to stand on a platform of securing the safety of my constituents. It is the first responsibility of any Government to keep their communities safe, whether nationally or internationally. Our communities deserve safety, security and respect.

Too often, antisocial behaviour, violent crime and lawlessness undermine the very fabric of our society. I have seen that recently in Wildwood and Highfields and Western Downs in my constituency of Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages, where confidence in public services has been eroded by antisocial behaviour. The Bill takes decisive action to restore public confidence in policing and protect those most vulnerable to crime.

The Bill strengthens police powers to tackle persistent offenders, introducing respect orders to hold perpetrators accountable and removing the bureaucratic barriers that delay much-needed enforcement. Whether it is vandalism or the reckless use of vehicles, our response must be swift and effective.

Furthermore, we cannot discuss crime prevention without addressing our duty to young people. Too many of our youth are drawn into criminal activity, whether through exploitation, gang violence or knife crime. Blame is often put in the wrong place; we need to tackle the adults who exploit those young people. The Bill introduces

[Leigh Ingham]

tougher measures to combat child criminal exploitation, ensuring that those who manipulate and abuse young people face the full force of the law.

At the same time, we must invest in preventive measures—education, youth services and intervention programmes that divert young people away from crime and towards opportunity. In my professional career, I worked with children and young people, and I know how amazing they are when they are given a chance. The Government will make sure that no children are left behind.

Another key pillar of the Bill is community policing. Our police officers do an extraordinary job under immense pressure, yet public confidence has eroded. The Bill equips our police with the tools they need—greater powers to tackle serious crime, retail theft and violent offenders—while ensuring robust accountability. By supporting our frontline officers, we send a clear message that law and order remain at the heart of our national priorities.

I was particularly pleased to see the named police officer guarantee, as my constituents in rural villages and settlements often tell me that they struggle to feel connected to the police, with long waits for their calls and a lack of oversight or regular patrols in their area. That is why I recently asked the Home Office in oral questions whether rural communities such as Tyrley in my constituency would receive the named police officer guarantee; I was delighted that the Policing Minister confirmed that they would. The Government are committed to delivering the safety for rural communities that we so desperately need.

The Bill protects victims, punishes criminals and strengthens the foundations of a safer society. It ensures that our high streets, our towns and villages, and our homes are protected from those who seek to harm or exploit. I urge hon. Members to support it in delivering justice, security and respect for all.

7.33 pm

**Ruth Jones** (Newport West and Islwyn) (Lab): I speak in support of the Bill, not just because it is the biggest package of measures on crime and policing for decades, with 50 new laws to cut crime and make our streets safer, but because those new measures will tackle antisocial behaviour, shop theft and street crime head on by giving the police and our communities new powers to take back town and city centres, such as Newport, from thugs and thieves. Those are great reasons to welcome the Bill, but I also welcome it because it contains some of my own work.

Last year, I introduced my first private Member's Bill to the House: the Community and Suspended Sentences (Notification of Details) Bill, which sought to amend the 2020 sentencing code to create a duty on offenders to notify the responsible officer of any change of name or contact details if they are sentenced to a community order, a suspended sentence order, a youth rehabilitation order or a referral order. Too often, at the moment, such offenders are able to change their names and slip under the radar to avoid scrutiny, and potentially go on to reoffend. Chapter 4 of part 5 of the Bill means that my private Member's Bill has been noted and incorporated into the legislation. I am pleased that the Government are committed to utilising good ideas from all areas, including the Back Benches.

I do not wish to praise only the elements of the Bill that I contributed to, because it will seek to address some other serious issues. I particularly welcome the introduction of respect orders to stamp out issues such as public drinking and drug use. That will be particularly welcome in Cross Keys in my constituency, where residents' lives are blighted by such antisocial behaviour outside their homes and along the canal—a natural beauty spot that is also suffering from individuals drinking and taking drugs during the day in full view of passersby.

Another issue that affects my constituents is off-road biking, which is dangerous and causes a great deal of damage to our beautiful countryside. I welcome the police's new powers as a result of the Bill to seize vehicles and to stop off-road biking and the dangerous use of e-scooters on pavements. Removing the need for police to issue a warning before seizing off road bikes and e-scooters is particularly welcome, and great news for the people of Argoed and those living near Mynydd Maen in my constituency.

I must also mention the need to protect shop workers, because shop staff are a particularly targeted and vulnerable group. In introducing the new offence of assaulting a retail worker, the Government are showing that they are serious about tackling issues in communities to take back our shops and streets by confronting violence and antisocial behaviour head on.

As chair of the all-party parliamentary group on safeguarding in faith communities, I am also pleased to see a new duty in England for adults working in relevant activities to report instances of child sexual abuse, as already mentioned. The Government are working hard to implement the recommendations of the independent inquiry into child sexual abuse, after years of inaction by the previous Government.

Finally, I am also pleased to see the new offence for spiking, which is predominantly an offence committed by men against women. Violence against women and girls is endemic in our society, and we need to take it seriously and tackle it directly. I am sad to say that that has not always been the case. There have been some solid campaigns, such as StopTopps, but placing the emphasis on the potential victim cannot solve the issue. The Bill makes a difference, and I thank the Front-Bench team for their diligence in bringing it forward. I could go on, but I am mindful of time and the need to get other speakers in, so I close by welcoming the Bill and urging all those involved to get it through the necessary stages and on to the statute book as quickly as possible.

7.37 pm

**David Baines** (St Helens North) (Lab): On Friday, I attended an event organised by Age UK Mid Mersey at the Mansion House in Windle in my constituency, taking questions from service users and volunteers. It was no surprise to me that crime and policing, and specifically the threat of antisocial behaviour, was raised by those present. Older people told me that they were scared to leave their home, especially after dark. For their sake, and for all those in our communities, we need to take our streets back. The Bill is a step towards doing that.

Many of the Bill's welcome measures are aimed at tackling what, for too long and by too many, has been thought of as low-level crime. Antisocial behaviour,



whether public drinking, drug use, vandalism or off-road bikes tearing up sports pitches and parks, is completely unacceptable. It blights our communities and can ruin lives. People in St Helens North have great pride in where they live, but that has been tested too often by a mindless minority.

In recent weeks in Blackbrook, I have heard reports of some young people targeting buses and shops with objects, even causing some buses to be diverted. They are a minority, and I know most young people will be just as appalled by that sort of behaviour as most people of any age, but it is totally unacceptable. The introduction of respect orders will help to address some of that by targeting repeat offenders and ensuring that they face real consequences. Most of all, restoring neighbourhood policing will send a message that we will not stand for it.

Another crime that for too long has been seen as low level and has been effectively decriminalised is shoplifting. My mum was a shop worker, working in what was then the Co-op on West End Road in Blackbrook. She regularly encountered shoplifting—and, I am sad to say, much worse. She was assaulted at work, as were many other women she worked with. When it comes to violence against shop workers, we need the police and businesses to take every possible step to protect workers and customers, and to punish those responsible. I strongly welcome the proposals in the Bill.

People in St Helens North deserve and demand to feel safe. The Bill contains many steps in the right direction to ensure that crime does not dictate the way that we live our lives, and that those responsible face the consequences of their irresponsible actions. Our police must have the resources and the powers to tackle antisocial behaviour and violent crime—both prevention and punishment. It is about protecting our communities and ensuring that they are places to live, work and raise a family in peace. That is all most of us want, and we need to deliver it.

7.39 pm

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): I rise to support the Bill, much of which is fulfilling Labour's mission to make our streets safer by dealing with what sometimes is called low-level criminality but, in reality, are crimes that make people feel unsafe in their own community. Whether shoplifting, public drug and alcohol abuse, online harms or antisocial behaviour, law breaking must always be dealt with and never ignored.

I warmly acknowledge, in particular, the proposed changes to the law on retail crime. Sadly, law breaking is commonplace in retail. Many years ago, when I was a student working at a clothing shop in the centre of Glasgow, my colleagues and I had to deal with threats, intimidation and even the prospect of being stabbed with needles. I have seen at first hand how that kind of intimidation can affect people in their working environment. I went to the Co-op in Morpeth in my constituency recently, where I heard from USDAW colleagues and Co-op staff that the situation facing retail workers has only become worse, with workers at times facing industrial levels of shoplifting and threats of physical harm. That is why I welcome the removal of the Tories' de facto £200 floor on shoplifting prosecution, as well as the new offence of assaulting a retail worker. As hon. Members have said, no one should have to fear for their safety in order to make a living.

However, I would welcome assurances from the Minister about some of the processes outlined for the new respect orders. The Bill defines antisocial behaviour as

“conduct that has caused, or is likely to cause, harassment, alarm or distress to any person”.

I ran a homelessness charity, and I can envisage a possible scenario in which a tenant with the potential to be troublesome is issued with a respect order that would bar them from entering the tower block in which they live. Let us imagine that they do not have alternative accommodation, so they enter the flat anyway. Upon doing so, they could be arrested, charged, put on trial and issued with a prison term. This hypothetical tenant may not be a saint, but it would be a surreal outcome in which a criminal is made out of someone who is simply trying to go home. I would appreciate some alleviation of my concerns on this matter.

Sticking with antisocial behaviour, I also know from my time working in homelessness that, alongside law and order, we need other tools to help those with multiple and complex needs. A Northumbria University research report that I commissioned in 2022 demonstrated that 94% of those facing homelessness have experienced serious trauma during their lives. That trauma underlies the often chaotic and unpleasant behaviours that we see in our towns and cities. Some of those who are causing misery to others are themselves deeply traumatised by the abuse, violence and neglect that they have experienced or continue to experience.

We should remember that being homeless itself is a trauma. We can most successfully address that behaviour by taking a trauma-informed approach and by offering appropriate support services. It is not about being soft—crime is crime—but if we genuinely want to stop the cycle of offending, we need multiple options at our disposal, including supportive options. When we witness antisocial behaviour, we should of course firmly say, “You must not do that or there will be consequences.” But we should also ask, “What happened to you that led you to this point in your life?”

Even as we pursue a much-needed focus on antisocial behaviour and crime, I would welcome clarification that traumatised people who are often stuck in a loop of failed systems will receive the support that they need. The Bill will do a lot of good, and I am sure that the Minister will be able to put my concerns to rest.

7.43 pm

**Lizzi Collinge** (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Lab): The measures in this Bill are very much needed by my constituents. One of the first pieces of casework I dealt with as an MP was of young children riding recklessly around on small motorbikes with no helmets. My constituent Helen was at her wits' end with the dreadful noise and the fear that one of the children or a passing pedestrian might get hurt. I recently asked for an update, and her husband Malcolm told me that although there has been some relief recently, they are concerned that the lighter nights will bring more problems. What frustrates them is the wait for a police response.

Recently in Morecambe we had a gang of lads causing havoc on the Branksome estate. Following reports of them threatening people and causing damage, the police gave chase and seized one of the bikes. Earlier that day, a town centre playground was taken over by people on bikes, with reports that they were being “purposefully

[Lizzi Collinge]

menacing” and that their bikes had damaged the grassy area near the playground. It was simply luck that no one was hurt.

In Morecambe, local organisations are coming together to tackle the menace of antisocial behaviour. The Safe Morecambe initiative—which brings together Morecambe police, the Morecambe business improvement district, the city council, the town council and other key stakeholders—was formed last November. Its members collaborate to ensure a safe and welcoming environment for residents, businesses and visitors. I met one of them, Tim Barbary, to discuss the coalition, and I will continue to support them, including by supporting the continuation of Operation Centurion, for which I am glad to say that funding has continued.

Our high street in Morecambe has also been badly affected by theft. The Conservatives wrote off a lot of this as low-level, but it is not. Certain parts of Morecambe and some rural areas have suffered terribly with fly-tipping. I am glad to see all these issues covered in the Bill, and that the Labour Government are focused on the issues that matter to my constituents. The Bill will make it easier to seize bikes and scooters that are being used antisocially. It will enable stronger action on all types of antisocial behaviour. It will provide for statutory guidance on fly-tipping and an extra 13,000 police officers on the ground.

Finally, I would like to flag the decimation of youth services under the last Conservative Government, which has meant that so many young people, especially those struggling without strong family role models, have been left not only to be sucked into the grip of antisocial behaviour but in many cases to be groomed into far more serious criminality. I have already expressed interest in my constituency becoming a pilot area for the national youth strategy programme, as I believe that good youth services not only ensure that young people are able to reach their potential, but have a wider knock-on effect on our constituencies.

All in all, I am very pleased that this Labour Government are taking the concerns of my constituents in Morecambe and Lunesdale seriously, taking strong action to tackle the blight of the misuse of bikes and scooters, taking theft on our high streets seriously again, getting tough on fly-tippers and clamping down on the wider antisocial behaviour that we see in our constituencies.

7.47 pm

**Pam Cox** (Colchester) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in support of the Government’s Crime and Policing Bill, the most comprehensive package of such measures that we have seen for decades. As a member of the Justice Committee, I know that it will play a crucial part in tackling the serious violence and high-harm offences that have plagued our communities for far too long.

I will focus my contribution on knife crime. In my own constituency we have seen at first hand the impact of knife crime on our streets and the fear that local people feel as a result. However, we are also witnessing some remarkable local initiatives that are making a real difference in our fight against it. Last year, the Knife Angel, a 27-foot-tall sculpture made from over 100,000 seized knives, visited Colchester. It was a powerful

symbol of our city’s commitment to tackling knife crime. Standing underneath our iconic Jumbo water tower, the Knife Angel serves as a poignant reminder of the lives lost and the urgent need for action. It brought our community together, fostering the shared determination to address this issue head on. I pay tribute to the *Daily Gazette* in Colchester for its campaign that ran alongside that striking exhibit.

I also pay tribute to the work of Essex police in tackling knife crime. Its violence and vulnerability unit brings together partners from across the county. It uses data evaluation, targeted interventions and communication campaigns to support young people to stay safe and to keep them away from the exploitation and vulnerabilities that can draw them into crime, as we have heard so many Members talk about today.

Finally, let me highlight the incredible work of a man named Peter Dutch and the ALB—the anti loo roll brigade—in Colchester. On another occasion I will happily explain the story behind that name. It has been pivotal in recent months in diverting young people away from trouble and is building local alliances to provide counselling, youth projects and other positive alternatives to crime. These local initiatives in Colchester exemplify the kind of community-driven efforts that are essential for tackling knife crime. The Bill will provide the necessary national tools that we also need to amplify those efforts and make our streets safer. I urge Members across the House—there are not so many on the Opposition Benches right now—to join me in supporting the Bill.

7.49 pm

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): Ensuring the safety and security of our communities is one of the most fundamental duties of government. When that duty is neglected, the consequences are real, widespread and deeply felt by everyone—especially the most vulnerable in our society. In recent years, that neglect has reached the point where local authorities such as Doncaster city council have had to step in to take up the slack. I recognise the work it has done, which has included funding additional police and expanding CCTV networks to support the police in their work.

From walkarounds with the police, councillors and businesses in areas such as Thorne, I know the impact that rampant crime is having on our high streets and town centres. Shop owners and workers feel under constant fear of attack. That is wrong. That is not good enough for the people of Thorne, not good enough for the people of Doncaster East and definitely not good enough for the people of the Isle of Axholme. I am proud to be part of a Government who will clean up our streets and rid them from the thieves and the thugs.

I am glad to see that, with the Bill, the Government are taking antisocial behaviour seriously. It is too easy to write off ASB as nuisance or annoyance, but it is very much more than that. Continual antisocial behaviour can go on for months or even years, making people’s lives miserable. It was described to me at a recent surgery as a “living torture”. The introduction of respect orders is a welcome addition to the tools available to authorities to tackle persistent antisocial behaviour and take strong preventive action. I particularly welcome the provisions in the Bill that will allow for the instant seizure of motorbikes without the need for previous warnings.

Like many of my hon. Friends, I represent a rural area. I know from speaking to farmers in the Isle of Axholme how unsafe they can feel when they know that help is a long way off. I have heard from farmers in Hatfield about the attacks on animals that they have suffered from recently. The new powers in the Bill to track stolen farm equipment will help both to deter criminals and to stop them in their tracks before they can profit from their crimes. I ask the Government to keep in mind as the Bill progresses through Parliament how those ambitions will be successful in a rural context.

Finally, I turn to fly-tipping. Every part of my constituency suffers from fly-tipping, which is often done by organised professional groups making money by passing themselves off as legitimate waste removal companies. They will stop fly-tipping only when it stops being profitable for them. A boost to the use of powers to seize vehicles linked to fly-tipping and to issue fixed penalty notices for fly-tippers is a good step in the right direction and certainly very welcome. At home, at work and at leisure, my constituents in Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme should feel safe and be safe 24/7. For that reason, I hope that every hon. Member in the House will join me in voting for the Bill tonight.

7.53 pm

**Emily Darlington** (Milton Keynes Central) (Lab): I pay tribute to all the amazing speeches we have heard from Labour Members. It can be seen from how many of us are still here, hours into the debate—in contrast to the Opposition—how seriously the Government and the Labour party take law and order. I absolutely agree with all those speeches, but because of time I will focus on violence against women and girls.

Women in Milton Keynes are scared of going out, scared of going to the police and scared of going home, which is still the most dangerous place for a woman. Violence against women and girls slowly became consequence-free under the previous Government. Under the Conservatives, only 2% to 4% of reported rapes ever made it to trial. Convictions for domestic abuse halved under the Conservatives, and femicides, of which there have been 95, including two in my own constituency over Christmas, have continued to happen and not been taken seriously enough.

I am really proud of the Bill's and the Government's commitment to protect women and girls and halve violence against women and girls. I pay tribute to the Milton Keynes portion of Thames Valley police, who have been central to ensuring that Milton Keynes becomes the first white ribbon city, despite the Conservative police and crime commissioner,

I want to talk about stalking and how important our measures are on that. If I had had time, I would have shared my own story of how I was stalked. My stalking happened in person, but more and more of it is happening online. I am interested in hearing from the Minister about how the Bill will help to tackle that.

Spiking unfortunately continues to rise. Just two weeks ago, a young woman in my constituency approached me after being spiked at a Slug and Lettuce on her 20th birthday—she ended up in hospital. We have talked a lot about measures to protect women from being spiked, but what are we doing to tackle the availability of the drugs used in spiking?

Finally, I want to talk about being online. Hon. Members on the Science, Innovation and Technology Committee will have heard the weak and disappointing answers from representatives of the major social media firms which are using the umbrella of “freedom of speech” to allow threats to women in online spaces to continue. They are also using that to spread pretty radical pornography. I want to understand how the Bill will fit with the cross-Government plans to tackle violence against women and girls.

In my last few seconds, I will highlight two laws that are still on the statute book that I would like the Bill to repeal: the Abortion Act 1861, which was raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi); and the Vagrancy Act 1824. Both of them target the most vulnerable in our society and should be repealed.

7.56 pm

**Danny Beales** (Uxbridge and South Ruislip) (Lab): Crime and antisocial behaviour affect the whole community in which they take place. They erode social cohesion, trust and pride in a place, driving people away from our town centres and making them feel insecure in their own streets and workplaces and even in their own homes. I am therefore pleased to speak in support of the Crime and Policing Bill, which is the largest package of measures on crime and policing for decades.

Crime and antisocial behaviour increased under the previous Government, despite what the shadow Home Secretary said. The reality is known by my constituents. In the year ending September 2024, the Home Office recorded the highest ever increase in shoplifting offences. USDAW found that one in five shop workers had been physically assaulted in a year. Instances of theft from a person increased by 22%. In my community of Uxbridge and South Ruislip, I have heard from many constituents who are worried about rising levels of crime—knife crime, shoplifting, burglary, phone theft and car theft, to name but a few. On Sunday alone, 21 constituents wrote to me to share their concerns about burglary in South Ruislip. The news is deeply distressing to my constituents, many of whom feel unsafe in their own homes and believe that the police do not have the resources needed to protect them. That simply cannot go on.

Increases in antisocial behaviour are a symptom of a society in distress. Far too often it was dismissed by the last Government as low-level crime—they were unwilling and unable to act. I welcome the measures in the Bill to introduce respect orders on the worst offenders, banning persistent offenders from our town centres. That is welcome news for many of my constituents who have contacted me about such activities in Uxbridge town centre and Yiewsley high street.

Critically, the Bill will also keep my constituents safe and protect them from armed burglary. It will create a new power for the police to seize, retain and destroy bladed articles and create a new criminal offence of possessing a bladed article with the intent to cause harm. It will also ban the possession and distribution of electronic devices, which are far too often used in vehicle theft, and create a new targeted power for the police to enter premises and search and seize electronically tracked stolen goods, from mobile phones to stolen vehicles, ending the terrible situation that my constituents have



[*Danny Beales*]

reported where they can track their stolen phone or electronic item but the police are unable to go in and get it. I hope, too, that we will look at international vehicle crime and tougher measures at our ports, to stop the rapid removal from the country of stolen vehicles.

As well as tough laws, the police must also have the resources they need to apply them and a return to proactive neighbourhood policing. Although the uplift in police funding, including to London police forces, in the last year, is incredibly welcome, significant pressures on London policing remain, so I hope we can continue in this Parliament to increase the resources of the Metropolitan police. Unfortunately, my predecessor, while Mayor of London, closed a number of police stations and police counters. I welcome the present Mayor of London's commitment to keep Uxbridge police station open, and I hope we can work together to reopen the front counter and the custody suite.

I strongly support this Bill and the new measures and increased police powers, along with the uplift in funding already agreed by this new Government. These measures will help to restore trust in the police and improve the safety of my constituents, and I wholeheartedly support them.

8 pm

**Mary Kelly Foy** (City of Durham) (Lab): This Bill presents an opportunity to confront the challenges facing our communities, protect the most vulnerable and ensure that justice serves everyone. I welcome the Government's commitment to tackling violence against women and girls, to tackling antisocial behaviour and to halving knife crime. This is a positive step forward, strengthening protections for the public and addressing some of the damaging policies of the previous Government. I must therefore turn my attention to the impact of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022.

In its rush to extend police powers, this legislation has had a devastating effect on Gypsy and Traveller communities. The Act introduced a new criminal offence related to trespass, and granted sweeping powers to ban those communities from areas for up to 12 months, as well as powers to fine, arrest, imprison and seize the homes of Gypsies and Travellers. Under these provisions, sanctions can be enforced based on damage, disruption or distress, often rooted in subjective perceptions of harm. This means that entire communities could face eviction or banishment from areas, with little regard for the cultural context or the lack of alternative places to settle.

These measures are a grave injustice and an affront to the rights and dignity of those who follow centuries-old ways of life. It is concerning that, in the supposed pursuit of law and order, the previous Government overlooked fundamental human rights protections. I must stress that the impact of these measures is not theoretical; it is real and it is being lived. It is affecting families, children and entire communities. Human rights bodies have raised their concerns. The United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination, in its formal recommendation, has called for the repeal of the provisions in question and, importantly, the High Court, in its ruling in 2024, found that certain provisions

in the Act were incompatible with the European convention on human rights. This Parliament has a duty to address these human rights violations and to correct the injustices done.

The Crime and Policing Bill offers us the opportunity to right the wrongs of the past, to restore fairness and to ensure that we have laws that respect the rights of all people, regardless of their heritage or way of life. This Bill could be the means by which we address the discrimination faced by Gypsies and Travellers. We need bold action to ensure that their traditions are protected. All people and all communities have the right to fair treatment. If we really want to stand for justice and human dignity, that must apply to all, so as chair of the all-party parliamentary group for Gypsies, Travellers and Roma, I urge the Government to undo the harm of the previous legislation. Let us stand for equality under the law and protection for all who live in the United Kingdom.

8.4 pm

**Tracy Gilbert** (Edinburgh North and Leith) (Lab): I declare an interest as a member and former employee of the Union of Shop, Distributive and Allied Workers. I welcome the Bill brought forward by the Government. I want to discuss three broad areas: antisocial behaviour; retail crime; and measures to end commercial sexual exploitation.

Antisocial behaviour has been an increasing concern for my constituents in Edinburgh North and Leith. Over the past few months, they have relayed to me their concerns over a group of young people who have been dubbed the "baby gang". Their name might not seem threatening, but their actions are. The actions of the "baby gang" have alarmed my constituents and made them afraid. The tragedy is that many of the gang members are only in their mid-teens. During the general election campaign, constituents told me repeatedly how they were fed up with off-road bikes being used in parks and on pavements. That is why I am so pleased to see that the Bill will include provisions to tackle not only antisocial behaviour but the use of off-road motorbikes used in this manner. These issues are devolved to the Scottish Parliament, so I hope that the Scottish Government—although they are not represented here tonight—will look closely at these measures.

On retail crime, I congratulate the Government on the measures in the Bill to tackle the unacceptable attacks and assaults on shop workers. The provisions in part 3 of the Bill replicate legislation that has already been brought forward by a Member of the Scottish Parliament, my colleague Daniel Johnson MSP, when he secured the Protection of Workers (Retail and Age-restricted Goods and Services) (Scotland) Act 2021. We are beginning to see the positive impact of the legislation and the effects it has had in shops and supermarkets across Scotland, which is evidenced in the data. In USDAW's latest Freedom from Fear research, 77% of shop workers across the UK reported abuse, 53% reported being threatened and 10% reported being assaulted. The data from Scotland is lower, demonstrating that within only a few years the introduction of a specific crime is helping to create a safer working environment for shop workers. I am proud that this Bill will extend this protection, because protection at work should not be limited by postcodes.

The Bill has no specific measures to reduce prostitution or sex trafficking. In 2023, the Home Affairs Committee found that legislation was needed in this area, as a report from the inquiry on human trafficking found that the collaboration between the National Crime Agency and the Home Office on pimping websites had produced no evidence of improvement. I believe that the Bill should go further in tackling this exploitation. It could afford the Government the opportunity to take the actions required to reduce demand and to tackle pimping websites. I would be grateful to hear from the Minister whether the Government would look favourably on amendments that seek to make profiting from the prostitution of another person a criminal offence. This Bill will go a long way in reducing crime, and I hope that when we next consider it in this place, it will contain measures that reduce the commercial exploitation of women.

8.8 pm

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): Antisocial behaviour ruins lives. On Friday, I held an event at the Field Lane estate in Calder Valley, the first in a series of events across my constituency to listen to members of the community about antisocial behaviour, and their stories were heartbreaking. Families are being terrorised by problem residents, children are scared to go to school and residents fear for their property and personal safety. All the while, people have no trust that making reports to the police will bring an end to the fear their families are facing. Sadly, this lack of trust became all too common a feature in communities under the last Government. They know that, no matter how many reports they make or how much evidence they have, the police will either not turn up or turn up late and then not take people seriously, after the last Government hollowed out our policing services.

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is vital for Members from the previous Government to be here to listen to the testimonies of our constituents about how the last Government failed them on so many facets of tackling crime?

**Josh Fenton-Glynn**: I absolutely agree that the last Government failed people on tackling crime, particularly due to its hollowing out of the police. Indeed, in West Yorkshire alone, within just six years of the Conservatives taking office, over 1,200 police officers had been let go, and 1,000 of those were in frontline roles, leaving their numbers even more depleted than the Opposition Benches. When the numbers rose back again, it was just not the same because the previous Government failed to recognise that police are more than just a number on a spreadsheet. They got rid of 1,200 officers who knew their communities, who added local intelligence and understanding of the local nuances, and who had experience supporting those neighbourhoods. We lost the heart of neighbourhood-based policing—the best tool to combat antisocial behaviour—and one of the best reassurances that evidence can have. The lack of local knowledge is why we have seen over 3,000 reports of antisocial behaviour in Calder Valley in three years, ruining lives. The lack of trust in police is why I know that so many more incidents simply go unreported.

After 14 years of the last Conservative Government allowing antisocial behaviour and other crime to grow unchecked, I am proud that this Labour Government are restoring respect for law and order, standing with

and bringing communities and police closer together, with named officers in every community, backed by £2 million of funding to kickstart recruitment for the new neighbourhood police officers. The Government will end the impunity that criminals feel they can operate under by giving officers stronger powers to tackle antisocial behaviour, violent crime and persistent offenders who make people's lives a misery. Against a backdrop of the lack of trust in our police service that was allowed to fester over 14 years, this Bill is an important step in the process of rebuilding trust and confidence and why, on behalf of my constituents from Calder Valley, who have suffered because of antisocial behaviour, I am backing the Bill to take action today.

8.11 pm

**Josh Simons** (Makerfield) (Lab): In Ashton, Orrell, Platt Bridge, Hindley and Hindley Green, one issue dominates life for so many: antisocial behaviour. For months, I have been promising my constituents the measures in the Bill, and I thank the Home Office team for the hard work required to bring it to the House so quickly. To my mind, the Bill is one of the strongest examples of this Labour Government delivering for working people on the issues they care about.

The Bill takes tough action against serious crime—drugs, knife crime and terrorism—but I want to talk about a different, more everyday type of crime. These are the crimes that make life demoralising and sometimes frightening for many people, and that shape how people feel about their town centre, community and security. It is the fly-tipping in Bickershaw that makes parents stop their kids playing outside. It is teenagers throwing mud at cars in Hindley, and groups intimidating people by the shops in Winstanley.

Some of the toughest calls I have received in this job have been people ringing to tell me that thugs have destroyed a local sports club: Ashton Town—an arson attack—Hindley FC, and Wigan Cosmos, as well as St Jude's pitches being destroyed in minutes by vandals on dirt bikes. Those clubs are great community assets where kids that I represent learn to become Wigan Warriors, or the elderly play walking football—places where people feel pride in their communities. I have supported fundraisers to help those clubs, working with local councillors and Warriors players to help St Jude's build a fence to keep the bikes out, but local residents should not have to reach into their already stretched pockets. Our streets should not feel so unsafe that people resort to self-protection. We are one of the world's largest economies and greatest democracies. That is why I welcome the measures in the Bill, such as new powers to seize bikes that wake people up at night, as they did to me this Saturday. Every time one of those bikes tears past me in the town centre, I hold on to my kids that bit tighter.

The Bill matters because it is about standing up for the good, hard-working people who love their towns and want to feel pride in them again. It is about what it means to feel respect for those who we stand by and live near, and it shows that the Labour Government will not tolerate those who make others' lives a misery.

The respect orders, for example, are wisely named, because vandalism, thuggery and mindless destruction are about a lack of respect for our public spaces and for each other. The Bill empowers groups in society—police,

[Josh Simons]

councils, housing associations—with restoring that respect, asking them to say, “Enough is enough” and to take control of their communities.

I want to make a wider point about respect in our society. Often when I am travelling on the bus or train, someone is playing videos loudly on their phone without headphones. That is not illegal, but it is off-putting, because it forces whatever that person is doing on to everyone else, as if they somehow own our shared public space. It demonstrates a lack of respect for our public realm and for those around us.

In the end, the strength of our communities and our country depends on the respect, and even the love, we have for one another. That is what resilience is in a community. Over the last 14 years, the Conservative Government have allowed that respect to erode. Too many no longer trust that the law will be upheld and applied equally and fairly to everyone, and that erodes people’s trust in one another. That is why antisocial behaviour is significant: it is about treating one another with a lack of respect, as if we do not care about the things we have in common. Only by rebuilding and reinvesting in our public realm, and restoring the strength and integrity of institutions such as the police, will we rebuild that respect and trust.

The Bill takes a vital step. It shows that we stand with law-abiding, hard-working people. It sends a strong message to those who fail to recognise their responsibility. Respect must return to our streets, and this Bill will start to make that happen.

8.16 pm

**Jessica Toale** (Bournemouth West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary and the whole ministerial team for bringing forward the Bill and making significant progress on our mission to make our streets safer.

I want to cover three areas in which we promised change and we are delivering. The first is antisocial behaviour. We have heard much about it from across the House today, but it continues to blight my town centre. I hear time and again from constituents in Bournemouth West about how unsafe they feel, and antisocial behaviour is reportedly turning potential retailers away from the town centre. It is not just a question of low-level inconvenience; it is a matter of people’s everyday quality of life and the economic health of our towns. The rise in street crime and shoplifting, and the persistent nuisance, has made many people feel that they cannot enjoy the place they live in the way they used to.

I have spoken to retail workers and bosses from the Co-op and other retailers, who have had to deal over and over again with the same people coming into their stores, sweeping stock from the shelves and putting their staff at risk. The Conservatives should be ashamed of that record. After 14 years, our communities have been left vulnerable, and an epidemic of crime and antisocial behaviour has been ignored for far too long. We are taking action where the last Government failed to by removing the £200 shoplifting threshold, introducing 13,000 neighbourhood police officers and increasing police funding—including 6.5% more for Dorset police—and introducing respect orders, which will give police

and local authorities new powers to tackle the worst offenders and prevent them from entering our towns and district centres.

Like many others, I also welcome the steps in the Bill to immediately seize those awful off-road bikes and dangerous scooters that cause such a nuisance, in particular up Kinson Road and Leybourne Avenue in my constituency. Students at Bishop Aldhelm’s primary school told me this morning that those nuisance bikes are destroying our woodlands and protected heathland.

Secondly, the Bill addresses serious crime and violence, such as knife crime. We see knife crime far too often in Bournemouth. Less than two weeks ago, there was a brutal double stabbing, and it was one in a long line of horrific attacks, including three fatalities in the past two years. I welcome the work this Government are doing to prevent such attacks with the creation of new offences, but despite the collaborative work of the police, the council and local charities, I also want to see a violence reduction unit in my local area.

The Bill is not just about punishing offenders; it also provides much-needed support for those who want to turn their lives around. Some amazing work is happening in my constituency, particularly through Changes Are Made, which provides positive outlets for young people. I encourage the Home Secretary to look for opportunities to support activities like those and to collaborate with effective charities through the Young Futures programme.

Finally, it is about time that we strengthened laws to protect women and girls. Just last week, I held an event to better understand women’s perception of their own safety in the town centre and to highlight the ways in which policing, the council, businesses and design can contribute to it. I welcome the creation of new spiking and stalking offences. It is shameful that previous Governments failed to make those changes.

I am proud of the Bill and the direction that the Labour Government are taking. We are not just talking about crime, but taking decisive action to reduce it. Although it may be unrealistic to expect Conservative Members to take responsibility and apologise for their failures—they would have to be in the Chamber to do that—perhaps they could join my constituents, who want to see cross-party support for these long-overdue changes, in welcoming the Bill.

8.20 pm

**Connor Naismith** (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): I begin my remarks by reflecting on the non-attendance throughout the debate of Reform MPs. It appears that they spend more time these days litigating against each other than they do legislating in this place.

When I knock on doors in Crewe and Nantwich or sit in my constituency surgery, I too often meet people who live in perpetual fear in their own community. The thing that those people have in common is that they want to see neighbourhood policing restored, and I am proud that this Government are committed to doing that. Anybody with a set of eyes could see that neighbourhood policing was decimated under the previous Government, despite what the shadow Home Secretary said earlier.

**Clive Jones:** Will the hon. Member give way?

**Connor Naismith:** I will not, because I am conscious that others wish to get in.



My constituents also tell me that they want to feel as if the police are equipped with the powers that they need to grip the problems that leave people fearful on the streets or, worse, in their homes. Rising antisocial behaviour has been a scourge on our streets, affecting my constituents' businesses, their livelihoods and even their health.

A young woman contacted me recently about the young males who make her and her children's lives a misery by bomb-knocking and kicking her door in the evenings, and shouting "bitch" as they pass her home. My constituent Steve told me at my constituency surgery over the weekend that his family's life is being made a living hell by a small number of social housing tenants, and the housing provider has so far failed to take any action to address that. That is why I fully support the introduction of respect orders, which will allow a number of agencies, including housing providers, to place restrictions on that kind of behaviour.

I declare an interest: I started my working life as a shop worker, first in Woolworths—yes, I am old enough—and then in betting shops, a part of the retail sector that has, unfortunately, never been a stranger to violence and intimidation for workers. However, as I found out when I met James, the manager of my local Co-operative store in Crewe, brazen crime and the intimidation of shop workers have become commonplace, even in our local convenience stores.

I believe that the Bill will make a lasting difference to the lives of my constituents. Business owners, workers and decent law-abiding people just want to live in a community where they feel safe. These powers are ambitious, and we must ensure that they deliver real, lasting change for the people who need it most.

8.23 pm

**Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): I am proud to speak in firm support of the Bill. Many of my constituents feel that crime, especially day-to-day antisocial behaviour, has grown exponentially over recent years. It impacts every part of my constituency, from the town centres in Ilkeston and Long Eaton, to villages such as Draycott and suburban estates such as Cotmanhay. The Bill is about making people feel safe, so that Erewash residents from Sawley to Shipley View can live their lives free from the fear of crime.

As our local police forces were gutted by austerity under the previous Government, so-called low-level offences such as antisocial behaviour, shoplifting and even burglary were increasingly ignored and functionally decriminalised by the Conservative party. Shoplifting was functionally decriminalised under the negligence of the previous Government, who set guidelines stating that it should not be dealt with if goods worth less than £200 were stolen. Although major supermarkets and surviving high street chains might be able to stomach that volume, our small businesses cannot. How were those businesses meant to grow, how were investments meant to be made, how were town centres meant to thrive and how were people meant to feel safe when criminals and thieves were given impunity by the previous Government's shoplifters' charter? The Bill repeals that thieves' charter, which will surely come as a relief to business owners and the hard-working, law-abiding majority of constituents in Erewash and across the country.

Knife crime has more than doubled in Derbyshire in the past decade. The recent horrific stabbing and subsequent death of a teenager in my constituency has rightly given rise to a lot of anger in my community—some of which ended up being directed at me, as people asked bluntly, "What are you going to do about this?" That is why I will be very proud to vote for the Bill, which creates a new offence of possession of a bladed item with intent to cause harm. It will give our police the new and stronger powers that they need to seize, keep and destroy knives confiscated from private properties.

Finally, on violence against women and girls, 13,000 stalking and harassment offences were recorded in Derbyshire in 2024—the highest figure in the east midlands—along with more than 3,400 sexual offences. In that time, one of my great friends and constituents reported to police that she had been followed and had sexual abuse shouted at her. That abuse happened in broad daylight and in public, on West Park in Long Eaton. The Government's mission is to halve violence against women and girls in a decade. If we are to do that, our police will need the measures in the Bill.

If we have now entered the decade of national renewal that the Government promised, yes we need to get the economy growing again, yes we need to get Britain building again, and yes we need to get the NHS back on its feet, but we must also ensure that crime is punished and that the police are given the powers that they need to properly enforce against offenders. We must take back our streets and excise the rot. If we restore social order and respect for our communities, we can fix broken Britain.

8.27 pm

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): I warmly welcome the clauses in this landmark Bill that will give greater protection to victims of stalking—including guidance for police about disclosing the identity of online stalkers to victims—and clarify what constitutes stalking so that the police have no excuse not to pursue incidents.

Some 91% of victims surveyed by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust had suffered from mental health problems as a result of being stalked. Being stalked is also an indicator of being at high risk of domestic homicide. It is vital that victims feel safe to report what they are suffering, which is why I welcome the opening of the purpose-built Acer House centre for victims of rape and sexual assault in York and North Yorkshire. It has been designed in consultation with victims to provide a safe and supportive environment in which evidence can be collected, and people can receive immediate health care and a medical examination if needed.

According to Women's Aid, stalking by ex-partners accounts for the largest group of stalking victims, with the vast majority of victims being women. As with domestic abuse in general, rates of prosecution and conviction are shockingly low. In the year to March 2024, North Yorkshire police recorded 1,045 stalking offences, but only 75 resulted in a charge or summons. In just over half the original cases, the victim chose not to pursue the case. Work by the Suzy Lamplugh Trust helps to explain why, and argues that victims have been let down at every stage by the police, the CPS, and the courts. The trust's super-complaint against the police in 2022 found that they were not even identifying stalking cases, and even when they were, they often did not properly investigate. The trust

[Alison Hume]

recommended that stalking protection orders should be applied for and put in place at as early a stage as possible.

After years of failure under the Tories, this Bill cannot come soon enough for victims of stalking. New domestic abuse protection orders have been piloted, which victims can apply for themselves. Stalking victims also feel that their lives are controlled by someone else, so giving them the chance to apply for a stalking protection order would hand power back to them. I am so pleased that the Government are considering wider changes to stalking protection orders, and I invite the Minister to comment on whether they will look at allowing victims to apply for them. To conclude, on behalf of my constituents in Scarborough and Whitby I am proud to support the Bill.

8.30 pm

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I firmly support the Bill—the most substantial of this Parliament so far. It will make streets in Wolverhampton North East and across the country safer, and it is frankly shocking that many of the proposed laws are not already in place. Just a glance on social media will show doorbell footage of where our streets have become a hunting ground for criminals. It is incredible that today criminals can carry sophisticated car theft devices such as signal jammers, keyless repeaters and signal amplifiers, but unless they are caught using those tools in the act, they cannot be arrested. That ends with the Bill, because simply possessing such tools will be a criminal offence. This is long overdue. More than 700,000 vehicles were broken into last year, with 40% of cases involving those high-tech devices.

The Bill will introduce around 50 new laws, finally cracking down on crime and antisocial behaviour. Some of the changes prompt a question about why such laws were not already in place. Violent attacks on shop workers will now be a stand-alone offence, and shoplifting will no longer be dismissed as a low-value crime, with a £200 loophole fuelling an epidemic of theft. New powers will ensure that repeat offenders are banned from retail areas more quickly, and that they will stay away. Illegal off-road bikes? Immediate seizure. No more warnings, no more second chances. If someone rides illegally, they will lose their bike, and instead of that bike being auctioned off and falling back into the hands of jobs, it will be crushed.

Just last Friday I went out on a walkabout with the neighbourhood police in Wednesfield high street. Wednesfield is a safe area, with lower crime than other high streets in Wolverhampton and Willenhall, but I was appalled to hear from shop workers about the brazen thefts that they endure. I spoke to a young lady who had just turned 19 and is petrified every time shop theft happens—and in her shop it happens every day. Theft has become so normalised that staff are struggling to report every incident because they simply cannot keep up. USDAW, the retail workers union, has been calling for stronger protection for years. It welcomes the Bill, stating:

“Tougher laws are needed to protect shop workers, and we welcome this legislation as a vital step in tackling retail violence.”

West Midlands police now has 540 fewer officers than it did in 2010.

**Alex Ballinger:** My hon. Friend and neighbour from the west midlands talks about there being 540 fewer officers in our area between 2010 and 2024, and I was also concerned to see that the highest level of knife crime in the country was reached in our part of the west midlands. Does she agree that since the Labour party has been elected, we have started to bring knife crime down, and does she welcome the fact that we are now on a trajectory to improve that situation?

**Mrs Brackenridge:** I certainly do support that. The west midlands is no longer the knife-crime capital of the world thanks to the effective work of the police, in partnership with local authorities, the combined authority, our violence reduction units, a lot of dedicated volunteers and our fantastic schools.

When it comes to reversing the decimation of neighbourhood policing, I am delighted that Wednesfield and Heath Town have recently received an extra police officer and PCSO, and Willenhall has received a new PCSO, but that is just the beginning. Labour is turning this situation around and we will rebuild neighbouring policing, because that is how to prevent crime before it happens: good, old-fashioned community intelligence and presence.

The Bill will make my constituents safer, and ensure that they feel safer. To the criminals who are getting away with stealing cars, intimidating shop staff, tearing up our green spaces with illegal bikes and terrorising our communities: enough is enough. I wholeheartedly support the Bill.

8.35 pm

**Mr Jonathan Brash** (Hartlepool) (Lab): Perhaps the most pernicious effect of 14 years of Conservative Government is how they systematically undermined security in every part of our society, whether it was national security through the hollowing out of our armed forces, financial security with our economy crashed and wages stagnating, or security in our communities. Town centres are plagued by antisocial behaviour, off-road bikes terrorise estates and shoplifting is out of control. This Bill seeks to deal with those issues.

The consequence of that insecurity can be devastating. It breeds fear, anxiety and division, and it opens up a political space into which populists, with no real answers, can enter to further their own selfish ambitions. Speaking of populists with no answers, Reform Members have not spent a second in the Chamber during today's debate about antisocial behaviour in our communities.

For far too long, the entrance to Hartlepool's shopping centre on York Road, known locally as “the ramp”, has been plagued by individuals who seek to intimidate and disrupt the daily lives of decent, hard-working people. I am fed up of hearing families and pensioners tell me that they are too scared to walk through our town centre. Whatever the personal challenges of that small minority of disruptive individuals, they have no right to make the people of Hartlepool feel unsafe in their community.

As chair of the Safer Hartlepool Partnership, I have proposed a comprehensive action plan for the police and council to implement, including a range of targeted interventions designed to tackle the issue head-on, which the Bill enhances and extends. One key measure is the

use of public space protection orders that allow us to prohibit certain behaviours in and around a particular geographic area. The Bill reinforces that tool by increasing the maximum fine for violating such an order from £100 to £500, ensuring stronger deterrents against antisocial behaviour.

I am also pushing for the greater use of enforcement powers, including dispersal orders, which the Bill extends from 48 hours to 72 hours, and community safety accreditation schemes, which grant police enforcement powers to council, shopping centre and other security teams, helping to free up police resources that, again, the Bill extends and strengthens.

The introduction of respect orders, which are new civil behavioural orders that allow courts to ban adult offenders from engaging in specific antisocial activities, will be a huge tool in Hartlepool. Breaching a respect order will be a criminal offence, enabling police to swiftly intervene and prevent further disruption. Importantly, those orders can also include positive requirements, compelling offenders to address the root causes of their behaviour, an approach that will be particularly useful in the communities that I represent where drug-related issues are often at the heart of the problem.

I welcome the Bill's measures about off-road bikes, which terrorise many communities in Hartlepool. I have already spoken to the Minister about further powers that I would like to see included in the Bill to enhance it. The Bill also tackles wider issues, such as closure orders, shoplifting, fly-tipping and child protection. Those are not easy problems to fix, but with this Bill, we now have the toughest set of enforcement powers ever introduced by a Government. It is our duty to ensure that we use them.

8.39 pm

**Deirdre Costigan** (Ealing Southall) (Lab): The legacy of the Conservative Government's 14 years in power is one of failure to keep us safe, and it is felt every day in my constituency of Ealing Southall. On Guru Nanak Road, King Street and Western Road in Southall, drug dealing is a common sight and makes the area feel unsafe for everyone. The police do not have enough resources, so the Singh Sabha gurdwara has had to employ its own patrols, at a cost of thousands of pounds, to keep its worshippers safe.

Hanwell clock tower has become a magnet for street drinkers. The police try to move them on, but they just do not have the powers under the weak laws left by the Conservatives. In west Ealing, drug dealers openly ply their trade, even sitting in residents' front porches when they are out, while the police cannot do much about it. Across London, it is not safe to take a phone call on the street, as people are liable to have their phone snatched. On top of that, fly-tipping increased by one third under the previous Government, making local neighbourhoods feel neglected and unloved—of course the drug dealers, phone thieves and street drinkers moved in.

Under the last Labour Government, there were six police and community support officers for every single ward in Ealing Southall, but the Conservatives cut £1 billion from policing in London, so we are lucky to have a couple of local officers per ward. They are not dedicated to the area, like they used to be—they get pulled to Brent, Harrow or central London. Under the previous Labour Government, the police also had stronger powers; the Conservatives actually reduced police powers.

Labour has already started the work to bring back neighbourhood policing and to recruit 13,000 new officers, with £320 million of extra funding for police in London. We will ensure that police officers get back out on the streets, instead of doing admin work like they were doing under the previous Government.

This Bill will give those new officers the tough powers they need to tackle antisocial behaviour and crime, with 50 new laws to make our streets safer. Our new respect orders will mean that the police can stop street drinkers from congregating at Hanwell clock tower and stop drug dealers from coming into west Ealing and Southall. If people break respect orders, the police will now be able to arrest them immediately and take them to court, where they can face up to two years in prison. The police will be able to drug test more people on arrest, and respect orders will require that drinkers and drug users access rehab services to break the cycle of dependency.

The Bill will also give police the power to search a property without a warrant where they have evidence that there is a stolen electronic device inside. I had my own phone stolen a while back; I could see on the internet that it was in east London, but the police could not do anything about it. This law will now mean that police can use "find my phone" apps to go after phone thieves and get stolen property back.

I am delighted that as part of this Bill, the Secretary of State will issue statutory guidance to local councils to help to ensure a more consistent approach to fly-tipping. Ealing Council is the No. 1 borough in the country when it comes to issuing fixed-penalty notices against fly-tippers, but it needs help to do more. Under the Conservatives, fly-tipping was allowed to spiral and was seen as a low-level crime, but it blights communities. I know that this Labour Government are looking at further steps we can take to punish fly-tippers and to reduce waste in the first place.

After 14 years of the Conservatives leaving local people in Ealing Southall to put up with open drug taking, street drinking and snatch thefts, Labour is giving the police back the power and the resources to take the tough action needed to make our streets safe again.

8.43 pm

**Steve Yemm** (Mansfield) (Lab): This Bill will be very much welcomed back in my constituency, with this Government introducing 50 new laws that will help to cut crime and make my area's streets safer. They include measures to tackle antisocial behaviour and stop theft, particularly in shops, and to tackle street crime head on, giving the police in our communities new powers to take back town centres from thugs and thieves and tackling knife crime, violence against women and girls, cyber-crime, child sexual abuse and terrorism.

That said, I am particularly pleased to see that this Bill deals with one particular issue. Illegal off-road bikes and e-scooters are a significant concern to many people in Mansfield. Antisocial behaviour connected to their inappropriate use was raised with me time and time again on the doorstep during the election campaign, and it is now raised in my casework inbox. I will share one such example, from a constituent who recently contacted me about this issue:

"Only yesterday whilst out with my husband doing 'grandparent school duties' we were yet again placed in a serious and dangerous situation. Several youths appeared out of nowhere wearing balaclavas



[Steve Yemm]

weaving around our vehicle before racing off in different directions. The silence of them means you have no awareness of them before they appear in front of your car”.

Many constituents report similar concerns, and are exasperated that nothing can be done to deal with the issue. Enough is enough, and I am delighted to announce after discussions I have had with local officers in Mansfield that the police are launching a crackdown over the coming weeks to tackle antisocial behaviour in my constituency related to off-road bikes and e-scooters.

As part of this crackdown, officers are appealing to the public to come forward via a new dedicated police email address—set up with my office and by the 101 phone line—to report any illegal bike-related antisocial behaviour. Using that information, officers will take significant enforcement action to target those who are terrorising our communities in Mansfield. I will be working closely with the police during that campaign, and will be holding a public meeting with them on 21 March to explain how it will work. I would be delighted to update the Home Secretary on its progress. More information will be released by my office in the coming days, but this crackdown will rely on my constituents acting as the eyes and ears on the ground. Without their reports, the project will not be a success, so I urge local people in Mansfield to get involved.

To conclude, my message to those causing misery in Mansfield is this: “We see you. The police are coming for you, and our communities will not let you get away with it any longer.”

8.46 pm

**Baggy Shanker** (Derby South) (Lab/Co-op): I encourage all hon. Members to visit us in Derby and in Derby city centre. They will find a city that is firmly on the up, with a bright future ahead. Our city centre regeneration projects are full steam ahead. We are creating fantastic cultural and community hubs in Derby, whether that is our multimillion-pound revamp of our market hall, the completion of the Becketwell Live arena or the University of Derby’s new business school, all of which are set to open their doors in the coming months. I want everyone in our community to be able to take a walk around our city and feel proud and safe.

However, although we are rightly excited about the future that Derby holds, we have to acknowledge the problems that the city centre faces. Our pride is tested when we see fly-tipping on the side of the road. It is tested again when we are worried about walking on the pavement because e-scooters are being used antisocially, and it is tested further for shop workers who are worried about going to work because the previous day they were threatened during a shoplifting incident. Lots of fantastic work is under way on these issues at a local level, such as the work of our police and crime commissioner, Nicolle Ndiweni-Roberts, and of Derbyshire constabulary. They are clamping down on illegal e-scooters, seizing and disposing of more than 200 since last November alone. However, I and my constituents know that more needs to be done so that they can feel proud and safe in the city we call home.

For that reason, I welcome the measures introduced in today’s Bill, which will go further to protect city centres such as Derby and their residents from antisocial

behaviour and crime. Whether they are employees at our central Co-op in Osmaston or at the Asda superstore in Sinfyn, it is right that this Bill will introduce specific measures to protect them from retail crime. Shockingly, 18% of shop workers were assaulted in 2023. Nobody should fear going into work, which is why I am pleased that this Bill will make assaulting a shop worker a stand-alone offence.

**Ben Coleman** (Chelsea and Fulham) (Lab): May I associate myself with my hon. Friend’s remarks? Does he find it as absurd as I do that under the Conservatives there was effective immunity from shoplifting goods under £200? That meant that shoplifting rose by 60%. Does he therefore welcome the fact that that effective immunity is ending, and that we are introducing a new criminal offence that will protect shop workers from being attacked and assaulted, including those in my constituency who have complained about that?

**Baggy Shanker**: I thank my hon. Friend for that timely intervention. It is important that the £200 limit is being scrapped. I have spoken to many shop workers across Derby who have said that, literally on a daily basis, people are walking into the shops, loading their bags and walking straight out, almost apologetically.

This Bill also introduces tougher action on knife crime, more power to support councils to tackle fly-tipping and measures to let police seize vehicles such as e-scooters much faster if they are being used for antisocial purposes. The Bill will tackle violence against women and girls by introducing a specific new offence for spiking.

I want every single person in Derby—I am sure everybody in this House wants this for every single person across the country—to feel safe and to enjoy our city and the places where they live. This Bill represents a huge step forward in achieving that, and that is why I fully support it.

8.51 pm

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): After 14 years of Conservative Government, antisocial behaviour has become far too common. Last year, 36% of people reported experiencing antisocial behaviour. Police powers to tackle criminal behaviour have been consistently weakened. Our communities have been left exposed, and we have heard many powerful examples of that from Members across the House today. That is why the measures in this Bill are so badly needed.

Shoplifting, casual drug taking, reckless driving and neighbourhood intimidation may not seem overly significant on their own, but when committed persistently, these low-level acts of antisocial behaviour make our communities that bit less safe, one crime at a time. Speaking to residents on the doorsteps in Jennett’s Park in Great Hollands recently, I heard how a spate of car thefts was making people lose sleep at night. Bracknell Forest is an incredible place to live, with a comparatively low crime rate, but whether it is drug taking in our underpasses, motorised bikes being driven around our footpaths or shoplifting targeting our shops, our community is feeling the effects of the Tories’ weak response to crime and antisocial behaviour.

Last year, shoplifting in Bracknell and Wokingham went up by 46%. That is not just in the town centre, but across Bracknell Forest, including in Sandhurst, where one local convenience store has been repeatedly targeted

and their staff threatened. I have seen it myself, sitting in a café of a local supermarket with the manager and watching as a shoplifter walked out of the shop. They were known to the staff, but there was little they could do to stop the frequent thefts.

I thank Thames Valley police for the work they are doing to tackle this endemic shoplifting, and I am pleased to say that the precipitous rise is now slowing down. However, the police need the right powers in place if they are to get to grips with the problem. That is why it is so welcome that the Crime and Policing Bill will introduce tough new respect orders to ban repeat offenders from antisocial hotspots. We are introducing a new criminal offence to protect retail workers from abuse, thanks to the fantastic campaigning by the Co-op party and USDAW. This Bill will scrap the Tory shoplifters' charter, which meant that, under the previous Government, anyone caught shoplifting goods below £200 could escape prosecution.

Many of my constituents are also concerned by the increasing numbers of casual drug users on our streets. In September, a mother wrote to me with concerns about brazen drug dealing going on near the town centre and the impact that has on vulnerable groups in the area. I have also heard concerns from local parents that drug dealers are targeting young people as they leave school. That is why it is so important that the Crime and Policing Bill will introduce new police powers to make drug-testing suspects on arrest easier, and respect orders to allow police to crack down on those repeat offenders frequenting the same spots. These new powers are an important step in delivering Labour's safer streets mission.

**Sam Rushworth** (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): My hon. Friend is doing a great job in explaining some of the new powers that the Bill will give our police. Police officers in my area to whom I have spoken find it absurd that it has taken until now to do so. Does my hon. Friend agree that these measures are such common sense that no reasonable party in the House should vote against them?

**Peter Swallow:** Absolutely—and it would be great to see more Opposition Members here to support the measures. The powers introduced by the Bill are indeed welcome, but under the last Government we saw a reduction in the use of powers that already existed. In 2010, Thames Valley police issued more than 6,000 antisocial behaviour notices—penalty notices for disorder—but in 2023 they issued only 412, which is a 93% decrease.

As I have said, these new powers are an important step in the delivery of Labour's safer streets mission, but as well as giving police the right powers to crack down on antisocial behaviour—as my hon. Friend mentioned—we need to give them the right resources. That is why it is so important that this Government have increased police funding by more than £1 billion, and the budget of Thames Valley police has been increased by 6.6%. Our safer streets mission will see 13,000 additional police officers on Britain's streets, along with a named, contactable officer in each community. That will help people to feel safe in their communities again. The Tories introduced chaos on our streets and in our communities, and Labour will do the hard work that is needed to bring back order and security.

8.56 pm

**Amanda Martin** (Portsmouth North) (Lab): As the daughter and niece of retired police officers and with a cousin, Alex, currently serving for the same constabulary, I want to start by saying a huge thank you to Hampshire police.

It is a privilege to speak in this debate on a Bill that seeks to strengthen law enforcement and restore public confidence in policing. It is about the real experience of our constituents who have suffered as a result of crime and antisocial behaviour, and feel that the system is failing them. For example, in the first nine days of the financial year, the store manager of a Tesco Express in my constituency logged 22 incidents of shoplifting, trespass, verbal abuse and threats of violence. The Bill will ensure that the police have a mandate to act swiftly, especially in instances of repeat and organised retail crime, regardless of the value of the stolen goods.

Another constituent's car has been vandalised twice, and one incident was so severe that the car was written off. Vandalism is not a minor inconvenience; it is costly and distressing, and leaves people feeling unsafe in their own communities. Car theft also continues to plague my constituents. One resident's car has been stolen four times, and the daughter of another has had her moped stolen twice, even having to recover it herself on one occasion. That is not to mention the number of "tradies" who are subject to tool theft. The Bill will empower police forces to take property crimes more seriously, make it easier to track and recover stolen vehicles, and more importantly, ensure that victims of theft receive timely police responses.

The Scottish estate in Cosham, the London Road in Northend, Allaway Avenue in Paulsgrove and Tangiers Road in Baffins are just four of the many places where e-scooters, bikes and cars race deafeningly and dangerously in my constituency. I am pleased that the Bill removes the need of the police to issue a warning before seizing vehicles being used antisocially. This is the start of a real crackdown on vehicles being used to intimidate pedestrians and increasingly commit crime.

Antisocial behaviour is destroying the quality of life for so many people. One of my constituents, an 80-year-old woman, has suffered relentless harassment from a neighbour. Her garden has been vandalised, furniture has been thrown, and she has been physically intimidated. The Bill gives the police stronger powers to tackle antisocial behaviour, and strengthens the use of existing antisocial behaviour powers.

The shadow of knife crime hangs over my constituency. In the past two months alone, and even today, there have been two stabbings and an attempted murder involving two teenagers. Parents are writing to me, terrified for their children's safety and demanding action. Some have even raised concerns about the advertising of chefs' knives on television. I welcome the fact that this Bill provides the police with the powers they need to take knives off our streets, enforce tougher penalties for possession and intervene early to prevent young people from being drawn into violent crime, because knife crime kills.

Finally, a father has reached out to me to say he is deeply concerned about the safety of women and girls in Portsmouth. His 15-year-old daughter, who loves running, has been catcalled and harassed multiple times, and she has not reported it because she believes it would

[Amanda Martin]

waste police time. As we know, low-level crime against women can be a gateway to more serious crimes, and I welcome the fact that this Bill brings in new protections for women.

This is not a Portsmouth-specific issue, and it is not a Labour issue, which is why it is shocking to see the lack of Opposition Members in this place today. All our constituents deserve to live in safe communities, and they deserve their MPs to make changes and put those changes into action.

9 pm

**Phil Brickell** (Bolton West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of this vital Bill, which will see the Labour Government deliver on the promise made at the last election to return our town centres to our constituents and make our streets safe. This Bill addresses pressing issues that have long plagued our society, and its provisions are both timely and necessary, particularly on the sexual abuse of children, knife crime and economic crime.

First, on child sexual abuse, the NSPCC has found that over 100 child sexual abuse image crimes are recorded by the police every day. That is a horrifying statistic, and it should focus the minds of all of us in this place, which is why supporting victims and survivors is rightly the cornerstone of this Bill. I very much welcome the steps taken to ensure that our criminal justice system, which was neglected for far too long under previous Conservative Governments, is better equipped to handle such cases effectively.

Secondly, the Bill's measures on knife crime, which has devastated families and communities across the country, will also safeguard our children.

**Natasha Irons** (Croydon East) (Lab): I am one of the MPs for Croydon, a place that continues to pay the price for the previous Government's inaction on knife crime and youth violence. Does my hon. Friend agree that when it comes to youth violence, we have to focus on prevention, and does he welcome the introduction of the Young Futures programme so that we can prevent young people from getting drawn into crime in the first place?

**Phil Brickell:** I absolutely agree that prevention is fundamental, especially when it comes to youth crime.

The senseless killing of seven-year-old Emily Jones in Queen's park, Bolton, in 2020 was horrifying. Knife crime incidents have been on the rise in towns such as Bolton for a number of years, so we owe it to Emily and her family, and to all those who have been affected by knife crime, to take bold action and to take it now. To this end, I am pleased to see that the Bill introduces tougher sentencing for repeat offenders and strengthens the police's powers to seize dangerous weapons before they are used to cause harm.

Thirdly, a number of the crimes that I have detailed are enabled by economic crimes, such as money laundering and fraud. Indeed, we heard earlier from the shadow Home Secretary about crime statistics. What I would say to those on the Opposition Benches is that we have seen a fraud epidemic over the last few years, and cases were allowed to spiral out of control under previous Conservative Administrations. Frankly, they were ignored by the shadow Home Secretary when he was a Minister.

Indeed, April 2022 to March 2023 saw 3.5 million cases of fraud in this country—40% of all crime, according to the ONS.

By removing the ability of criminals to launder their ill-gotten gains in the clean economy, we can remove the primary incentive for the behaviour that drives so much of the criminal activity that we have been debating tonight. Indeed, having spent almost 15 years tackling economic crime, I particularly welcome the new provision in the Bill to cap court costs for enforcement agencies, which the Conservative party never addressed. Too often, our law enforcement bodies face intolerable financial risks when pursuing the recovery of ill-gotten gains from deep-pocketed crooks with expensive lawyers. One minor mistake by the National Crime Agency or the Serious Fraud Office can wipe out a whole year's budget.

That has had a chilling effect on the risk appetite of agencies to tackle those suspected of serious and organised crime, which drives so much of the criminality that we are debating tonight. By introducing cost protection in clause 103, the Government are rightly levelling the playing field for enforcement agencies and those who are charged. This will send a powerful message about the rule of law in this country, which is that no matter how rich or well connected someone is, if they are engaged in criminal behaviour, justice will be done.

We are in a very challenging place when it comes to the public finances, and the tax burden bequeathed by the Conservative party to my constituents is already far too high, which brings me to a specific proposal that I would urge the Minister to consider as the Bill progresses through this place. Economic crime costs us around £300 billion every year, yet less than 1% of police resources are dedicated to tackling it, so why not make the criminals pay? A cross-governmental economic crime fighting fund would use the reinvested proceeds of regulatory and criminal fines, asset recoveries and deferred prosecution agreements to provide sustainable funding and increased firepower for our enforcement agencies' capabilities. I hope the Minister will respond to this ask for a sustainable and innovative solution in her wind-up.

The Bill provides a much-needed shake-up for crime and policing in this country. It will return our streets and town centres to our constituents and deliver justice where too often it was denied.

9.5 pm

**Damien Egan** (Bristol North East) (Lab): I am very happy to be able to speak and to add my support to this Bill, and I appreciate the depth and ambition of the measures that have been brought forward.

When I meet my local police officers in Bristol and South Gloucestershire, I see a committed group of men and women completely dedicated to public service, but I also see that morale is low. Police numbers in Avon and Somerset have fallen, with the number of PCSOs dropping from 424 in 2010 to 255 today. After 14 years of cuts, officers question if they are appreciated. For our police, I hope that this Bill is seen as a demonstration of the confidence that we have in them and the respect we have for the difficult job they do.

I welcome the steps taken to let police get on with their jobs, including searching premises where phones are geolocated, confiscating illegal road bikes and introducing respect orders, as well as lifting the £200 cap on when



officers will investigate shoplifting. There are also the new protections for shop workers such as the women I have met working in Boots in Kingswood and the PDSA—People’s Dispensary for Sick Animals—charity shop in Kingswood, which are just two of the shops blighted day in and day out by shoplifters.

On a different aspect of the Bill, we have seen the struggles and confusion in relation to policing public order at protests. Protest is a cornerstone of our democracy, but we have seen examples of protests that have become hateful, have incited violence and have become violent. Fines for climbing on war memorials and banning face coverings will help maintain public order, and I hope the police know that they have our support to act when they see wrongdoing. As the Bill progresses, I would ask Ministers to consider how robust the exemptions are for face coverings, as they may be open to misuse. For example, the health exemptions could have very broad interpretations.

On knife crime, officers in my patch certainly welcome the changes, but they are concerned about how unscrupulous knife manufacturers could adapt to selling knives that, while technically legal, still glamorise violence. In the past year, I have got to know a woman called Hayley Ryall, the mother of Mikey Roynon from Kingswood, who was tragically killed at a birthday party when he was stabbed by three young men in June 2023. Mikey was a beautiful young man, and he was just 16 when he was killed. With the ongoing trials of serious violence reduction orders in Thames Valley, the West Midlands, Merseyside and Sussex coming to their conclusion this year, Hayley has asked me when a decision will be made on the wider roll-out of serious violence reduction orders and when that will take place.

All these measures will only have the full effect if we have the officers on our streets to police them. Avon and Somerset recently received a £27 million uplift in funding, and I look forward to seeing this money used for more recruitment and to support our existing officers. There is much to fix—we all know that—and these measures go a good way to putting the balance of power back towards law and order.

9.9 pm

**Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): I rise to support the Bill and to commend the Government for bringing forward such a robust response to the scourge of retail crime that affects communities across our country, including my constituents in Banbury, Chipping Norton, Charlbury and the villages of north and west Oxfordshire.

In my constituency, shoplifting offences increased by 25% between March 2022 and March 2024. This is a deeply concerning trend, not only for shopkeepers but for the local communities they serve. Shoplifting costs the average UK convenience store £6,259 a year. These costs are often passed on through the prices that customers pay, or are reflected in the serious questions that those shops face about their viability. The importance of our local shops’ financial viability is particularly pronounced in rural areas such as Hook Norton, Enstone and Bloxham in my constituency, where they are not just businesses but essential services that form part of the fabric of the community.

This Bill sends a clear and powerful message that rising rates of shoplifting will not be tolerated under this Government. The removal of the effective immunity

for shop thefts under £200 will help to deter petty thieves and repeat offenders who have exploited that loophole. By closing the gap, the Bill ensures that every crime, no matter how small and seemingly petty, will be taken seriously.

The measures outlined in the Bill are precisely what shopkeepers in my constituency have been calling for. Not only does the Bill clamp down on shoplifting, but it introduces a new offence of assaulting a retail worker. This provision stands firmly by those who serve our communities day in and day out. Shop workers deserve to feel safe in their workplace, and this new offence rightly acknowledges the seriousness of the threats and violence they face on a daily basis.

This comprehensive and well-considered Bill delivers on this Government’s promise to make our streets safer and to protect the people who keep our communities running. I commend the Home Secretary, the ministerial team and the Government for their decisive action, which will benefit rural communities, as well as communities the length and breadth of the country. I urge all hon. Members to support it.

9.12 pm

**Mr Calvin Bailey** (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in support of the Bill, which responds to the concerns of many in Leyton and Wanstead.

In October, my Adjournment debate highlighted the terrible impacts of antisocial behaviour in Leytonstone, including in the Avenue Road estate, Selby Road and the surrounding area. Despite good engagement from the police and council leaders, residents still face hotspots of drug injecting, vandalism and abuse in public spaces. This creates fear and makes families feel that their streets no longer belong to them. The response of the Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention was encouraging, committing to the respect orders now in this Bill, and I thank her for her visit to Leyton and Wanstead last November.

This Bill addresses key issues. The new legislation on cuckooing in chapter 2 of part 4 will tackle homes used for drug taking, which are particularly seen in areas such as Leytonstone. Respect orders will enhance local initiatives such as mandatory drug programmes, Project Adder and addressing public drinking in areas such as Jubilee Road.

Part 3 delivers on our pledge to introduce a special offence for assaults on shop workers, and it strengthens penalties for shoplifting. Persistent, violent shoplifting has taken hold. A staff member at Church Lane Sainsbury’s in Leytonstone said, “Each and every day it’s going mad. Shoplifters roam the streets from six in the morning every day. We are losing more than £500. Our safety is on the line.” In South Woodford, the Co-op has repeatedly been attacked. When a constituent stepped in to help, they were threatened with a glass bottle. The nearby Boots has faced repeated thefts, with some shoplifters returning four or five times a day.

Constituents describe the fear of retail staff and sadness that children might grow up seeing this situation as normal. It is not normal. We must ensure that our children do not grow up thinking that the high street is a criminals’ playground. We must ensure that no shop worker faces daily threats. We must acknowledge the role that USDAW has played in addressing these issues.

[Mr Calvin Bailey]

I ask the Minister to provide a view on how the law may be extended to protect transport workers, as proposed by the Transport Salaried Staffs Association in its recent report, which highlights the extent of the violence its members face.

I welcome the measures enabling police to target locations storing stolen goods, which often double as hubs for drug dealing. The Bill will enable more effective, co-ordinated police responses, but we must go further. The return of 13,500 police officers is vital, as are our named neighbourhood police officers, but we must also reduce the high abstraction rates that remove those officers from our streets. That is what the people of Leyton and Wanstead deserve, and I hope the Government will go further in this regard. I am proud to support the Bill today.

9.15 pm

**Jon Pearce** (High Peak) (Lab): In High Peak, our five major towns—Buxton, Glossop, New Mills, Chapel-en-le-Frith and Whaley Bridge—have all been affected in different ways by the crimes the Bill seeks to address. Our town centres are the hearts of our community. At their best, they bring people together and create a sense of pride and belonging. When antisocial behaviour, theft and shoplifting are allowed to take root, it affects not just the victims, but the whole community. Sadly, the previous Government all too often wrote those crimes off as low level and left our communities feeling powerless. This Bill is for all the people I have met on the doorstep and who have come to my surgeries in High Peak—people who wanted a Government on their side, who would take these crimes seriously.

This Bill is for the retail workers and business owners who have to deal with shoplifting day in, day out. The previous Government effectively decriminalised shoplifting of goods worth less than £200, but this Bill will end the Tory shoplifters' charter and go further by introducing a new criminal offence to better protect retail workers from assault.

This Bill is for all those who want our streets to be safer and pride to be restored to our communities. At the end of February, Derbyshire police had to put in place a dispersal order for two whole days in Glossop in order to tackle antisocial behaviour. The Bill will extend those powers to 72 hours. Through the new respect orders, it sends a clear message to persistent troublemakers: "We see you, we will disrupt you, and we will make your life as difficult as you have made the lives of others."

**Ben Coleman**: Does my hon. Friend agree that it is good news that at last we have a Government who are doing something about the scourge of off-road bikes and dangerous e-scooters on the pavements and in our parks by giving the police new powers to seize those vehicles immediately, instead of letting the problem continue? Although this should have happened much sooner, it will make the lives of my residents in Chelsea and Fulham, and people across the country, happier and safer.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes)**: Order. By way of being helpful, I remind right hon. and hon. Members that when they make interventions, they should address them to the Chair, and not to other Members, so there can be no confusion in the debate.

**Jon Pearce**: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I thoroughly agree that the new powers will be hugely helpful, both in his constituency and in my own.

This Bill is for our children and the most vulnerable in our communities. The hottest circle of hell is reserved for anyone who exploits and abuses a child. The independent inquiry into child sex abuse, which was set up by the Conservatives in 2015, took seven years to complete and cost £200 million, made 20 recommendations. Shamefully, the previous Government did not implement a single one. This Bill will right that wrong. We will introduce statutory reporting for instances of child sex abuse, grooming behaviour will be an aggravating factor, and there will be new powers to search for instances of child sex abuse on digital devices of individuals arriving in the UK.

We will go further by going after the gangs that seek to exploit children for criminal purposes. It is estimated that 14,000 children are at risk or involved in criminal exploitation, and sadly, some of those victims are in High Peak. From police and schools, I have heard heartbreaking stories of children being forced into drug dealing, of homes being taken over by drug dealers, and of young lives ruined. The weak laws that the previous Government left us meant that authorities were powerless to act in many cases. Our new laws will make it a criminal offence for adults to use children to commit criminal offences such as drug running, organised robbery and the new offence of cuckooing. The vile gangs that exploit children in High Peak for criminal gain are the lowest of the low, and I will be supporting Derbyshire police to use the full extent of the new laws to drive them out of our communities.

This Bill is for women and girls. For International Women's Day, I held a joint event with Crossroads Derbyshire, an incredible charity that works to support domestic abuse survivors. Crossroads has a new stalking advocacy service, funded by the Labour police and crime commissioner's office. The Bill will strengthen the police's response to stalking and give victims the right to know the identity of online stalkers. Let the message go out from here today to stalkers: "There will be no hiding place for you on our streets or online."

This Bill is for everyone who believes in the rule of law and that there should be zero tolerance for those who threaten our security and safety. It is for those who want to take back control of our streets and communities.

9.21 pm

**Alex Ballinger** (Halesowen) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate as the son of a local bobby—my mum worked for 20 years in the local police, serving her community, and I could not be more proud of her. My father, too, was a local bobby, as was his father before him, so my family have something of a reputation.

I am, of course, delighted to see the Government's recommitment to neighbourhood policing after 14 years of neglect. My mum often spoke about the importance of a neighbourhood police officer understanding her community, who the troublemakers are, how to calm tensions and how to make people feel safe. For people across my constituency, feeling safe is what they care about most. They do not feel safe when they see rising

rates of knife crime among our young people, or antisocial behaviour on our high streets. They worry that they never see the police on the streets any more.

How we got into this situation is no mystery. Cuts to neighbourhood policing by the last Government left a huge gap in our communities. Before the recent uplift, the west midlands had 700 fewer police officers than it did under the last Labour Government in 2010. People in Halesowen want to feel safe in their homes, on their streets and in their public spaces. They want to trust that the police have the resources, funding and support necessary to do their job.

Two of my constituents, Mr and Mrs Lobodzic, have been in touch to tell me about the impact that antisocial behaviour has had on their lives. Residents of Cradley Heath, they have been subject to harassment, intimidation and unchecked antisocial behaviour, and they have felt unsafe in their own home. The lack of accountability for those responsible has left them feeling hopeless and abandoned. The Bill takes the essential steps needed to address antisocial behaviour such as that experienced by my constituents.

The new respect order can be imposed on individuals who have engaged in, or threatened to engage in, antisocial behaviour. Importantly, breaching a respect order now constitutes a criminal offence. For my constituents in Halesowen, that will provide much-needed reassurance that their concerns are being taken seriously, and that those who disrupt the peace will face real consequences. Deputy Chief Constable Andy Prophet, who leads on antisocial behaviour for the National Police Chiefs' Council, said:

“Respect orders will give the police and councils the ability to crack down on those who persistently make our streets and public spaces feel unsafe.”

Although those measures are promising, it is important that they go hand in hand with another critical demand from my constituents: the visible presence of police officers. People want to see their local officers regularly patrolling their streets, just as my mum used to do. That is why I am pleased to see, alongside the Bill, the introduction of the neighbourhood policing guarantee, which will ensure the deployment of an additional 13,000 police officers, PCSOs and special constables into neighbourhood policing roles. By reinforcing community policing, we will not only deter and prevent crime, but strengthen the response to emergencies and enhance trust between the police and the public.

In Halesowen we are fortunate to have dedicated and exemplary police officers such as Sergeant Nichola Chester, and PCSOs such as Nathan Fung, as members of our excellent but stretched neighbourhood team. It is vital that their efforts are bolstered with the resources and manpower that they need to maintain safety and security. The Bill is a critical step towards achieving that goal.

The people of Halesowen deserve to live without fear, to walk our streets with confidence and to know that their Government are steadfast in their commitment to their safety. The Bill, with its focus on tackling antisocial behaviour and reinvigorating neighbourhood policing, represents a decisive step in the right direction, and I am pleased to support it.

9.25 pm

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): I rise to support the Government's Crime and Policing Bill. The last time I addressed the House on policing I shared the fact that the borough of Redbridge, which I led, once had five police stations, but after a decade of Conservative cuts only one remains standing. That is not just a fact but a direct reflection of how the Conservative party deprioritised policing and failed to protect our residents, friends and neighbours. When we deprioritise policing, we do more than weaken law enforcement; we allow crime to spiral out of control, we expose our communities to harm and we erode the very fabric of our society.

The Bill is a crucial step in reversing 14 years of neglect and ensuring tougher consequences for criminal behaviour. It tackles a wide range of issues, from knife crime to terrorism, but I want to focus on a matter that affects our daily lives: antisocial behaviour. For too long it has been treated as low-level or even trivial crime, but in Ilford South and across the UK it is anything but trivial. It erodes community trust and often paves the way for more serious criminal activity. We see antisocial behaviour on the ground, in the nitrous oxide canisters littering our streets. We see it in our local shops, where retail workers face shoplifters daily. We see it on our streets, where young girls, often in school uniform, endure harassment from men much older than them.

Antisocial behaviour is not just an inconvenience but a warning sign. Last year, two teenagers stabbed staff members at Goodmayes station. They were also charged with a prior robbery incident at a nearby Tesco. That is what happens when we turn a blind eye to so-called low-level crime: it escalates, posing an even bigger threat to our communities. That is why I welcome the Bill. It makes a clear statement that antisocial behaviour will no longer be tolerated.

I am particularly pleased to see the scrapping of the effective immunity for shoplifting of goods under £200, and stronger protections for retail workers against assault. When workers in our shops, supermarkets and local businesses cannot feel safe, and we cannot feel safe doing our weekly shopping, the system has failed. By ending the decriminalisation of so-called low-level theft, we are ensuring that our local town centres are protected to thrive. Safety is about not just theft of property but the right to go about our daily lives and walk our streets without fear or intimidation.

When I was leader of Redbridge council, we took decisive action to make our streets safe for women and girls. We were the first council to use public spaces protection orders to punish those catcalling and harassing women and girls. I am pleased to see the strengthening of those protection orders in the Bill, and the introduction of respect orders, which will ensure that communities across the country have the power to tackle nuisance, harassment and intimidation on our streets.

We all deserve to feel safe in our homes, on our streets, in our shops and in our schools. The Bill begins to turn our promise into reality.

9.29 pm

**Lillian Jones** (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (Lab): In common with hon. Members from across the House, this debate is of paramount importance to the people in my constituency. The Labour Government have inherited



[Lillian Jones]

a shameful legacy from the Conservative party, which had 14 years to address criminality and antisocial behaviour but instead left our communities feeling unsafe.

The situation in Scotland has frightening similarities, with the SNP Government failing communities across Scotland. Since the SNP introduced its under-22 bus pass initiative, many of my constituents have told me that they are now afraid to visit Kilmarnock bus station or even use local bus services. This is not about demonising young people—far from it, as they are more likely to be victims of crime and antisocial behaviour than the perpetrators of it—but it is wrong to ignore the significant minority who make life a misery for others. Scotland badly needs Labour's respect orders to effectively tackle the minorities' behaviour that has been intimidating our communities for far too long.

Labour's respect orders will deliver stronger powers for our police in Scotland, helping them to keep our communities safe, but, yet again, Scotland is being let down by the SNP and its inaction. Similarly, the bus pass scheme, which should be something to be celebrated, has created a situation where people of all ages are now thinking twice about using their local bus services. As my friend the Scottish Labour leader Anas Sarwar said, "under-22s that are found to have repeatedly acted violently on buses"

should have their free bus passes taken off them. That should be obvious—rights should come with responsibilities—and it is shameful that there is currently no mechanism to withdraw a free bus pass from someone who has been abusing one. That needs to change.

It is totally unacceptable to see chronic antisocial behaviour continue with no effective action from the SNP. The Crime and Policing Bill demonstrates that Labour is on the side of law-abiding people, and I will be proud to vote for the Bill at the conclusion of the debate.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** That brings us to the Front-Bench contributions.

9.31 pm

**Matt Vickers (Stockton West) (Con):** I take this opportunity to thank our brave, hard-working police officers, PCSOs, police staff and volunteers for the huge sacrifices they make to keep our streets safe. I thank all hon. Members across the House for their considered and concise contributions.

The Bill covers a wide array of offences, and we all welcome that. Tackling criminality means equipping the police and enforcement agencies with the powers that they need to lock up dangerous perpetrators to make our streets safer. The Bill contains meaningful and impactful provisions, particularly in relation to knife crime, car theft, retail crime, the sharing of intimate images, child sexual abuse, drug testing and cuckooing among many others.

It is generous of the Government to hold the previous Conservative Government's work in such high esteem: in fact, about two thirds of the measures in the Bill are copied straight from the previous Government. As was said—I think on several occasions—it is a copy-and-paste job that even the Chancellor would blush over. I thank

my right hon. Friends the Members for Braintree (Mr Cleverly) and for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith), alongside many other past and current Members of the House, for their significant work in ensuring that those offences are included in the scope of the Bill. That work will ultimately have a positive impact on the lives of all our constituents. Time does not allow me to talk through all the measures in the Bill [HON. MEMBERS: "Oh."] I know that hon. Members are disappointed, but I will focus on a few important provisions.

First, let me turn to retail crime. As hon. Members across this House may know, having served as the chair of the all-party parliamentary group on the future of retail and as a former Woolies worker—no one ever questions whether I am old enough—I have been very involved in the campaign to protect our retail workers. I have joined the likes of the hon. Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris), Paul Gerrard from the Co-op, Helen Dickinson and the team at the British Retail Consortium, the Association of Convenience Stores, USDAW, numerous retailers and others who have worked to deliver more protection for our retail workers.

Back in 2021—during my slightly rebellious phase—I tabled an amendment that helped us to make an assault on a person providing a service to the public a statutory aggravating offence. More recently in April 2024, alongside a suite of measures designed to tackle retail crime, we saw the last Government agree to the creation of a stand-alone offence of assaulting a retail worker. I am glad that that will be taken up by the incumbent Government and hope that it will have a real impact and improve the lives of these important key workers in high streets and stores across the country.

I have two concerns, however, about the Bill regarding retail crime. First, the previous Government's plans had proposed to make it mandatory for the courts to impose at least a curfew requirement, an exclusion requirement or an electronic monitoring requirement on repeat offenders convicted of shoplifting or the new offence of assaulting a retail worker and sentenced to a community order or a suspended sentence. That had been welcomed by retailers, but the Bill does not include any provisions to this effect. I urge the Government to look again at this, to ensure that we are doing all we can to protect retail workers and avoid what appears to be the watering down of potential protections.

Secondly, on the plans to remove the £200 threshold for shoplifting, while the rhetoric sounds positive, it is untrue to say that theft under £200 was ever decriminalised. In fact, the Government's own impact assessment tells us that 90% of charges for shoplifting relate to property worth less than £200. There is a fear that measures will lead to further delays to justice being done while not leading to tougher or longer sentences. Victims of retail crime deserve swift justice, not year-long delays while perpetrators continue to offend.

I turn now to further legislative steps that I hope Members across the House will find difficult to oppose. One hugely important measure is the introduction of a statutory aggravating factor, requiring sentencing courts to treat grooming behaviour as an aggravating factor when considering the seriousness of child sexual offences. The Opposition believe that the Government should go further and establish a national statutory inquiry, but it

is right that they have brought forward this measure from the Criminal Justice Bill. It recognises the severity of the offence and ensures that third parties involved in the heinous practices of these rape gangs face justice and punishment. We must take every step possible to protect the most vulnerable and ensure that stronger laws are in place so that the terrible crimes of the past cannot be repeated.

Another key measure in the Bill, contained in clauses 96 to 100, expands the ability to conduct drug tests upon arrest. The expansion of the drug testing on arrival programme, introduced by the previous Conservative Government, has already demonstrated the sheer number of individuals found to be under the influence of substances when arrested. Between March 2022 and September 2024, police forces reported a total of 154,295 tests to the Home Office. Of these, 86,207, or 56%, were positive for cocaine, opiates or both. It is therefore right that we expand the drug testing programme to cover as wide a range of class B and C drugs as possible, allowing the police to access the information they need to manage offenders appropriately within the criminal justice system.

I also welcome the efforts to tackle off-road bikes. Having seen their impact on my constituents, I hope that during the passage of the Bill we might consider going even further, maybe even considering suggestions made by Government Back Benchers. We must use this opportunity to ensure that the police have the powers they need, and to examine where further powers are required to ensure that the law truly serves the victims of crime and provides a level of openness and transparency for our police forces so that people can have confidence in our justice system.

Additionally, we should all want to see the police doing what they do best: on the beat, preventing and investigating crime. Their time should not be wasted on matters that the public do not consider a priority. Time and again, we see reports of police officers being sent to respond to incidents that are not criminal in nature while serious offences on our streets go unchallenged. The measures in this Bill to tackle antisocial behaviour signal an understanding that removing crime from our streets must be a priority. However, we must consider whether more can be done legislatively to ensure that police time is used effectively.

I must stress that all the well-meaning measures contained in the Bill are meaningless without a well-funded police force. Forces are—*[Interruption.]* Forces—some led by Labour police and crime commissioners—are raising legitimate concerns about the level of funding they will receive from the Government. Any reduction in police numbers undermines every element of this Bill, weakening the police's ability to tackle crime across the country. The head of the Metropolitan police has raised his concerns about potential job losses in our capital city—a city where 30% of England and Wales's knife crime occurs.

I should note at this point that it is very welcome to see the Government reintroducing many of the measures on tackling knife crime put forward in the Criminal Justice Bill by the previous Conservative Government, including a power to retain and destroy bladed articles on private property and to increase the maximum penalty for the sale of dangerous weapons to under-18s. Given that the financial pressures faced by police forces amount to an estimated £118 million shortfall, there is a real

concern that the Government's actions will contribute to a decline in police numbers. The Government's police funding increase masks the Chancellor's national insurance hike on our police forces and their failure to build police pay awards into the baseline.

Moving forward, we will have ample opportunities as a House to scrutinise the legislation and consider potential improvements. Reading the impact assessments and economic notes accompanying the Bill reveals uncertainty about the effects of its various measures. Notably, there is a lack of clarity regarding the number of individuals expected to be imprisoned for certain offences, with significant variation in the estimates provided. The Government must back our police over the criminals and demonstrate the political will to do so. They must provide police with the resources and robust powers they need to keep officers on the beat, deliver swift justice for victims and, in turn, make our streets safer. This Bill is a step forward. Across the House, we all need to support our police officers to tackle the heinous crimes—

**Neil Coyle:** Will the shadow Minister give way?

**Matt Vickers:** Go for it.

**Hon. Members:** Hooray!

**Neil Coyle:** Thank you. On swift justice, will the Opposition Front Bench bring forward amendments regarding the shadow Home Secretary's position on citizen's arrest? How many amendments can we expect to see about how the police should respond to citizen's arrests?

**Matt Vickers:** What the shadow Home Secretary was doing in office was putting more police on the country's streets than ever before—149,679 police officers. We hope the Government will maintain that as we move forward, but there are lots of question marks around that.

We all need to support our police officers to tackle the heinous crimes that we have heard about in the debate. I hope the Government remain open to considering measures proposed by Opposition and Government Members who are committed to robustly tackling the very behaviours that this legislation seeks to prevent.

9.41 pm

**The Minister for Policing, Fire and Crime Prevention (Dame Diana Johnson):** It is an honour and privilege to wind up the debate on what is, as the Home Secretary set out in her opening speech, a critically important Bill. It is critically important for all sorts of reasons, many of which have been highlighted during the debate. It has been a wide-ranging discussion, which is unsurprising given the Bill's scope and breadth.

There have been many excellent and powerful contributions, particularly from the Government Benches, with over 57 Back-Bench speakers. There is a thread that binds all the Bill's measures together: this Government's unwavering commitment to the security of our country and the safety of our communities and people we all represent. We are on the side of the law-abiding majority, who have had enough after 14 years of Conservative Governments.

[*Dame Diana Johnson*]

This Bill will support and progress our safer streets mission, which is integral to the Government's plan for change. We are determined to rebuild neighbourhood policing, restore confidence in the criminal justice system and reduce the harm caused by crime. We have already taken action to strengthen the response to threats, including knife crime, antisocial behaviour and violence against women and girls, but to deliver the change that the British people want and deserve, we must go further, and this Bill will allow us to do that.

It is evident from the debate that there is broad cross-party support for many of the Bill's measures. It has been helpful to have the insights and experience of hon. Members who have previously served as police officers—my hon. Friends the Members for Pendle and Clitheroe (Jonathan Hinder) and for Forest of Dean (Matt Bishop)—as well as the wise words from a former Crown prosecutor who now sits on the Government Benches, my hon. Friend the Member for Amber Valley (Linsey Farnsworth).

Many of my hon. Friends welcomed the commitment to neighbourhood policing, the focus on antisocial behaviour, the introduction of respect orders and the new powers for vehicles being used for antisocial behaviour. In fact, there is a very long list of those Members: my hon. Friends the Members for Telford (Shaun Davies), for Hemel Hempstead (David Taylor), for Hyndburn (Sarah Smith), for Stockton North (Chris McDonald), for Chatham and Aylesford (Tristan Osborne), for Morecambe and Lunesdale (Lizzi Collinge), for Ealing Southall (Deirdre Costigan), for Bracknell (Peter Swallow), for Portsmouth North (Amanda Martin), for Halesowen (Alex Ballinger), for Gravesham (Dr Sullivan), for Ilford South (Jas Athwal), for Kilmarnock and Loudoun (Lillian Jones), for Erewash (Adam Thompson), for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale), for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), for Calder Valley (Josh Fenton-Glynn), for Makerfield (Josh Simons), for Uxbridge and South Ruislip (Danny Beales), for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy), for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), for Crewe and Nantwich (Connor Naismith), for Hartlepool (Mr Brash) and for Mansfield (Steve Yemm). They all spoke with great passion about their constituencies and the effect that antisocial behaviour has had on their communities.

Similarly, many hon. Friends spoke about retail crime and the ending of the shoplifters' charter, and welcomed the new offence that will better protect retail workers. We heard about that from my hon. Friends the Members for Banbury (Sean Woodcock), for Derby South (Baggy Shanker), for Buckingham and Bletchley (Callum Anderson), for St Helens North (David Baines), for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) and for High Peak (Jon Pearce).

Members spoke eloquently in support of the new offences to tackle child criminal exploitation, stalking, cuckooing, spiking and knife crime, including my hon. Friends the Members for Warrington South (Sarah Hall), for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), for Colchester (Pam Cox), for Milton Keynes Central (Emily Darlington), for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume), for Bolton West (Phil Brickell) and for Leyton and Wanstead (Mr Bailey).

I also pay tribute to the Members who have campaigned on these issues for some time, including the right hon. Member for Chingford and Woodford Green (Sir Iain Duncan Smith) and my hon. Friends the Members for Rotherham (Sarah Champion) and for Newport West and Islwyn (Ruth Jones). The measures for which they have been campaigning are in the Bill. I say to the right hon. Gentleman, who we recognise is a doughty campaigner, that we are certainly considering dangerous cycling in detail.

In the limited time available to me, I will focus on a few of the points raised throughout the debate, but there will clearly be opportunities during line-by-line scrutiny in Committee to debate all the matters raised this evening fully and properly. I will start with the shadow Home Secretary, the right hon. Member for Croydon South (Chris Philp), who asked a number of questions—some of which were not a surprise, given his focus on technology in particular. In his speech, he seemed to be suffering from amnesia about what has happened to policing and crime over the past 14 years. It is worth gently reminding him that, in the period from April to June last year, when his Government were still in post and, in fact, he was Policing Minister, police numbers were going down. I just thought that I would gently remind him of that, because he obviously needs a bit of help to recall what was happening on his watch. Of course, neighbourhood policing was decimated under the previous Government.

Let me get to some of the specific questions that the shadow Home Secretary wanted me to answer. We all agree that rough sleeping and nuisance begging are complex issues. We are working closely with the Deputy Prime Minister and her Department to ensure that such individuals, who are often vulnerable, are appropriately supported—that is set against our commitment to stand by the police and effectively tackle crime and antisocial behaviour. As it stands, the Vagrancy Act 1824 remains in force, and we know that police forces in many areas also use the ASB powers to tackle the antisocial behaviour associated with begging and rough sleeping.

The shadow Home Secretary also asked about the provisions to compel offenders to attend sentencing hearings. As announced in the King's Speech in 2024, those measures will be introduced in the forthcoming victims, courts and public protection Bill.

**Chris Philp:** Will the Minister give way?

**Dame Diana Johnson:** I would really like to get on actually. The shadow Home Secretary had quite a lot of time at the beginning of the debate, and I would like to respond to the Back Benchers who have spent many hours in the Chamber in order to make their points. However, in response to a question that he asked about knife scanning technology, the Home Office is still working with industry partners to develop systems that are specifically designed to detect at a distance knives concealed on a person. That work is part of the Innovation competitions that were launched last year, and phase one is expected to be delivered by the end of May, resulting in the first prototype systems.

Facial recognition was mentioned by the shadow Home Secretary and a number of hon. Members, and such technology is an important tool to help the police to identify offenders more quickly and accurately. It is



showing significant potential to increase police productivity and effectiveness, and it could substantially contribute to our safer streets mission. We need to support the police by ensuring that they have clarity, especially where there is a balance to strike between ensuring public safety and safeguarding the rights of individuals. I will be considering the options for that, alongside broader police reforms that will be in the White Paper later in the spring.

Public order, particularly the issue of protest, was raised by a number of hon. Members including my hon. Friends the Members for Liverpool Riverside (Kim Johnson) and for Bristol North East (Damien Egan), and the Liberal Democrat spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove (Lisa Smart). The right to peaceful protest is a fundamental part of our democracy, and we are fully committed to protecting and preserving that right. However, it is vital that we strike the right balance between the right to protest and the rights of the wider community. I am sure we will debate that issue more fully in Committee. We will also be carrying out expedited post-legislative scrutiny of the Public Order Act 2023, beginning in May. That process will look at how the legislation has operated since coming into force, and we will consider carefully the outputs of that review.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gower (Tonia Antoniazzi) asked me to confirm that any amendments to the Bill on the subject of abortion will be subject to a free vote. All women have access to safe legal abortions on the NHS up to 24 weeks, including taking early medical abortion pills at home where eligible. We recognise that this is an extremely sensitive issue, and there are strongly held views on all sides of the discussion. My hon. Friend will understand that whipping on the Government Benches is a matter for the Government Chief Whip.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Cambridgeshire (Sam Carling) spoke knowledgeably about the issue of mandatory reporting. He referred particularly to religious groups and spoke about the Jehovah's Witnesses, and he asked for a meeting to discuss the matter further. The purpose of mandatory reporting is obviously to improve the protection of children, and our aim is to create a culture of support, knowledge and openness when dealing with child sexual abuse. That is why we consider it more appropriate for those who fail to discharge their duty to face referral to the Disclosure and Barring Service, and professional regulators where applicable. Those bodies can prevent individuals from working with children, potentially losing their livelihood, which is a serious consequence. The strongest possible sanctions will apply to individuals where deliberate actions have been taken to obstruct a report being made under the duty. Anyone who seeks to prevent a reporter from carrying out their duty to report will face the prospect of up to seven years' imprisonment.

My hon. Friends the Members for Gower and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Tracy Gilbert), and the hon. Member for Reigate (Rebecca Paul) asked whether the Bill could be used to reform our prostitution laws. I assure hon. Members that the Government are committed to tackling the harms and exploitation that can be associated with prostitution, and ensuring that women who want to leave prostitution are given every opportunity to find routes out. The Government are closely monitoring new approaches that are being developed in Northern Ireland and parts of mainland Europe, working closely

with the voluntary and community sector, and the police, to ensure that the safeguarding of women remains at the heart of our approach.

The repeal of part 4 of the Police, Crime, Sentencing and Courts Act 2022 was also raised regarding unauthorised encampments, including by my hon. Friends the Members for City of Durham (Mary Kelly Foy) and for Liverpool Riverside. I thank my hon. Friends for raising that issue. The Government are considering the High Court's decision and will respond in due course.

The hon. and learned Member for North Antrim (Jim Allister) raised questions about the application of certain provisions in the Bill to Northern Ireland. I assure him and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who raised similar questions, that we are continuing to discuss with the Minister for Justice in Northern Ireland whether further provisions in the Bill should apply to Northern Ireland.

Questions about domestic abuse were raised by the Liberal Democrat home affairs spokesperson, the hon. Member for Hazel Grove, and by the hon. Member for Eastbourne (Josh Babarinde). As was discussed in the debate, domestic abuse covers a wide range of behaviours and is already considered by the courts as a factor that increases the seriousness of offending, which may lead to an increase in the length of a sentence. I am sure that the Minister for Safeguarding would be happy to talk to the hon. Member for Eastbourne about his specific concerns about the current legislation.

In conclusion, this is a wide-ranging and ambitious Bill. It has the straightforward purpose of making our country safer. It will achieve that by restoring neighbourhood policing, by giving law enforcement stronger powers to combat threats that ruin lives and livelihoods, and by rebuilding public confidence in the criminal justice system. It is clear that people around the country want change. They want to feel protected by a visible, responsive police service; they want to know that when our laws are broken, justice will be sought and served; and they want to have a sense of security and confidence, so that they can go about their lives freely and without fear. That is why we have put the safer streets mission at the heart of our plan for change, and it is why we have brought forward this Bill, which I wholeheartedly commend to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Bill accordingly read a Second time.*

## **CRIME AND POLICING BILL: PROGRAMME**

*Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)),*

That the following provisions shall apply to the Crime and Policing Bill:

### *Committal*

- (1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

### *Proceedings in Public Bill Committee*

- (2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Tuesday 13 May 2025.
- (3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

### *Proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading*

(4) Proceedings on Consideration shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which those proceedings are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on that day.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and Third Reading.

### *Other proceedings*

(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—*(Taiwo Owatemi.)*

*Question agreed to.*

## **Business without Debate**

### **STATUTORY INSTRUMENTS (JOINT COMMITTEE)**

*Ordered,*

That Ms Julie Minns and Gordon McKee be discharged from the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments and Andrew Pakes and Gareth Snell be added.—*(Jessica Morden, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.)*

### **PETITION**

#### **Reading Football Club**

9.58 pm

**Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I rise to present a petition on behalf of the residents of Reading and supporters of Reading football club. Over 600 people have signed the paper petition and over 10,000 have signed an online version, showing the strength of feeling from local fan groups who wish to keep our club alive.

Reading is not the only club to have suffered from ownership problems. In fact, too many clubs across the country have done so, showing the importance of learning from our experiences at Reading. The petitioners therefore request

“that the House of Commons urge the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and the Business and Trade Select Committee to launch an inquiry into the ownership and governance affairs of Reading Football Club since 29 May 2012 on grounds of public interest, with a particular focus on the governance of Reading Football Club since May 2017. And the petitioners remain, etc.”

*Following is the full text of the petition:*

*[The petition of the residents of Reading and supporters of Reading Football Club,*

*Declares that:*

*(i) Since 29 May 2012, ownership of Reading Football Club (“RFC”) and its material assets has passed through a number of different owners, following a period of sustained success under the custodianship of Sir John Madejski.*

*(ii) The ownership changes culminated in the ultimate beneficial owners of RFC becoming Mr Dai Yongge and Ms Dai Xiu Li in May 2017. The Dais have overseen a deterioration in all material affairs of RFC, prejudicing the sustainability of RFC.*

*(iii) The Dais expressed openness to selling RFC in September 2023 but no sale, or commitment to such a sale, has yet taken place, despite numerous well-publicised expressions of interest.*

*(iv) The circumstances surrounding RFC’s deterioration, and the lengthy, unsuccessful sale process conducted by the Dais are unclear, with limited information made available to stakeholders in RFC and misinformation rife.*

*(v) Under the Football Governance Bill, an “Independent Football Regulator” (“IFR”) will assume responsibility for regulation of professional football in England, including in relation to financial sustainability and fan engagement matters.*

*(vi) An inquiry into the circumstances referenced in paragraph (iv) above would likely identify areas for consideration by the IFR which ought to be taken into account in designing the framework under which the IFR will operate. It will also help identify which stakeholders, past and present, are ultimately responsible for the deterioration of RFC, provide supporters of RFC and other stakeholders with a much-needed explanation for the same, and contribute towards a successful outcome to RFC’s current sustainability crisis. An inquiry can also help us know how to avoid this ever happening again to any other club.*

*The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Culture, Media and Sport Select Committee and the Business and Trade Select Committee to launch an inquiry into the ownership and governance affairs of Reading Football Club since 29 May 2012 on grounds of public interest, with a particular focus on the governance of Reading Football Club since May 2017.*

*And the petitioners remain, etc.]*

[P003051]

## Town Deal Funding: Owens in Hastings

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

10 pm

**Helena Dollimore** (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I have called this debate about Owens in Hastings, the short-lived family fun factory whose boarded-up front is a familiar and depressing sight to anyone who has walked through our town centre. We are certainly not the only town to have experienced boarded-up shopfronts, which have become all too common on high streets around the country.

The reason I am here speaking about this at 10 pm is that Owens has come to symbolise for our community much more than a mere eyesore. Under the Conservative Government's levelling-up plans, Owens received £150,000 of taxpayers' money. At the grand opening of Owens, it was revealed that the owner behind it was Lubov Chernukhin, a millionaire who has donated more than £2.4 million to the Conservative party. Did Ms Chernukhin, a millionaire owner, really need a top-up from the taxpayer to fund such a venture? Was that truly the best use of the money given to Hastings to improve our town? None of that makes any sense to my constituents.

It gets worse. Owens closed shortly after opening, and the deserted, boarded-up building now dominates our town centre in Hastings. The staff were laid off with no notice, and many people who supplied the business and helped with the building work have said that they have not been paid for their work. The closure of Owens, which is now covered in wooden boarding, leaves a stain on our community.

Owens has now been closed for 18 months. What has Ms Chernukhin been doing in that time? The answer is: donating vast sums of money to the Conservative party. It is a shame that no Conservative Members are here to hear this, because they might like to hear that the right hon. Member for Witham (Priti Patel), who sits on the Conservative Front Bench, recently accepted a £70,000 donation from Ms Chernukhin, who is clearly not struggling for money these days. In just the time since Owens has been closed, she has donated more than £150,000 to the Conservative party.

Ms Chernukhin should donate the money she received from the taxpayer back to the people of Hastings—used well, it could go a very long way to fixing our broken paving stones and bus shelters. Lubov Chernukhin: we want our money back. Until that money is repaid in full to our community, the Conservative party should not take a penny in donations from her. Again, it is a shame that no Conservative Members are here, but I will be writing to the Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), urging her not to take any more donations until that is done. When she became the Conservative leader, she said very clearly that her party would apologise for the mistakes that it had made; perhaps apologising to the people of my constituency is a good place to start.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Lady for bringing forward this debate. One of the things I see, which she perhaps sees as well—it is the thrust of where she is going—is that the town deal funding the Government offered gave great opportunities

to councils. I know that they did the same in my council area, where we developed an evening dining culture and a coffee culture, but it took the council being the body ensuring that the money was spent where it should be spent. Does the hon. Lady see the good things that can come out of the town deal funding? Does she agree that we should all look at and focus on the good things?

**Helena Dollimore:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his passion about his area and about improving it. It is so true that where money is spent properly, in conjunction and collaboration with the priorities of local people, we see people really feeling a difference in their community. That is why when I speak to my constituents, it is so frustrating for them. We all know that we could have spent £150,000 so much better, which is where that frustration comes from. We are left with a boarded-up, huge building in the centre of town that we have to walk past, and we are reminded of that failure every time.

*The Guardian* has also reported that Lubov Chernukhin's involvement in Owens was at least part funded by a £1.5 million loan from a British Virgin Islands company, Sunny Gulch Village Ltd. That company was previously owned by her husband, Vladimir Chernukhin, a former deputy Finance Minister in Putin's Russia and former chairman of a Russian bank. In a 2018 court case, Lubov herself confirmed that Mr Chernukhin had maintained "excellent" relationships with "prominent members of the Russian establishment".

Is that really the company that the Conservative party wants to keep, and is that really a suitable donor?

There are also serious questions to answer about what due diligence was done under the last Government before taxpayers' money was handed out in this way. The money was part of the town deal fund under the last Government. The plans for spending that money were meant to have been scrutinised by a board that was representative of the local community, but when I have spoken to local businessmen and women who sat on that board, they have told me that they were given very little information about the projects and pressured into signing them off. One asked repeatedly to see the full business cases, but was told that they could not because of commercial sensitivities. Why did the previous Government design such a process for spending taxpayers' money with so little transparency for us, the taxpayer?

Local businesses also cannot understand why the decision was taken to subsidise a commercial venture when they themselves have had to work so hard to get their businesses off the ground, with no help from the taxpayer. Genecon, a consultancy, was paid by the town deal board to examine the business case for each project, but no research, analysis or figures have ever been shared. Did Genecon ever do that due diligence? All projects were signed off by the then levelling up Department; what checks and due diligence were done by officials and Ministers on those projects to ensure that our taxpayers' money was being spent wisely? It seems that in the case of so many levelling-up projects, proper processes were not followed. Anyone who speaks to any charity applying today for public money will be told about all the paperwork those charities rightly have to go through. Why was the bar set so low for a venture such as Owens?



[Helena Dollimore]

Moving forward, it is vital that the same mistakes are not made. Under this Labour Government, we have a brilliant opportunity to breathe life back into our high streets, sort out our empty units and get our local economy moving. I am really grateful to the Minister for the Labour Government's confirmation that Hastings will be one of the 75 towns awarded £20 million in funding toward those aims over the next decade. The Government have rightly said that that money should be spent on the priorities of our community, whether that is broken pavements, broken bus shelters, or opening up important community venues such as St Mary in the Castle. I will be publicly asking my constituents how they think that money should be spent, and putting on pressure for us to spend it properly. The Labour Government are also giving our communities important new powers, such as high street rental auctions. These will give local leaders the power to take action on properties that have been left vacant for over a year, granting local businesses and community groups the right to rent empty commercial lots at market price.

Lastly, I put on record my thanks to the journalists involved in exposing this scandal. It is only because of the work of journalists at local publications such as the *Hastings Independent Press*, as well as at *The Guardian*, that we know what has gone on. Never again should taxpayers' money be wasted in this way. For that reason, I am also referring the case of Owens to the National Audit Office, and I ask it to investigate. The lessons from Owens must be learned.

10.8 pm

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Hastings and Rye (Helena Dollimore) on securing this evening's important debate, and I thank her for speaking so powerfully on behalf of her constituents. She is a passionate champion for Hastings, and is leading the charge to ensure that not a single penny of Government investment in that town is wasted. We have a number of things in common; we are both Labour and Co-operative Members of this House, but we were also both in Hastings and Rye on 8 September 2022 when the late Queen passed away. Apart from the profound sense of how important and significant that day was, what was very clear from speaking to those who are now my hon. Friend's constituents was the high regard she was held in. I am glad that that was reflected in the result of the election.

Before I turn to the main subject of the debate, I will speak about the funding that the Government are putting into my hon. Friend's constituency. Last week, my Department announced up to £20 million of funding and support for Hastings through our new plan for neighbourhoods. It will help build a thriving Hastings, strengthen the local community and allow residents to take their own decisions on things that affect them. We are also giving Hastings £15 million for our community regeneration partnerships, which will help provide more affordable housing in the town and fund improvements at the Hollington youth hub. Those investments come on top of the £24.3 million town deal for Hastings.

Our town deals are based on local partnerships and local decision making, and they are led by local town boards. I know my hon. Friend is a member of hers, and

I know that she champions her area extremely well. I am pleased to see that the town deal in Hastings is well into delivery and is beginning to deliver results on the ground, although I hear her concerns about Owens entertainment centre, which I will turn to in more detail.

When my hon. Friend raised this issue in the House last year, I was disappointed to learn about the closure of Owens and any money wasted under the previous Government. Although the decision to invest in the project was taken by Hastings borough council and the town board, it goes without saying that it is deeply disappointing when projects fall through. I understand that the project at the former Debenhams site was due to bring the building back into use and create more leisure facilities and, importantly, local jobs. Following the closure and the company responsible going into administration in October 2024, the owner has retaken possession of the building and the space has been re-advertised for lease.

I hear the concerns of my hon. Friend and her constituents loud and clear regarding her constituents rightfully getting their money back. Although the funding comes from the UK Government, the responsibility for local town board management sits with the town board and formally with Hastings borough council as the accountable body for the town deal. I understand that Hastings borough council issued legal letters last year regarding potential action to recover the £150,000 from the towns fund that was allocated to CFEC Ltd, which ran Owens entertainment centre during this time.

I will be direct, as my hon. Friend was direct, and say that there are plenty of unanswered questions. What we do know is that the Conservatives, when they were in government, received £2 million in donations from its owner. We also know that under their watch, this now-closed amusement centre received more than £150,000 of taxpayers' money. The simple question we do not yet know the answer to is: why? Why might this millionaire Tory donor have needed a top-up from the taxpayer to open a bowling alley? There are concession owners in the dark, ticket holders confused and, importantly, 31 staff members without a job. I am sure they would like to know the answer to that question, too. I am also sure they would like to know whether the Conservatives, given what has now come to light, have any intentions, for the benefit of the local community, of returning all or part of the donations that they received?

Following the news that CFEC Ltd had gone into administration in October '24, a claim was lodged with the administrators to recover the £150,000. My officials will continue to stay up to date on the situation through our town deal monitoring and regular conversations with the council.

On town deals more widely, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North and Kimberley (Alex Norris) was pleased to offer an extra year for delivery recently, taking the end of the fund to March 2027. We all want to see quick results, but colleagues in this House and in councils have reiterated how challenging it has been for projects, especially with cost inflation. This Government have listened, which is why there is now an extra year of funding to get those projects over the line. My officials are working with areas where the extra year is taken up to ensure that delivery stays on track.

Let us now look at the broader picture. The last Government tied places up in knots with their short-term initiatives and funding pots, all with very different rules and timetables. Far from driving growth, that bogs places down in bureaucracy, complexity and uncertainty. Moving ahead, we will set out a refreshed approach to local growth funding in the multi-year spending review in the spring—an approach that simplifies funding, with less red tape and more local choice. This Government's defining

mission is growth, and we are determined that nowhere will be left behind. Together, we will work in partnership with people on the ground and with local authorities in Hastings and in every corner of the country.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.14 pm

*House adjourned.*





# Westminster Hall

*Monday 10 March 2025*

[DR RUPA HUQ *in the Chair*]

## Legal and Illegal Migration: Suspension

4.30 pm

**Dave Robertson** (Lichfield) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 700824 relating to suspending legal and illegal migration.

Before I begin my remarks, may I say what a pleasure it will be to serve with you in the Chair Dr Huq? This is a topic of real importance, which matters to an awful lot of people across Britain, but too often politicians fail to talk about it with the seriousness and depth it deserves. Views on immigration have become increasingly polarised in this country, and it is a sad fact that, at the close of today's debate, I will receive hate mail, as I am sure many other Members around the Chamber will. Some will be from people who think that, because I am willing to talk about the rapid rise of immigration, I am somehow a racist, but some will come from people who think I am the worst example of "woke thinking"—whatever that is—and a soft touch who does not care about the country's national security. Neither of those positions is right.

Actually, when I talk to people face to face—real-life people who are not in politics—very few hold either of those essentially polarised opinions. One thing I am really hoping for from today's debate is that we can bridge that gap and start to talk frankly and fairly about this issue. Everybody in this room wants to make progress on it, and I hope that right hon. and hon. Members will bear that in mind and that we can have a positive and open discussion—a grown-up debate—which is what this country deserves.

When thinking about immigration, two things are clear to me. The first is the role that migrants have played, going back centuries, in making this country what it is today—the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, the Jutes, the Normans, the Flemings, the Irish, the Windrush generation, people from across the Commonwealth and countless others. It would be remiss of me not to go through that list and make particular mention of the contribution of the millions from across the Commonwealth, and further afield, who fought shoulder to shoulder with our soldiers in both the world wars in the last century—and not only that, but who helped win the peace afterwards.

The second thing we need to do, though, is to respond to that by saying that immigration has grown rapidly in Britain in recent years. In the years since the covid-19 pandemic, it has spiked dramatically, and I am sure it is clear to all of us in the Chamber—and certainly to the 219,000 people who signed the petition—that that is a worry for a lot of people. Voters consistently tell pollsters that immigration is one of the biggest issues we face, and the most recent survey by YouGov found that 69% of people think it has been too high over the past decade.

I think that the worry that migration figures have grown too quickly is what underpins the petition. When I mentioned that I was going to lead this debate, I spoke to somebody back home, and their view was that,

because the petition starts with the, "Close the borders!", I should just try to ridicule somebody. That is absolutely the wrong approach in this situation. When we look into the detail of the petition—the explanation for it and what the petitioner has written—actually, the real drive here is not trade or imports; it is very much immigration, and I really do not want to try to patronise anybody by picking on a particular point and making ridiculous comments about it.

Unfortunately, it has been a little more difficult than usual to prepare my introduction. When I have introduced petitions debates before, it has been my common practice that one of the first people I speak to is the petitioner themselves. It has been really valuable to speak to that person face to face, or via Zoom, to really see where they are coming from and, hopefully, build the speech around that. Unfortunately, the petitioner has not been able to respond to any of the requests for a meeting, so I have not been able to have that face-to-face discussion. However, I am going to do the very best I can to do justice to their petition and to talk about it in as much detail as possible.

The petition calls for a temporary halt to all immigration, both illegal and legal, for five years. That word "temporary" is important. The petitioner writes that

"our country is facing serious challenges both from legal and illegal migration",

and argues that strong action is needed. That speaks to a sense that we have reached a moment of crisis. The petitioner is not saying "never again" or dismissing the contribution that migrants make to our society, but they are worried about where we are right now. To go back to my initial point about having a grown-up debate, it is important that we recognise that the petitioner is not saying, "No people who weren't born here"; this is a response to the situation as they see it.

So where exactly are we? Since I have the opportunity to present this debate, let me present some facts to go around it. Since 2021, immigration to Britain has risen to unprecedented levels. In the 12 months to June 2024, net migration—the total number of people moving here, take away the total number of people who have left—was well in excess of three quarters of a million people. That is down on the previous year, but it is still vastly higher than the pre-pandemic estimate, which would have been closer to one quarter of a million.

Within the 1.2 million people moving to the UK, 5% were Brits who were living elsewhere and who came home. I do not think in a million years that the petitioner would say that people who were born in the UK did not have a right to come back—I do not think that that is the point of view the petitioner is coming from—but the numbers do count them as people who have immigrated to the UK, because it is an inward flow. Another 10% of those who came were from the European Union, plus Norway, Iceland, Liechtenstein and Switzerland, although more people from those countries actually left Britain than arrived here.

The vast majority, about 1 million people, were non-EU nationals. Almost half, about 400,000, came here to work; around 375,000 were students and roughly 150,000 were asylum seekers or people coming through specific humanitarian schemes—the Ukrainian and Hong Kong nationals schemes are great examples there, and I am sure there is widespread consensus about the importance

[*Dave Robertson*]

of maintaining those safe and legal routes. Most of the remaining 100,000 or so people came for family reasons, and again I think most people would support people's right to live a proper family life.

The petition talks about both legal and illegal immigration. The vast majority of people arriving in this country do so through standard legal routes, with a work permit, a student visa or some other type of permission. However, we all know that a large number of people come to the country through what the Government call "irregular routes", most of them by crossing the English channel in small boats. Of those people, around 94% go on to claim asylum and around 70% are successful, which is a similar proportion to those arriving through other routes. In the year to September 2024, just under 30,000 people arrived in small boats; that figure is down by a third from a peak of more than 45,000 in 2022, but still much higher than we saw before that. In fact, it is 100 times—not 100%, but 100 times—higher than it was in 2018.

However we look at it, that is a really bad thing. The English channel may only be 20 miles across at its narrowest point, but in boats such as those we have seen people using to try to cross it, journeys can be extremely dangerous. It is one of the busiest shipping lanes on the planet, and the crossing is very dangerous. By October last year, 2024 had already become the deadliest year on record for channel crossings: 69 people had died trying to reach our country. Those are lives that should never have been lost. The people who profit from those journeys are the organised criminal gangs that are prepared to put profit in the way of people's safety.

Given that background, it is important that we debate the petition in full, in detail and openly. As part of the work behind writing this opening speech, I spoke to a wide range of stakeholders, who said that suspending migration would be possible as a policy choice, but that it would have impacts. That is also worth saying: it is potentially doable, but as legislators we have to go one step further and talk about what effect it would have. Before I carry on, I thank everyone who shared their time and knowledge to help to make this as informed and useful a debate as possible: the Centre for Policy Studies, the Migration Observatory at the University of Oxford and the Joint Council for the Welfare of Immigrants.

When we talk about the effects that introducing this policy might have, let us start with work. What would it mean for jobs and our economy to stop that immigration completely, even for just five years? Polling suggests that, right now, the only factor that worries Brits more than immigration is the economy, for obvious reasons. Therefore, thinking about the impact of immigration on jobs is a huge part of where the debate should be going.

One of the big worries voters have is that migrants take jobs that could otherwise be done by Brits, driving down wages in our economy. Anyone who knows anything about economics knows that there is no fixed number of jobs in Britain and that, because we have the advantages of living in a liberal, free market economy, the number of jobs rises in good times, when people have money to spend, and in bad times—

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am loath to interrupt the hon. Gentleman's short seminar on economics, but let me add my thoughts.

Everyone has an economic value and an economic cost, and some people who arrive in Britain bring an economic value; indeed, some bring great value, such as people with skills that we need and so on. However, some people bring far more costs than value; for example, if they bring dependants, such as elderly relatives or young children, who need education or healthcare, they bring little economic value, which is not to say that they are not valuable people—they may well be. Therefore, in terms of the economic argument, is the hon. Gentleman as alarmed as I am about the high number of dependants—who bring no economic value to the country—that immigrants bring with them?

**Dave Robertson:** I was about to pick up on a couple of the right hon. Member's points, but the major thrust of what he was saying was about dependants who do not bring any economic value. However, particularly if we are talking about dependants who are children, we have to consider the future economic value of having potentially amazing people coming to this country, with potentially amazing skills, who can deliver wonderful things for our country.

My wider point, on what migration means for the job market, is one that is worth discussing. Migrants do not take jobs from a fixed pool. The simple fact is that, when people migrate to the UK, they spend money. A rise in population can mean more cash in the economy and more money for businesses, allowing them to expand and create more jobs for those who have come to the UK. However, the reality is that the impact that migration has on the economy is quite small. Overall, migrants make our GDP bigger—that is a fact—but not by a vast amount. Migration is not a silver bullet to create more jobs, higher wages and boom times, which is pretty unsurprising if we think about it: if immigration did do all that, I do not think that as many people would be as worried about it as they are.

The other thing that comes up when we talk to people about this issue is wages. Although migration may have an impact on GDP, they are interested in what it does to the wages that people can earn? For the most part, looking across the economy as a whole, all the measurements say that the answer is very little. The impact is difficult to measure—it is such a small value that it is difficult to put a number on—but experts find that wages are not substantially higher or lower because of migrants.

Most of us know, however, that people's understanding of the economy is not about a number written on a spreadsheet somewhere that an economist is looking at; it is about, "Do I have a job?", "Does it pay well?", and, "Do I have enough to get by?" The one place where immigration does have an impact is on the lowest-paid workers. For those people, it has an admittedly small impact, but it does depress pay ever so slightly. That is very easy for us to say, but if people are struggling to make ends meet anyway, any impact on their wages in the wrong direction is a big deal.

Beyond that, if we are to talk about immigration, jobs and the economy, we have to talk about what sectors of the economy rely on migrants. Many sectors and lots of industries in our economy struggle to fill jobs with British workers. The ones that I would single out, though, are seasonal agricultural work, such as fruit picking, and care work. Those are two sectors where migrants make up a big share of the workforce.

To look at care specifically, in England, which is where I will start, carers are often paid less than they could get working in a warehouse for one of the large internet companies—I will not name the one that begins with an A—as a delivery driver or in the local supermarket. That can make care work unattractive to people. People who want to be carers do it not only for the pay at the end of the month, but because they enjoy looking after people who need their support and help—older, disabled or other vulnerable people. As a result, almost one in five carers in the UK is a migrant worker and, for them, the wages are better than they might get at home.

It is interesting to compare that to Scotland and Northern Ireland, where there are far fewer migrant carers. That is because wages for carers are higher in those areas, so they are attracting more British workers and there is less of a drive to employ migrant workers. The Migration Advisory Committee reckons that raising the wages of carers by £1 an hour would make the job much more attractive to English workers, beating out those other jobs that currently pay more. That is where we can talk about this being a policy choice. It is down to any Government to make these policy choices. They could choose to do the investment—it would be about £2 billion a year—that would enable that to happen, but it would potentially leave unfilled jobs in other key sectors, or leave other areas unable to find the labour they needed.

I have a few points to make before I shut up and let other people contribute. I think it is important that we talk about public services. Immigration will have an effect on them. Everybody recognises this; it makes an obvious difference, with more people registering for doctors and dentists, needing hospital treatment, sending their children to school, and using other public services. However, it also means more people paying tax to pay for those things, so it is not quite a “good or bad” argument; it is one that we have to have in the round.

If we look at the figures, we see that some migrants, particularly those highly paid migrants mentioned by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes), tend to pay more in tax than they take out by using those services. However, in other areas the impact is not offset in quite the same way, and having more people just makes things harder. Housing is the most obvious example. We know that we have a housing crisis in the country; there is broad political consensus about that. Rents are rising, and people are paying eye-watering sums to own a house. It is becoming much harder to get out of the private rental sector and on to the housing ladder. Because migration increases our population, it means more competition for homes and potentially even higher prices. The irony is that, in the short term, we need skilled construction workers to come here to start building the homes, because we have a gap in those skills in Britain, but if the population rises faster than we can build housing, it will exacerbate the crisis.

Earlier I spoke about the number of people coming to live in the UK on student visas, and I think it is important that I go into a bit more detail on that now. Some of us, and some people I have spoken to, may not consider international students to be migrants, but that is how they appear in the numbers, which show that almost a third of the migrants to this country last year came here to study. The international education strategy

set by the previous Government aimed to increase the number of international students studying in the UK to 600,000 by 2030. Those students pay higher fees, which helps to pay for the world-class research universities that we have in the UK—one of the things that I am sure all right hon. and hon. Members are very proud to support. International students make up roughly a quarter of all students in British universities—up from closer to 10% all those years ago when I was a student. At some of our universities, though, the share is much higher. International students make up more than half the total at Imperial College London, University College London, BPP University, Coventry University and the Universities of Edinburgh and Southampton.

The number of international students is already starting to fall, because they are no longer allowed to bring dependants with them or switch to a work visa before the end of their course. Applications were down by almost a third last year, which means we have another difficult choice to make: either raise the fees that British students pay to help to balance the books, or potentially remove funding from the university sector, which is so important to the economy and to our soft power. Cardiff University has already announced plans to cut 400 jobs and axe courses because of fewer international student applications, so this is already starting to have an effect. Fewer international students could result in some institutions going under.

The final point that I want to make is about culture. This is a much more difficult issue to tie down, but a lot of voters talk to us about the culture that people bring with them, and the potential impact of high levels of immigration on British culture and the kind of country that Britain is. I think all of us know that there are lots of versions of Britishness and that trying to tie down a definition of that word would take longer than the three hours we have for the debate today. There are people in this country who are totally chalk and cheese, whom we love and we loathe. There are different groups—those who really identify with others and those who really do not. Again, we could spend a long time talking about that idea on its own. None the less, at the same time there is a shared sense of what it means to be British. That is not just about where somebody was born, or the colour of a passport; it is something much more fundamental—something that people share. It is fuzzy and hard to define, but we do know it.

For lots of people in this country, Britishness is not the only part of who they are, whether they are a third-generation immigrant or somebody newly arrived here. It is not a zero-sum game, where people must only be British and nothing else. It is perfectly legitimate for people to feel British-American, British-Canadian, British-Nigerian, British-Indian or British-Pakistani. Dual nationality and the variety of approaches that people have brought to the country have resulted in amazing developments in the last centuries. That is something that a lot of us want to celebrate, but while a lot of people see that the vibrancy, the new cultural ideas, the new foods and music and the different businesses on the high street are great, there are some who feel hesitant and that things are moving too fast for them.

I believe that when we get to know people who seem a bit different, we tend to find that we have a lot more in common with them than we first thought. Breaking down barriers and getting to know our neighbours can



[*Dave Robertson*]

result in people feeling closer, with a stronger sense of community, but if that work is not done and people feel unable to break down the barriers, they may feel more isolated, distant and nervous, and that their community is changing in ways that they did not agree to and cannot control.

I feel the need to say that a minority—and it is a minority—of people in this country have views on race and immigration that we should all condemn. There are, unfortunately, some people who will try to use debates like this to further their own poisonous ends. There are also in this space many people who feel nervous discussing such matters—nervous about being dismissed as being racist, even though they are not coming from a place they consider to be racist. That is why I return to my initial point: let us have a grown-up discussion, talk about this in the round and recognise that not everybody starts from the same place. Let us also recognise that if we want to get this right—and people do want to get this right—we will have to build consensus, build bridges and work with everybody in our community, whether that is the settled population, different parts of the settled population, migrants, expats or anyone else.

There is clearly a mood in the country that immigration is too high. That tells us something about how Brits feel about our country. It speaks to everything that the UK has to offer that so many people want to make their lives here and share in our Great British values, but it is hard for some people to feel proud and optimistic about that when they look around and see shut shops, when jobs in their town, city or village do not pay well despite long hours, when they cannot see a doctor or a dentist, and when they cannot afford to pay their rent or even dream of buying a house. Fixing those problems is hard and complicated. Ending immigration is a policy choice the Government could choose to make, but it will not be a silver bullet that will fix all those issues. Any Government who made that decision would have to do so with full knowledge of the potential impacts, some currently unseen.

This petition, more than anything, demonstrates the fear about where we are right now. Change is needed. People are really eager to see Members like us, who have the opportunity to speak about this subject, talk about it in a way that, hopefully, moves the country forward.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** I remind Members to stand if they want to speak, so that we can work out who is going next.

4.53 pm

**Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I am extremely grateful for being allowed to contribute to the debate, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) not only on bringing the subject to the House, but on the measured way he introduced it. It is good to hear someone offering a balanced view on immigration. I have good news for him: I am not frightened or nervous about speaking about migration for fear of being labelled a racist. Indeed, I have spoken about it for a very long time, and will continue to do so.

The plain fact of the matter is that this country has had far too much immigration for far too long. Much of the debate recently has, understandably, focused on illegal immigration. One hundred and fifty thousand people have crossed the channel, and that number has risen since last summer. People see our borders breached with impunity and regard that, perfectly properly, as a challenge to the rule of law. Is it not curious that many of the people now coming are coming from Vietnam? Before that it was Albania. There is not much evidence that these people are fleeing countries that are tyrannical and persecute people. The truth is that many of those coming here are economic migrants.

It is unsurprising that someone in a part of the world that is less advantaged than this one—although not godforsaken because nowhere is godforsaken—would want a better life for themselves and their family. Such a person might well become an economic migrant if they felt they could do so without cost, although in this case, the cost is substantial. They pay people smugglers great sums of money to get them here, knowing that once they are here, the chances are that they will never leave.

CS Lewis said that failures are “finger posts on the road to achievement”.

Well, one certainly hopes so, because successive Governments have failed. They have failed to deal with illegal immigration, and failed to recognise that legal immigration is a much greater problem still. For all the awfulness of our borders being breached, the scale of legal migration and its effect on population growth is so immense that it dwarfs the challenge and problem of people coming here across the channel. Office for National Statistics figures suggest that our population will surge and that most of the increase will be a direct result of migration. The scale of migration is so great now that it is impossible to build sufficient houses to meet demand, and impossible to provide healthcare for the sort of numbers by which our population is increasing.

Let me give some figures to illustrate my point. In 2023, net migration to this country—this is not about people coming and leaving; this is the net figure—was 866,000. Even the most ambitious Government—a Government who exceed all previous records—might build 250,000 or 300,000 houses a year, but the net population growth through migration in a single year was 866,000. The year before, it was 822,000, and the year before that, it was 250,000. This is an entirely new phenomenon. In the period running up to the mid-1990s, migration was basically in balance; in some years more people left, in some more people arrived. In an advanced country, people always come and people always leave, and it is right that they should be able to do so, subject to certain conditions—in terms of the people arriving, that is. But this dramatic change has swelled our population very rapidly. No country can cope with that sort of population growth without very serious consequences for public services.

I will turn shortly to the other consequences, which the hon. Member for Lichfield touched on, but let us first deal with the economic arguments. The hon. Gentleman rightly said that the justification for immigration has usually been economic—we needed these people to fill jobs that others could not do. When I was attending Cabinet, David Cameron, the then Prime Minister, said that it seemed that only he and the Home Secretary believed in his policy of reducing migration to tens of

thousands. Every time he went to Cabinet, one or more Cabinet Ministers would plead that we needed more health workers, construction workers, farm workers, dentists, doctors or nurses. Who did we not need? Every single Department pleaded that they were a special case, such that the policy was almost impossible to pursue or to achieve.

That is the problem we had, but it ignores the point I made to the hon. Member for Lichfield. As I said, he made an extremely balanced case, and he is right to say that an enormous number of people have been admitted on work visas. From June 2024, 270,000 workers were brought in to work in healthcare, but they brought with them 377,000 dependants, almost none of whom will have worked in health or care, and many of whom will have perfectly understandably depended on the provision of both. This was not meeting an economic need; it was creating an economic demand.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir John Hayes:** I give way to the hon. Gentleman, although he looks like a bespectacled economist, so I am slightly nervous.

**Dr Arthur:** I am not sure if that was an insult or not. First, I should declare an interest by saying that back in 2015, an overseas healthcare worker saved my life. It was my cardiologist, and I put on record my thanks to him. The right hon. Gentleman will know that the population in the UK is falling, and we are getting older as well—I am evidence of that. Without immigration and workers coming into the country, particularly for our healthcare system, we may be stuck. Does he not agree with that?

**Sir John Hayes:** I will deal with those points in order. On the question of population, the ONS is clear that net migration is likely to fuel a rise in the UK population to 72.5 million by 2032. For most of my childhood and adolescence, the population was somewhere around 57 million, 58 million or 59 million. We have never at any point in our history had a population of anything like 72.5 million. The growth has been dramatic, taking place within a generation and a half. We can never build infrastructure to cope with that kind of growth. No Government could. It is not about whether the Government are Labour or Conservative or from a fringe party—by that I mean the Liberal Democrats, of course—it is about the public service being funded in a feasible and tenable way.

Of course it is true that many of the people who come into the country do great things, and of course it is true that our population has people from all kinds of places of origin who contribute immensely to our wellbeing and welfare. However, the truth is that the healthcare visa scheme was a palpable and absolute failure. If we look at the number of vacancies in that sector during the period I have described, it barely moved. It fell slightly, but by nothing like the number of people who were brought in. That leaves the question: what are these people doing now, and what did they do shortly after they arrived? My estimation is that many of them never intended to work in the healthcare sector and were brought into the country by businesses which never

intended to work in it either. That is just one example of how the arguments about the economy and the value to the economy need to be re-examined and challenged.

I spoke earlier about the economic cost that people bring as well as value; what I did not mention, and must also be considered, is the displacement effect that migration has on investment in skills. When I was skills Minister, I helped to rejuvenate the apprenticeship system—under my stewardship we built the biggest number of apprenticeships we have ever had in modern times. I did that because I believed in investing in vocational, practical and technical competencies, not only to fulfil economic need, but because many people's aptitudes, tastes and talents take them in that direction. However, if we say to businesses, "There is no need to invest in training or recruitment and retention, because you can bring people in from abroad to do those jobs", what possible incentive is there for them to eat into the number of people who find themselves outside the labour market?

I feel particularly for young people. The number of so-called NEETs—those not in education, employment or training—is stubbornly high and has gone up to around 1 million now. Those 16 to 24-year-olds deserve better than a system that says, "We won't train you; stay on benefits, because there is someone elsewhere who will do the job you might be trained to carry out." That is not good Government. It is not reasonable or responsible.

We have to displace immigration and invest in skills, rather than the opposite—exactly what we have been doing for so long under successive Governments. Hon. Members will notice that I make no apology for the record of previous Conservative Governments. I am being absolutely frank: this has been a failure by the whole of the political establishment. Indeed much of that establishment, drawn as it is from the liberal classes, misunderstands the argument entirely. The hon. Member for Lichfield boldly and accurately drew attention to the gulf between the views and opinions of a very large number of our constituents and those who populate organisations such as the Migration Advisory Committee—it is a murky group; I never know quite who is on it or how they got there, but they certainly do not seem terribly sensitive to the kind of arguments that the hon. Gentleman advanced when he talked about the frustration and fears that people feel about the scale of migration for economic reasons.

Let me also say something about the social consequences. The hon. Gentleman, in his opening remarks, touched on the fact that societies work when they cohere—when they have a shared sense of belonging that draws people together and mitigates the differences that inevitably prevail in a free society. That shared sense of belonging is itself dependent on change being relatively gradual. Of course, everywhere changes, and our individual lives change too. We can cope with so much change in a human span, yet we have seen towns and parts of cities in our country alter beyond recognition. It is hard to reconcile that with the maintenance of that sense of belonging.

We need to be able to absorb people, and we need to be able to welcome those people, knowing there is something for them to integrate into. Yet, in some parts of Britain, there is a precious little left to integrate into. It is not fair to the indigenous population, nor is it fair to the incoming people, because it cheats them of their chance to gain that sense of belonging, that sense of Britishness, that the hon. Gentleman rightly identified

[*Sir John Hayes*]

as critical to our communal wellbeing. He is right that some people are frightened to say that. I have never been on the Clapham omnibus—you might have been, Dr Huq—but I can imagine what the people on it are like, because they are probably rather like the people on the Spalding omnibus, or even the Boston omnibus.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): I urge the right hon. Member to enjoy the pleasures of taking a bus to Clapham—it is a splendid experience.

**Sir John Hayes:** I would like to think that the hon. Gentleman, who is my constituency neighbour, spends more time in Lincolnshire than Clapham. I am sure he does. Perhaps, though, we could have an outing on the Clapham omnibus together.

When I go about my constituency, and I imagine this is the same in Lichfield and many constituencies across this House, I hear the frustrations; a feeling of resentment that so much harm has been done by so many people in power who have been oblivious to that harm. The last Government very belatedly, after overtures from people such as me and the hon. Member for Ashfield (Lee Anderson)—when he was still in the light, before he went into the shade—clamped down on some of those abuses. They cut the number of work visas in a range of sectors and they reduced the number of dependants that students could bring.

It was preposterous that students could come and bring their families, was it not? When people go to study somewhere, they do not go in order to bring their family; they go specifically for an academic purpose. That ability was curbed, and it had some effect on overall numbers, but it was too little too late. It was not sufficient, and it took a lot of hand-wringing to get to even that point.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): On that point, will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir John Hayes:** Now that I have been half-kind to the hon. Gentleman, I will give way.

**Lee Anderson:** The right hon. Gentleman is being most generous with his time in giving way, especially to a Member from a minority party. He raises an interesting point about people coming here to study and bringing dependants. Does he know of any British students who have gone abroad and taken their family with them?

**Sir John Hayes:** The key difference is the type and number of students. The hon. Gentleman and I rarely disagree, and we certainly do not disagree on this subject very much. If someone is studying for a PhD, and they are coming here to work for a considerable time and looking to build a long-term career in academia, I can understand why they might want to build a family life here. If they are coming for a shorter course such as a master's, it is pretty hard to see why they would want to bring their family, given that they would expect to go home at the end of it. Most of those people will also be very young, so it is unlikely that they will have children, wives or husbands—so who are these dependants that they might be bringing? I agree with the hon. Member for Ashfield that the idea was preposterous to begin with. Happily, in the end we curbed it.

I know that others want to contribute to the debate, so I will not take up any more time, except to say that it is high time there was a sea change, and that we recognise those

“finger posts on the road to achievement”,

the failures by successive Governments. While I know that, to quote CS Lewis again,

“An explanation of cause is not a justification by reason”,

the cause of this situation has been a fundamental reluctance to measure the medium and long-term effects of things that in the short term seemed attractive because they dealt with shortages or gaps in the economy.

I hope that we can now make the necessary changes. I hope that we can reunite those in power with those whom their power affects, and that we can re-engage with a population who know the premise with which I began my short contribution: that there has been too much immigration into this country for too long—a widely held view by people who think that enough is enough.

5.11 pm

**Jacob Collier** (Burton and Uttoxeter) (Lab): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), who is also my office buddy, for opening this important debate.

The petition demands a five-year suspension of all immigration. Although I understand the concerns that have led to more than 200,000 people signing it, if we were to do what the petitioners are asking for, we would make Liz Truss look like a saint and suck out the rich cultural tapestry that makes our country so great.

Migrants make up a fifth of our workforce. The NHS alone relies on more than 160,000 staff from overseas. Suspend all immigration tomorrow, and who will fill those roles? Who will care for our sick? Who will work on our buses—including the Clapham omnibus, perhaps? Who will staff our hospitality sector?

**Lee Anderson:** The hon. Member asks who will fill the skills gap or the labour gap. How about the 7 million people in this country who are economically inactive?

**Jacob Collier:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, and I am grateful that he is here in Westminster Hall today; he has had a busy weekend, so it is nice to see him.

It is the Government's plan to train up more British people and get them into the healthcare sector and other sectors. That is what the Government are going to drive forward, and I am sure the hon. Gentleman will be interested in the announcements later this week by the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, who will lay out our steps to get people back into work.

This particular petition is not a serious proposal or one that any serious Government should follow, but I recognise, as my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield said, the underlying concerns raised by the petition and the concerns that my constituents have about migration. Migration must be controlled, and the Government have rightly taken steps to bring down net migration to sustainable levels. We will not tolerate the vile trade of human smuggling, including the criminal gangs that are exploiting vulnerable people and making millions at the expense of our national security. That is not immigration—it is lawlessness. That is why the Government are investing



in the new Border Security Command, delivering crackdowns on smuggling networks, increasing enforcement and expediting removals.

In the last six months alone, 16,400 people without any right to be in the UK have been returned to their home countries, and I know that the Minister and his Home Office team are working hard on this. That is real action and not just words.

**Lee Anderson:** I thank the hon. Member for giving way again; this is the last time that I will intervene. He said that 16,000 people with no right to be in this country have been deported. I agree with that figure, but is he aware that most of those people are overstayers on student visas or work visas, that they have been paid £3,000 to be deported, and that not one of them came over on those small boats?

**Jacob Collier:** The fact is that this Government are getting on with deportations, and we did not see that under the last Government. Indeed, they pursued the Rwanda policy, which cost the taxpayer millions of pounds and sent only four volunteers. What we are seeing from this Government is real action.

The Government know that secure borders are not an option, but a necessity. Legal migration is another matter entirely. Shutting off our borders to all might be a simple gimmick that some in this House support, but this is a serious issue and not one for snake-oil solutions. That is why we must take a balanced approach by investing in training and upskilling British workers to fill more vacancies in crucial sectors such as healthcare, while also ensuring that overseas workers with the skills we need come here and contribute to our society.

Beyond economics, this is about the very fabric of our society. In Burton and Uttoxeter, we see a diverse community because of migration. While Muslims observe Ramadan in their mosques, local Christians are helping the homeless, the Polish community are shopping in the mini market, and the Burton Caribbean centre is blasting out soul music. That makes us a better place. Today, as we mark Commonwealth Day, I am reminded of the contribution that those nations and their people have made and continue to make to our country.

Earlier today, I was at Burton town hall, where Mayor Shelagh McKiernan and her cadet raised the Commonwealth flag. Sheila reminded us of the six Commonwealth values. No. 4 is tolerance, respect and understanding. In this debate, too often we forget that people are at the centre of it: people who contribute, build and enrich the very communities that they join. From the engineers who build our infrastructure to the care workers looking after the elderly, these people are integral to our national story, and always have been.

I am proud to be British because of the fundamental values of tolerance and respect for others. That is how I was brought up in school, and that is what my parents taught me. We owe it to the British people to have a debate and immigration system that are worthy of those values and the complexity of the issue, not slogans and not hysteria.

5.17 pm

**Carla Denyer** (Bristol Central) (Green): I am grateful to serve under your chairship, Dr Huq. I usually say how pleased I am to speak in a debate, but I have to

admit that I am conflicted about being here today because I could not disagree more strongly with the petition's demands. And yet, the thousands who have signed it have rightly identified that we face deep challenges in this country, and that people are being badly let down and are struggling. Those who have signed the petition want answers. They want politicians like us to take bold, decisive action that will genuinely change people's lives for the better. Let me be very clear: stopping migration is not the answer to that problem—in fact, it is the opposite. But we do nobody any favours by pretending that the problems are not there.

The petition captures a view of migration that I fundamentally disagree with, but the view is clearly widespread, so I want to directly address the many people who have signed the petition and all those who feel frustrated, left behind and ignored. I want to give another view of the problems that we face as a country and give people another way forward—one that is determined to change things for the better, that is positive in the face of negativity, and that resolutely stands up to those spreading misinformation and prejudice from wherever it comes.

I will start with the positive. I am proud to represent Bristol Central, which is apparently the most pro-immigration constituency in the country. I know that that feeling is not universal across the UK, so I want to explain why I and so many of my constituents feel that way. The truth is that migration is good for this country. People come from across the world because they want to be part of our communities. They do vital work, as has been discussed, in our hospitals, schools and GP surgeries. They care for our children and our grandparents. They start businesses and create jobs. They pay tax and give to charity.

If we look at Spain, we see that, last year, its economy grew by five times the eurozone average and more than the US. Why? Because by welcoming immigration, its Government boosted demand in the economy and filled their labour shortages. Economic growth is not the best measure of the benefit to citizens, and I will come to that in a moment, but to pretend that migration is a problem and not an opportunity does a disservice to people who have grown up here and people who have chosen to make the UK their home.

The Government's economics watchdog tells us that higher migration leads to lower Government deficits and debt. Instead of grasping the huge opportunity presented by people moving here to be part of our communities and contribute to our economy, the Government are subjecting immigrants to harsh arbitrary visa restrictions, forcing many to leave their families behind—one man's economic dependence is another man's children—and pushing many into jobs, such as in the care sector, where they are at risk of very poor treatment because they are under threat of deportation at any time.

A lot of people feel very protective of this country, and so do I. We should want to protect this country, our home, and a place where so many incredible things have been invented and created. We have such a strong culture, with inventions from the electric motor and penicillin to the first ever website—although arguably that has had some cons as well as pros. The UK is a wonderfully creative culture and economy. It has the most beautiful countryside and the most talented people.

[Carla Denyer]

We should be proud and protective of this country, and I want to be, but who are we protecting this country against? Who does it need protecting from?

I agree with the petitioners when they say that “we can’t even look after the people we have here at the moment”, but why is that? It is absolutely true that people and powers in this country are making life harder for a lot of Brits—they are making it harder for families to feed their children, pay the bills, get a doctor’s appointment, get on the housing ladder, or even get a council house. But that is not the people who have moved to the UK from elsewhere; it is big corporations paying poverty wages and then taking their profits out of the country. It is energy companies hiking their bills time and again while polluting our environment, and water companies making us pay for the privilege of having sewage pumped into our waterways.

**Sir John Hayes:** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Carla Denyer:** I will make a little more progress. It is the landlords who own hundreds of properties putting up the rent every few months, out of all proportion to incomes, so that people pay more and more of their wage packet each month. It is the big developers prioritising profit by building luxury developments rather than the affordable homes that we need. It is years and years of deliberate underfunding by Governments that have brought our public services to their knees.

None of this is inevitable. If the Government choose, they could raise the minimum wage so that it is genuinely enough to live on. They could take action on spiralling bills, put an end to rip-off rents and build the affordable housing we so desperately need. But some rich and powerful people have an interest in keeping rents high, or allowing public services to be sold off to the highest bidder, or letting the rich get richer while the rest of us struggle. Rather than answering difficult questions about why this economy has been designed in a way that benefits them, it is easier for them to point the finger at migrants.

It is not always easy to stand up and tell the truth when we are swimming against the tide of what people across the country are being told day in, day out by public figures, newspaper headlines and posts on X. It is not easy to challenge the perceptions that have become the mainstream, but we have to, because as long as we chase false solutions to our problems and ignore the real sources of those problems, the things we care about—how much money we have in our pocket, whether we have a safe, warm, secure home, a roof over our head, and public services—will not improve.

I am going to have to turn to the negative for a moment. There is a serious problem of racism in this country, and especially in debates around immigration. That is not to say that everyone who has concerns about immigration is racist, though I fully expect that I may have my speech characterised as such. But we need to be honest about the fact that racism is thriving in this country. Like a hideous parasite, it feeds off people’s fear and suffering and is nurtured by politicians and media outlets that benefit from finding someone else to blame.

Last summer in Southport, we saw a horrific attack against children that scared us all. Such horrors make us angry, and rightfully so. But just as unacceptable and scary is what happened next and how that anger was deliberately misdirected towards totally innocent people: towards black and brown families minding their own business, who are no more responsible for the behaviour of one young man who happens to be the son of immigrants than I am responsible for the behaviour of all other left-handers. The despicable scenes we saw in the riots are a chilling snapshot and reminder of what is happening in this country and of what I am here to speak against: a spiral of misdirected blame, anger and fear that fixes nothing, helps nobody and harms many.

When the Minister responds, I ask him not to focus only on the perhaps easier, but not entirely honest, answer of being tough on migration, but to meet the petitioners with sincerity about the challenges we face and how we can really tackle them. To quote the petitioners one last time:

“We believe we can’t even look after the people we have here at the moment.”

They are right. Successive Governments have failed the people in this country. They have failed to provide jobs with fair wages, affordable housing, affordable energy, access to healthcare—I could go on. Rather than solutions, millionaire politicians and millionaire media moguls have inundated our phones, TVs and newspapers with images and messages depicting immigrants as the source of all our problems.

People are struggling. They are worried about not being able to pay their bills, about not getting paid enough and about their safety. An overwhelming tide of loud voices is telling them who to blame. That does not ease their worry or stop their struggling; it capitalises on their anger for political gain at the expense of some of the most hard-working and, sometimes, vulnerable people in this country.

It is a story as old as time to blame the stranger, the newcomer, the one who looks different. No one ever beat that story by accepting the narrative or overcame it by validating it. People’s feelings about being let down are valid, but the direction in which they are being pointed is not. It is the responsibility of all of us in this House, and especially of the Government, to be truthful, confront the real issues and not let people’s pain be channelled into hatred.

5.28 pm

**Josh Newbury** (Cannock Chase) (Lab): It is a pleasure to speak under your chairmanship, Dr Huq, especially given that this is my first speech in Westminster Hall. I thank my constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson), for introducing this debate so thoughtfully and in such a balanced way, as several hon. Members have said. It has not gone unnoticed that my constituency has among the highest numbers of signatures on the e-petition. As has been rightly pointed out, the petition is a signal to the House of how people feel about immigration and the real impact on their lives. It is our responsibility as Members of this House to acknowledge that. It is also our responsibility to be clear that discussing immigration and the strains that it leads to is not racist or intolerant, but a legitimate part of our democracy in the same way as public debate over any other issue.

It is important for us to discuss the impacts of high levels of immigration, particularly where they are seen over a short period and where that immigration is concentrated in certain cities, towns or villages. The impact of that rapid rise in population in that context is not dissimilar to large new housing estates being built over a few years—except that, with house building, we can to some extent put in place mitigation through the planning system and allow for a direct transfer of cash from developers to infrastructure. We can—and, I am sure, will—debate whether the planning system delivers infrastructure quickly enough, but the bottom line is that rapid immigration to particular areas is far harder to plan for and therefore to address.

Over the past two decades or so, several pots of Government funding have attempted to address that point, such as the migration impact fund, introduced under the last Labour Government, and latterly the controlling migration fund under the coalition and Conservative Governments. However, those pots often fund efforts such as encouraging GP registration among new migrants to reduce the use of urgent and emergency care. Although that is positive for demand on services and, certainly, the public purse, it often does not address the core issues with the lack of infrastructure, such as the number of places at local GP surgeries or schools. I believe we need to revisit the question of how we make up for the impact of immigration at a very local level, where people are feeling the effects most.

Ultimately, we are here to discuss why hundreds of thousands of people have chosen to sign this petition. For some, it might be a worry about the pressure on housing, schools and healthcare, or an acknowledgment of the simple fact that net migration has been left to soar for far too long. As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield mentioned, net migration reached staggering levels in recent years, and it has never reduced to the level that the previous Government aimed for.

**Sir John Hayes:** The hon. Gentleman is making a measured speech, unlike the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer), but will he chart what he has mentioned in practical terms? Last year, there were 700,000 new GP registrations. No Government, Conservative or Labour, could cope with that scale of growth in demand.

**Josh Newbury:** Absolutely—I agree with the right hon. Gentleman on that point. Those of us who have had high levels of house building see that, and I am sure that is reflected in areas with high levels of immigration. We need proper planning wherever there is a rapid growth in population, and I worry that that has not been happening for a very long time.

GP registrations are a particular pressure point. I recently had a roundtable with all the general practices in my area, and I was told that they are at capacity—over capacity, in many cases—and that further house building is coming down the line. They worry that we do not have forward planning in the NHS, which is often slow to catch up. I say that having worked for an NHS commissioner in a past life. We must acknowledge that we need to do far better on that point.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield said, a key reason for the high levels of immigration is the unchecked issuing of work visas, particularly in sectors with high vacancies such as social care. That is why I

welcome the Government's commitment to finally link up immigration policies and our national strategy for education and skills. Only that will ensure that British people have opportunities to upskill, reskill and access those jobs—in some cases, they currently do not feel able to do so. That will also put a greater onus on employers to ensure that they use work visas for vacancies that genuinely cannot be filled by our workforce.

An early priority identified by the Deputy Prime Minister, the Education Secretary and the Home Secretary is social care, and it is not hard to see why. In many ways, social care epitomises the issues we are facing with immigration and workforce planning: we have an ageing population, so demand for the sector's services is exploding; pay is generally low, especially given the importance of the work; the wider terms and conditions are not appealing for many young people starting their careers; and there are often no opportunities for skills training.

Last Friday, I was given a greater insight into the challenges of the care sector when I visited CSPC Healthcare and heard about the challenges it has seen in the sector for the 12 years that it has been operating. It provides domiciliary care in my constituency and across Staffordshire and the west midlands. It told me quite a lot, most of which I will save for a future debate on social care, but one thing it said that struck me was that many agencies, particularly those working with overseas recruitment agencies, are sponsoring huge numbers of work visas, only for those workers to find that the amount of work they were promised is not there when they come into the country, are bused out to a particular town and dropped off. That is exploitative and quite frankly an outrage if immigration figures are being artificially inflated when our economy does not need all those staff. That highlights the reforms we need for the immigration system and our skills and workforce planning.

The question that must follow all that is: would suspending all immigration for five years really solve all those problems? Our economy relies on workers from abroad to fill gaps in our workforce and in sustaining our vital public services, so I fear that a complete shutdown would risk huge consequences. In particular, we know that our NHS will always rely on workers coming to make their home here and contributing to those great institutions. Having worked in our NHS in a past life, I know that skilled staff from other countries, most of them European and Commonwealth nations, are critical to keeping the health service alive.

We will always benefit from international skills and talent to keep us globally competitive, but importantly, immigration must never be used as an alternative to training or tackling workforce problems here at home. The previous Government's reliance on overseas workers, teamed with a failure to invest in skills here in the UK, left us with an immigration system that is neither properly controlled nor managed, resulting in net migration of almost 1 million people. Regardless of our stance on immigration control, surely we can all agree that that is unsustainable practically, financially, environmentally, or on whatever grounds we care to look at.

The decade of decline in skills training, particularly vocational skills in the sectors with the greatest need, saw employers unable to fill vacancies and therefore with no choice but to either do the nation serious economic damage or face eye-watering net migration figures.



[Josh Newbury]

The work that Skills England is doing with the Migration Advisory Committee will show us the occupation shortages, which will ensure that people can access the skills training they need to fill vacancies in those sectors, raising growth sustainability across the country and stopping reliance on overseas recruitment.

I will finish with a point on dependants and a point on the practicalities of halting immigration for five years. As has been mentioned, dependants have been a key component of rising levels of immigration for many years, especially in visa categories where levels were previously very low, such as students. I absolutely sympathise with the view that our points-based immigration system needs to focus on bringing the most economically productive workers into the UK. However, we must also acknowledge that some of the highest skilled, most productive workers, just like British workers, have care responsibilities. Surely we do not want to shut out people purely because they have children or have to care for a sick or elderly parent, for example. What we need is a common-sense approach to dependants. Should a student be able to bring their whole family over with them when they study? In my opinion, no. Should a single mother with three children, who wants to work as a nurse in our NHS, be welcomed? Yes. I think the vast majority of the public support that pragmatic view.

I sympathise with what I assume are the motivations of the creator of this petition: giving the UK breathing space to rebuild our infrastructure, which has been so damaged by the age of austerity, a pandemic and huge levels of net migration. But the reality is that halting immigration for several years, or even months, would simply create huge pent-up demand for visas for that period of zero migration. During that time, presumably people would still be allowed to leave the country, raising the possibility of a mass shortage in our workforce. Then, if immigration were allowed again at some point in the future, the tidal wave of applications would almost completely overwhelm not only our visa system but the infrastructure that we are most concerned about. A total stop of immigration would therefore be counterproductive to tackling the impacts that underpin this petition and so much of our national conversation around immigration.

To conclude, I hope that the openness and robustness of debate we have seen today will continue. Closing down the debate around immigration with name-calling and demonisation, from whatever perspective, will close down the chance of getting to a point where we are able to address all the issues we have touched on. I welcome the Government's choice to grasp the nettle of reforming our skills system and linking it to where job vacancies are, and I hope we can continue that debate in the months and years to come.

5.38 pm

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dr Huq. I congratulate the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) on opening the debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee.

We all want to do things well—I am sure that is an ambition shared by all hon. Members—and immigration done well can be a great thing. It is what I call smart

immigration, where we welcome people from across the world, with the skills required, in numbers that can be absorbed into the existing population. We welcome people who want to integrate, work and grow within communities, and learn the language. That is a great thing, and we have a long history, until the last 25 years, of actually getting that right.

When we are looking at strategy and planning our constituents expect us to do a good job, so when we look ahead to the next 20 years and see that population growth of some 10 million people is forecast—give or take; let us call it half a million a year—and the vast majority of that is through inward migration, we want to say, surely, “How will we plan for that? Where is the infrastructure? Where are the homes, doctors, hospitals and everything else?”

In a sense, the challenge that the Government currently face—there are many, which we all recognise—is dealing with the existing challenges. I suspect that there is very little real planning. The Government are planning to build 1.5 million homes in this Parliament, but that will barely alleviate the existing population's housing challenges, let alone half a million more people coming to join our population every year over the next five years and beyond. I fear that for the next 20 years we are going to make the same mistake as the huge one we made 20 years ago.

If we had had this sort of debate in about 2005 and someone had said, “We've got a good idea, folks: let's increase the population by 10 million people over the next 20 years”—give or take, about 17% of the then population—I am pretty sure that smart hon. Members would have said, “If so, we have to build the infrastructure, the houses and so on.” Someone would probably have asked, rightly, “Will that make us all better off?” The role of the Government in this great place is to make our constituents better off.

If something is planned for and delivered well, great results can be achieved. But if there is no proper planning, as happened, regrettably, under the previous Conservative Administrations—various shades of Liberal Democrat—uncontrolled migration and the situation of the last couple of years are the result. In one year, there was almost 1 million net inward migration and in a second year almost three quarters of a million. That is completely uncontrollable, and it puts huge pressures on the population.

The thing to focus on to bring people together in this sensitive debate is population. If we want population growth, we must plan for it, make sure that it is going to make everybody better off and then deliver it. The interesting point, of course, is that our population has never been bigger; according to official numbers, it is a whisker under 70 million people. We are not short of people in this country. There are, give or take, 7 million or 8 million people who are economically inactive and over 5 million people on out-of-work benefits. Surely, before we say, “We need another half a million people a year, every year, to provide the labour for the various services we need to fill”, we should be training and skilling up our own people.

**Dr Arthur:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for the sensitive way he is navigating through this. However, is it not the case that people defined as economically inactive include those who are retired? Is he suggesting that we go around the golf courses and bingo halls in our constituencies

and get those people into the workforce, building houses for us? Is that the solution to the economic problems in this country?

**Richard Tice:** The point is that life expectancy has grown and the pension age is growing because we are healthier. That is a great thing. People enjoy work—work is a great thing. However, the real point is that there are some 5 million-plus people not of retirement age who we need to get back into the workplace. We want a world-leading benefit system that looks after the genuinely vulnerable and sick as well as the genuinely unemployed who are looking for work. I would have thought that we could all agree on that.

Let us look at what really did work well: back in the '80s and early '90s, net inward migration was about 30,000 to 50,000 a year on average—in some years, there was a little bit of net emigration. It was working well. People came to work and integrated—and guess what? Our economy was growing at 2.5% to 3.5% a year. Everybody was getting better off. We had real per-person wage growth, above the rate of inflation, of some 2.5% per annum in the 1990s.

We now have no GDP growth but significant population growth through inward migration, so we are all getting poorer per person. That is one of the challenges that we all face. If we know that the system worked back then, maybe we should be willing to learn the lessons of history. That was a time when there was no immigration debate, interestingly. Until about the early 2000s, immigration was not an issue because it was working well, with numbers that could be sensibly absorbed. People were getting richer—and that is a good thing.

My view is that we are not short of people, and the anxiety of those who signed the petition is that population growth is too great. We cannot cope with our existing population, and there is a need for pause—perhaps a policy of net zero immigration: one in, one out. About 400,000 people leave the UK every year; we could welcome a similar number in—that will ebb and flow—as long as they are highly skilled and highly qualified where we have shortages, while we train our own people.

Back in the '80s, the interesting thing was that our healthcare system, the NHS, was working very well—

**Carla Denyer:** It was funded very well as well.

**Dr Rupa Huq (in the Chair):** Order. Through the Chair, please.

**Richard Tice:** It was working well, and we had people coming from around the world to help the NHS—but we were training our own, and that was a great thing. That comes back to the point that what has happened in the past 15 years is the complete failure to deliver for population growth at every level. The madness of the cap on training our own people who want to be nurses or doctors—it is absolutely ludicrous. We encouraged businesses in that by saying, “You do not need to invest in training. You can just bring in people from overseas.”

What happened? That brought in low-skilled, lower-cost labour from overseas, and we were told by the authorities, the ONS and the Office for Budget Responsibility or its predecessors, that that would be a good thing for the country. Now, we have been told by the OBR, which has

just caught up with things, that lower-skilled and lower-cost labour never contributes financially to the economy more than it takes out.

**Sir John Hayes:** This is in anticipation of our trip to Clapham, perhaps. Another economic point that has not been made so far in the debate is that if we allow for the kind of incoming populations that the hon. Gentleman described, we stultify the economy. Instead of investing in technology, in labour saving, or in creating the high-tech and high-skilled economy that makes us competitive across the globe, we reinforce an economy that has high levels of labour—usually unskilled and lowly paid labour—and we weaken our productivity and competitiveness. That is precisely the other economic effect that that policy has had over time.

**Richard Tice:** The right hon. Member makes a splendid economic point, which I was coming on to, because this is basic economics. If we have a labour shortage, employers have one of two choices. They can either say, “I need to pay higher wages”, which reflects what the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) was indicating earlier. Or, if they cannot afford that labour, they will essentially be saying, “I need to invest in capital equipment, which is more productive”, and that is what happened: in the '80s and '90s, businesses were investing in capital equipment. That is why we became ever more productive and why we got richer. That is the key thing.

From a legal migration standpoint, if we implement it well, with the highly skilled and highly trained going to where they will contribute to various sectors, it is a good thing and hugely welcomed across the country. That takes us back to where I think things were some 25 to 35 years ago. Done badly—like anything in life—we end up with problems. That is why we have ended up in the situation we are in: because of the failures of the previous regime.

That is the issue of legal migration. With competence of delivery, it should be sortable, but the British people are very anxious about the pressures on housing and public services, and that is driven by the pressures of population growth. The challenge for this Government is to try to deal not only with the huge problems that they inherited, but with the potential population growth. In a sense, if the Government said, “Well, we can't cope with population growth, because we need to deal with the current challenges”, that might make life easier for them. Otherwise, the Government will be constantly chasing their tail and might never catch up.

That brings me to the issue of illegal migration. I would have thought that we could all agree that if something is illegal, we should stop it. In many ways, that goes back to what I was saying earlier about having to do something well: one has got to be competent, and occasionally it requires a bit of courage.

Interestingly—credit where credit is due—under the Labour Administration in the 2000s, we had significant numbers seeking asylum and we had significant illegal immigration, which was then not on boats but in lorries and vans and such, and the Government were doing a good job. They were catching people and saying, “Thank you very much for your application, but you are an economic migrant and have come here illegally. We are going to thank you but say no, you can't stay.”

[Richard Tice]

The Government were removing some 40,000 people a year and were assessing asylum applications in two to three weeks, with a couple of weeks for an appeal. The decision was made and either the person stayed or returned. In 2004, I think, the acceptance rate for asylum seekers was about 18% to 20%. That percentage is now somewhere in the 70s.

We have a history of being able to do things well. I think that is what the British people want.

**Dave Robertson:** I note the hon. Member's comments about how things worked in the '80s and '90s. For most of that time I was not very old, but to his point about asylum success rates being different then and now, in both of those decades the UK was subject to the European Court of Human Rights, so does he agree that if there has been a change, it is probably not because of the Court?

**Richard Tice:** I think the fact was that the Government were assessing people quickly and promptly. I suspect that what we did not have back then—I may be wrong, and if so, I stand corrected—is a huge industry of lawfare that had grown up, as it has now, but I could be wrong on that. I think it comes back to the issue of competence.

Having been stopped from coming illegally primarily in lorries, people are now coming on boats. What the previous Government utterly failed to do, having had no strategy whatsoever, was stop the boats. There is a history of other nations stopping the boats, and the tragedy, as a previous speaker said, is that by not stopping the boats, people are dying. Last year was a record year—I think the figure of 69, give or take, was mentioned.

The current policy is the worst of all worlds. It is my opinion, having studied it and read it in great detail, that the 1982 United Nations convention on the law of the sea gives us the legal right to pick people up out of boats and safely take them back to France. Under that same treaty there is a legal obligation on our good friends the French to do exactly that. They have a legal obligation that they are failing to fulfil. We know that it works because the Belgian authorities pick up boats that try to leave its shores. They take them back and the whole thing is stopped very quickly. What that requires is competence and political courage, which we have not seen anything of in the last six years by either Government.

The Government have a strategy at the moment, and I hope that the Minister will address it in his remarks, which is to smash the gangs and pray that that will stop the boats. But the evidence so far—some seven or eight months into this Administration—shows that the numbers are some 20% higher than in the comparable period. We know that last year some 36,000 people came across on the boats.

This is costing the country billions and billions of pounds. It is quite hard to get a sense of how many billion, because it is being spent in so many different ways, but it is costing the country billions of pounds. It has also led to the destruction of thousands and thousands of jobs in hotels across the country in the hospitality sector. It has also put significant extra pressure on housing: some 150,000 have come across on boats; very few have been returned. There was that successful return of four people to Rwanda at the cost of many hundreds

of millions of pounds. The question for the Minister is: how long will the Government carry on with this policy of smashing the gangs before accepting that it is not working and that it will not work? That is a very important question that I have previously asked the Secretary of State, and we are still waiting for an answer.

**Sir John Hayes:** I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way a second time; it is very generous of him. I have some figures that I hope will help him. He asked how much it is costing. What we do know is that £3 billion was allocated to housing asylum seekers in hotels. That is an average of about £8 million a day—£8 million that could be spent on the desperate, the needy and the dispossessed in our country.

**Richard Tice:** I am most grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, but I think the real number is many billions higher. Of course, the cost could be £10 billion a year—that is almost 10 times the winter fuel allowance, just to put it in perspective.

There is another issue here: the degree of illegal working going on in this country is completely off the scale. It is often unreported on. For example, 40% to 50% of all fast food deliveries, give or take, are now being done by people on sub-accounts. They rent the accounts from the original account holder, who they find on Facebook, at a cost of £50 or £60 a week. Why would someone pay someone else for a sub-account on a delivery company website if they were able to get an account for free? There can be only one reason: those people are working illegally.

If any Members enjoy the pleasures of fast food deliveries, I suggest they look at the person delivering their food and compare them with the picture of the person who was supposed to deliver it. Very often, they will see that it is not the same person. The scale of illegal working has the sad effect, which I have seen and spoken to people in certain towns about, of suppressing the wages of genuine British workers who want to earn a good living, and were earning a good living, by delivering fast food on bikes, e-bikes or whatever. Again, there is a serious lack of fairness; it is completely unjust.

There is a strange thing going on, and it is happening in my constituency of Boston and Skegness and elsewhere. I am talking about illegal legal migration. It is a racket and massive business. People are coming here on a visitor visa and when they arrive here, they go to a high street shop—they do this in Boston—where they get told how to fiddle the numbers on the form to show that they were here pre 2020. By doing so, they can subscribe under the EU settlement scheme, even though they have never been here before. That gives them a national insurance number for overseas, which entitles them to work, and soon after that it entitles them to claim benefits. We have ended up with a level of illegality up and down the country much greater than anybody dare talk about. I hope everybody agrees that it is incumbent on this Government to ensure competence in enforcement, because that will stop this level of abuse. It is suppressing the wages of British people, and it is adding huge pressure on housing demand, when there is a critical housing shortage.

[DAME SIOBHAIN McDONAGH *in the Chair*]

I welcome you to the Chair, Dame Siobhain; it is lovely to see you.



We have to get on top of the illegality, while recognising that legal migration done well is a very smart thing to do. Done badly, as it has been in recent years, it has led to the massive challenges and the concerns that tens of millions of people across the UK have.

In summary, I think this is about doing things well. It is about stopping illegal migration by doing the job properly, and being smart about how we motivate our existing population and getting people skilled up and back into work, so that we do not need to rely on large amounts of inward migration when we are paying huge amounts of money for people to stay at home. That cannot be smart, good government. I think any Government, if they do this well, will have the gratitude of the British people. I think the British people just want someone to do this job properly.

6 pm

**Olly Glover** (Didcot and Wantage) (LD): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Siobhain. I start by thanking all the participants in this interesting and wide-ranging debate, and the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) in particular for his comprehensive and very thoughtful introduction. He rightly reminded us that this matter is of great importance to many people and that we should not demonise or polarise people for their views in this discussion; we should be willing to listen and discuss the topic—as indeed we have today.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) also recognised the importance of discussing this topic and highlighted his view of the country as being full, with migrants consuming public services. In relation to the Clapham omnibus—I should point out that underground trains and suburban trains are also available as public transport options in that suburb—I will perhaps encourage him to take a trip on said omnibus. He may be surprised to find that the viewpoints of residents in that area, which voted heavily to remain and is very diverse and cosmopolitan in many of its features, are rather different from those in his own constituency.

The hon. Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) talked about the need to tackle illegal migration and also recognised the long history of migrant contributions to our country. The hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) also highlighted the importance of having a respectful debate on the issue and recognised that housing is under pressure for a whole range of reasons. The hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) highlighted how the ageing UK population drives part of the need for migrant labour in this country, and how the planning system has not been effective at meeting population increases and ensuring that infrastructure and public service provision catch up.

That point was also made by the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), who cited the failure of successive Governments, as well as making some positive comments about the Labour Government of the early 2000s and the need for UK skills investment. That was a point also very well made by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings. In relation to Liberal Democrats of different hues, I assure the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness that our colour has always been orange. We would, of course, welcome suggestions for any changes to our colour palette.

When it comes to my own views on this issue, I think it is important to reflect on an overall philosophical point. My strong view is that, on average, people as individuals have far more in common—they have common needs—than differences, and that is far more important than where they came from. I feel this partly because I have Polish heritage: my Polish mother moved to this country in the 1970s and has spent decades always working and contributing to UK life. She has certainly fully integrated—perhaps aside from an occasional accent difference or getting her “a’s” and “the’s” mixed up.

On that point, so often discussions about immigration and immigrants are softened when the debate turns away from the general and to specific individuals and personal relationships. For example, when I met local business owners at the Railway Inn pub in Culham in my Oxfordshire constituency, an initially very frustrated and hostile conversation about immigration suddenly softened somewhat when I talked about my Polish mother. Those people in the discussion talked about their own heritage and the many people they know in the area who have come from other countries, and recognised that, individually, they make a strong contribution.

It is important to remember that there are many types of migrants, with very different reasons for coming here. It is therefore essential that we examine the basis and reasons for people’s major concerns about migration. On irregular migration, I think we can all agree—as we have done during this debate—that we want to stop the dangerous channel crossings. Unfortunately, the previous Conservative Government failed to tackle them and arguably made the situation worse. Human trafficking gangs responsible for those crossings continue to operate with virtual impunity. We saw barriers erected to international co-operation by the previous Government that make it harder to crack down on cross-border people smuggling.

That Government’s inability to process asylum claims efficiently meant that those without a genuine right to stay were not being swiftly returned. As has been stated by the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings, that continues to cost the taxpayer a great deal for hotels and other forms of accommodation. It is clear that change is desperately needed, so it is right that the new Labour Government are taking steps to stop those channel crossings. Cracking down on the criminal trafficking gangs responsible will be crucial. The Liberal Democrats want to ramp up domestic enforcement against those gangs, including by establishing a new single enforcement body to crack down on modern slavery in the UK, which is how so many of those gangs make their money.

We also need to look at the root causes of why migration is happening to Europe and the United Kingdom, because we are not alone in facing this challenge—it is very much a continent-wide problem. We need to work constructively and collaboratively with our European allies, particularly France, via Europol. We need to create an effective and morally appropriate deterrent, such as deportation back to home countries if applications are rejected—again, that comes back to the importance of tackling that backlog and having an efficient system for processing applications. We need to consider the varying root causes that lead people to attempt to reach Europe and the UK, including war, oppression, climate change and, yes, a lack of economic opportunity. We need

[Olly Glover]

to consider further what safe and legal routes may exist for people to apply for asylum and refugee status from abroad.

Turning to legal migration, the Liberal Democrats agree that our country needs a fair and effective immigration system that enforces the rules on who has the right to stay in our country. Unfortunately, we saw nothing of the sort from the previous Conservative Government, with their chaotic approach of making and breaking headline-grabbing targets that has shattered public trust and left the system in a shambolic state. Net migration figures reached record highs on the Conservatives' watch, and their inability to process asylum claims efficiently meant that those without a genuine right to stay were not being swiftly returned.

It is clear that the new Government have a mammoth task ahead: rebuilding an immigration system that works for our country and economy, while fixing public trust in the process. Many speakers in today's debate talked about the challenges with the planning system eroding the public's trust. Certainly in my constituency—which has seen 35% population growth in the South Oxfordshire and the Vale of White Horse districts—a system that does not match infrastructure and public services to population growth erodes public confidence in the entire system. As the hon. Member for Bristol Central said, having public services that work will be essential for regaining that trust.

Over the past two years, from the data that we have, the two main reasons for immigration have been work and study. Recent years have also seen a much higher number of people arriving for humanitarian reasons than in the past, notably via the Ukraine schemes, the Afghan resettlement schemes and the holders of British national overseas status from Hong Kong, who have quite rightly been welcomed here because of the oppression of the Chinese Government.

Migration is currently a source of population growth, and migrants tend to be younger on average than the general population, which can be useful when our own population is ageing. As has been said, the number of non-UK nationals in employment is greater than the 3.5 million people aged 16 to 64 who were out of work in late 2024, but who wanted to work. Of those, 1.5 million were unemployed, meaning they were actively looking for a job, while 2 million were assessed as economically inactive, meaning that they were not able to work.

If we want to reduce migration and have more “British jobs for British people”, as one Prime Minister once said, we need to examine why our economy is so dependent on migrant labour in many sectors. We need to recognise the risk that a suspension of immigration for five years, as has been suggested by this petition, would likely lead to labour shortages across the UK's labour market, harming both the private sector and public services.

**Sir John Hayes:** The hon. Member is right that, if we did not get the unemployed people who could work into work, the circumstances would be as he describes them. We need to get those people into work. Many of them want to work, and many young people—the 1 million NEETs—do not have the skills necessary to work, and they deserve our support. Surely they must come first.

**Olly Glover:** I thank the right hon. Member for his intervention and commend him for his commitment to improving skills training when in Government, which he discussed in his speech. I think the challenge of how we get there is significant, and I will come on to discuss that in my concluding remarks.

In my constituency there are examples of organisations that are intrinsically international in nature, for example the European Space Agency. I met two of its directors, one British and one French. There are many other science and high-tech employers, such as Tokamak Energy at Milton Park and Astroscale at Harwell Campus, which also rely on those specialist skills which depend on a global labour market.

Our commitment to rearming and boosting the defence sector will also increase the demand for labour. That is why we need to consider the steps and programmes that will be necessary before any clampdown on legal migration. It is also important to address the balance between improving the labour supply and incentivising it through better pay and remuneration, and our collective willingness to pay higher prices as a result of increased pay and labour costs—not least for food—if we do. I look forward to hearing the Minister's response.

6.10 pm

**Katie Lam** (Weald of Kent) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair this afternoon, Dame Siobhain. I am grateful to the Petitions Committee and the well over 200,000 members of the public who have requested that we debate this topic today.

Some may be uncomfortable with the petition before us, which calls on us to suspend all immigration for five years. That would represent a radical departure from the status quo. Some may even be tempted to be dismissive of it, but that reaction would be wrong. I commend the hon. Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for taking this so seriously.

This petition is an expression of the deep and entirely legitimate frustration that the British public feel with the way that successive Governments of different political parties have handled immigration. I say that that frustration is entirely legitimate because the level of migration to this country has been too high for decades and remains so. Every election-winning manifesto since 1974 has promised to reduce migration. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch) has said, the last Government, like the Governments before them, also promised to do exactly that—but again, like the Governments before them, did not deliver. My hon. Friend the Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy) summarised it well in a speech he gave here in Westminster Hall a few months ago:

“Immigration is the biggest broken promise in British politics, and probably the biggest single reason that British politics is so broken.”—[*Official Report*, 18 December 2024; Vol. 759, c. 163WH.]

This is not only about the betrayal of the public's trust, terrible though that is. People can increasingly see the tangible downsides of high immigration in their own lives. They can see it in their wages, which are stagnating because they are being undercut; they can see it in their soaring rents, in how hard it is for their children to get on the housing ladder, in the cohesion of their communities and in the pressure on their GPs, their dentists and our infrastructure.

Several Members today have mentioned the public's fears about that, including the hon. Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury). Those of us in Westminster should not be surprised to see members of the public demand a radical change of course. Elected representatives must respond to these material concerns, not with platitudes, but with actual change. If we fail to do so we will see demands for a total shutdown on immigration grow louder and louder.

I do not believe that we should suspend all immigration. Like the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), I believe that a small number of highly skilled people can make a valuable contribution to this country, bringing their talents, experiences and ideas with them—but our current system does not select for such individuals.

In part, this issue is about quantity. Over the last few years, this country has seen unprecedented levels of immigration: over a million people per year from 2022 onwards, and net migration at or expected to be at least 820,000 people, as we have already heard from my right hon. Friend the Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes). That means adding as many people to Britain's population as live in Leeds, this country's third largest city, every single year. Even if they are highly skilled and keen to assimilate, every person who comes to Britain needs infrastructure, housing and healthcare. Assimilation itself, bringing new migrants into the fabric of our communities, becomes much more difficult with people arriving here at anything like this kind of scale.

This issue is about not just quantity, but about the people we welcome to Britain. It should be a fundamental principle of our system that people who come to this country do not cost more than they contribute. What they pay in tax should at least cover the costs of the public services that they use. That is the opposite of the situation we have now. Only a small proportion of those who have come to this country over the last few years are likely to be net lifetime contributors.

After just five years here, many migrants will become eligible for indefinite leave to remain. With ILR status, they gain access to universal credit and social housing, surcharge-free access to the NHS and much more. According to analysis from the Centre for Policy Studies, over 800,000 migrants from the past five years could soon claim ILR, at an estimated lifetime cost of £234 billion—equivalent to £8,200 per household, or nearly six years of defence spending.

If we accept that the immigration policy of the past few years was a mistake, we should make every effort to reverse its long-term consequences. That is why the Conservative party is advocating that the qualifying period for ILR should be extended, giving us an opportunity to review time-limited visas issued over the last five years. ILR conditions should be tightened to ensure that future applicants are genuinely likely to be net contributors. Those who have come here legally on time-limited visas and who have not contributed enough should be expected to leave.

But it is not enough to correct past mistakes. Moving forward, we must also design a sustainable immigration system that addresses concerns about immigration volumes and the people we allow to come here. Those who come to Britain should be genuinely high skilled, with the

capacity to support themselves and their families without relying on public funds. As my right hon. Friend the Member for North West Essex has previously argued, culture also matters. We must recognise that fact and design our system with assimilation in mind. It is both fair and sensible to prefer immigration from societies that are more like our own.

**Sir John Hayes:** My hon. Friend is giving a compelling summation of both the debate and the problem. She will know that Trevor Phillips, the Labour politician and columnist, first deconstructed the idea of multiculturalism. His argument was that it perpetuated the notion that cultures could co-exist without anything that bound them together, but that those cultures would in the end segregate and, in his words, create ghettos. It is important that we challenge that and build a society based on what we share, the things we have in common, and the links and bonds that tie a civil society together.

**Katie Lam:** It is important to say, as my right hon. Friend's intervention reflects, that we absolutely can have a multi-ethnic society, but that it is fundamental that we are one country and one people with one perspective.

The kind of immigration system that I have discussed is one that the British people have voted for time and again: limited, selective and tailored to our needs. Unfortunately, I have seen no indication that the Government are willing to implement such a system. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are not planning to extend the qualifying period for ILR? Can he outline what discussions he and others in his Department are having with ministerial colleagues about the impact that new ILR grants will have on public services? Have the Government made any estimation of the number of people who will receive ILR over this Parliament? Finally, will the Minister outline in detail, and most importantly with a specific timeframe, the substantive plans the Government have to address the volumes and impact of immigration, both legal and illegal?

6.18 pm

**The Minister for Security (Dan Jarvis):** It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Dame Siobhain. I start by congratulating my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield (Dave Robertson) for introducing this debate on behalf of the Petitions Committee. He framed it at the outset in a very sensible and reasonable way, and the whole House will be grateful to him for contribution he has made.

Eagle-eyed Members will have noticed that I am not the Minister for Migration and Citizenship, who is away on ministerial duty. Given that our national security is underpinned by our border security, I am pleased to be here this evening to reply on behalf of the Government.

A range of topics have been discussed and a broad range of views have been put forward, and I will come on to some of the areas highlighted during the debate shortly. Before I do, let me take the opportunity to summarise the Government's position on these matters. Starting with legal migration, both the Prime Minister and the Home Secretary have been crystal clear that levels are too high and must come down. Net migration rose to a record high of more than 900,000 in the year ending June 2023. According to the latest figures, estimated net migration was 728,000 in the year ending June 2024.



[Dan Jarvis]

Any debate about this issue needs to recognise the position that this Government inherited when they took office. Net migration has spiralled out of control in recent years, driven largely by overseas recruitment. We are determined to bring numbers down through continued implementation of tough restrictions on visas, particularly in relation to family members and dependants, and through measures such as increasing the general salary threshold for skilled worker visas.

More broadly, we are focusing on delivering much greater alignment between the immigration and employment systems. We need a stronger, more effective skills and training offer in the UK so that vacancies can be filled from the domestic workforce rather than by overseas recruitment. The independent Migration Advisory Committee has been commissioned to review key sectors, and we will set out our long-term plan in an upcoming White Paper.

The right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings (Sir John Hayes) raised an interesting point at the beginning of the debate about economic value and family migrants. We want to ensure that family immigration rules allow immediate family members to join British or settled relatives in the UK where they can be financially supported and integrate into society. That needs to be balanced with properly managed and controlled migration. Therefore, the Migration Advisory Committee has been commissioned to review the financial requirements in the family immigration rules to ensure that we have a robust basis for change.

Turning to illegal migration, it is important to recognise the situation we inherited. In 2018, only a few hundred people arrived in the UK by small boat. By the time this Government took office, the number was running at tens of thousands a year. Over that period, an entire criminal industry built up around our borders and beyond. The dire consequences of that dreadful trade are familiar to hon. Members on both sides of the House. Having gained the upper hand, ruthless smuggling gangs saw the United Kingdom as an easy target. Our border security was relentlessly and repeatedly undermined. Lives were tragically lost in the channel and elsewhere, and public confidence in the immigration and asylum systems collapsed. That cannot go on. Since the general election, we have been working at pace to stop the chaos and to return order to the system.

Hon. Members will no doubt be relieved to hear that, in the interests of time, I will refrain from giving an exhaustive account of our approach. However, among other actions, we have established the Border Security Command to mobilise various operational agencies against the criminal gangs, in an effort backed by £150 million of funding; significantly deepened Britain's co-operation with key partners including France, Germany, Italy and Iraq; ramped up illegal working visits and removals of those with no right to be in the UK; and begun work to clear the asylum backlog. There is much more to do on that, which is why we have made secure borders the foundation of our plan for change and brought forward the Border Security, Asylum and Immigration Bill to strengthen the UK's border security and bring in new counter-terror-style powers to dismantle the smuggling gangs.

I will turn to the substance of today's discussion and the petition that prompted this debate. I will directly address the suggestion that all immigration should be suspended for five years. The UK has a long history of helping those fleeing conflict, tyranny and persecution. That generosity and compassion is part of our national identity. But let me be absolutely clear: our borders need to be secure and the rules will be enforced. As we have seen over recent years, when that does not happen, the consequences are severe.

Equally, legal migration has benefited our country in all sorts of ways. For generations, people have come here from around the world to work and contribute to our society. It is in all our interests for the UK to be able to access the best talent from around the world, and this Government value and recognise the role that legal migration can play in supporting many sectors of our economy and our essential public services. The issues arise when the numbers become unsustainable and the system lacks order and control. Therefore, I would respectfully make the point to the petitioners that the answer to these challenges lies not in the closure of borders or the suspension of immigration, but in making sure that our approach is fair, effective and firmly in the national interest.

Let me turn to the specific issues raised during the debate. We heard a very interesting speech from the right hon. Member for South Holland and The Deepings made a very interesting speech. He quoted CS Lewis—twice, I think—in the context of the failure of successive Governments. He is right about that, which is why this Government take these matters so seriously. He helpfully took us through the numbers and illustrated very clearly the scale of the challenge. He also made some very good points about training and skills.

The right hon. Member also mentioned a trip to Clapham—something that appeared to appeal to the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice). I should perhaps gently remind them both that trips to that particular location—including, of course, the common—have not always served Members of this House particularly well. [Laughter.] However, I will leave it to their judgment as to whether they select an alternative location.

My hon. Friend the Member for Burton and Uttoxeter (Jacob Collier) made an important point about the NHS relying on 160,000 workers who have come here from overseas. However, he also firmly made the point about recognising the need to bring migration down to manageable levels. He spoke about secure borders being essential, which is why this Government are working to ensure that our border is secure, including, of course, through new legislation.

The hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) was commendably clear in her views but, with great respect, I am afraid to say that I did not agree with many of her conclusions. However, given that my hon. Friend the Member for Lichfield framed the debate in terms of having a balanced range of views, I thought she made a valuable contribution. She challenged the Government to respond in a balanced and fair way, and I will leave it to her to judge whether she thinks that that is the case.

My hon. Friend the Member for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) made his first speech in Westminster Hall, and I congratulate him on it. It gives me the opportunity

to reflect on comments that were made in this place by a west midlands counterpart of his, Lord Spellar, who memorably said that if you want to keep a secret, tell it in Westminster Hall. We will see whether that proves to be the case, but my hon. Friend did make a number of important points, not least about linking immigration policies with skills, training and education policies. He is right about that, and I can assure him that that is the approach that this Government will always seek to take.

The hon. Member for Boston and Skegness made a thoughtful and constructive contribution. He spoke about the importance of having a plan, which is an entirely fair challenge. I think he would agree with me that there was not one previously, but I hope that he will be patient and that, in time, he will see that this Government do have a plan, that we recognise both the challenges and opportunities that come from a managed migration policy, and that we will always approach these matters with the seriousness they deserve.

The hon. Member suggested—perhaps a little unfairly—that our strategy was to smash the gangs and pray that that works. I can assure him that that is not our approach. The Government are prioritising important work to tackle organised immigration crime and reduce irregular migration to the UK, by adopting a new approach that considers the end-to-end process of organised immigration crime, targeting each stake to make facilitation unviable and to disrupt the activity of the organised criminal gangs.

That new approach to tackling organised immigration crime draws on the success of our world-leading counter-terrorism system and will prevent, by disincentivising migrants and deterring organised criminal gangs from participating in organised immigration crime; pursue, by disrupting organised criminal gangs and their criminal activity; protect, by detecting and acting on organised immigration crime at the border; and prepare, by managing, learning from and adapting the UK's response to tackling organised immigration crime. As he knows, none of that is easy, but rather than employing gimmicks such as those we saw previously, we are working properly and at pace to address the issues he raised.

The hon. Member for Didcot and Wantage (Olly Glover) spoke interestingly about his Polish heritage, and I am grateful to him for acknowledging the scale of the challenge. I agree with his point about the importance of good, functioning public services, and the example of the UK Space Agency as an employer was very interesting. The Government will always remain happy to debate these matters with him further.

It is good to see the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Weald of Kent (Katie Lam), in her place. I agreed with her when she said we should respond not with platitudes but with real change. She was right to speak about having a sustainable immigration system that is fair and sensible, and I hope we can continue to debate these matters in the way we have done today. Before she sat down, she asked me a number of questions about ILR. She will perhaps understand why I will ask

the Minister for Migration and Citizenship to write to her with the answers she requested; I hope that that will be satisfactory.

I again thank the hon. Member for Lichfield for introducing this constructive and thought-provoking debate, and all Members who contributed to it. As I have set out, the Government are getting on with the job of securing our borders and reducing net migration. In both areas, what matters most is that we restore order and control. For too long, those essential ingredients have been missing from our systems, but we are determined to put that right because the people of our country deserve nothing less.

6.32 pm

**Dave Robertson:** It has been a pleasure to take part in this debate with you in the Chair, Dame Siobhain. I thank all right hon. and hon. Members for coming along today and contributing. This is obviously a hot-button issue across the country, and we should value having so many contributions from Members representing a wide range of constituencies, parts of the country and political persuasions.

I thank all Members for the way the debate has been undertaken. There is always a risk on highly charged issues such as this that we lose the debate a bit and, on both sides, descend into behaviours that do not befit the best history of the House, but that is not where this debate went.

This is a complex topic, and given that the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) espoused the benefits of migration and the hon. Member for Bristol Central (Carla Denyer) discussed the issues that drive people's concerns about immigration, we can see that Members from both sides of the House have made this a considered debate. I hope that every single one of the petitioners looks at it with interest and sees that everybody has put a lot of time and thought into it. We all want to see some movement, if not to the same place, then in the same direction—there is widespread agreement on the need to deal with the crisis in the channel. We should applaud that, although we will have to wait and see quite how much of that makes it on to the front pages of the *Daily Mail*, the *Express* or *The Guardian* tomorrow.

I again want to address the petitioners. We are here on their behalf, and I really hope they are listening, watching and reading *Hansard*, and are aware of how seriously all parties take this issue, even if we do not agree with the outcomes suggested in the petition.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered e-petition 700824 relating to suspending legal and illegal migration.

6.34 pm

*Sitting adjourned.*





# Written Statements

Monday 10 March 2025

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### Horizon Redress

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):** This Government are fully committed to providing full and fair redress to victims of the Horizon scandal and making sure all of those responsible face justice and contribute to redress.

The latest redress figures published by my Department on Friday show that £768 million has now been paid to over 5,100 claimants across all redress schemes, representing a more than tripling of the total amount of redress paid to victims by Government since the end of June 2024.

I am pleased to inform the House that on Friday, the Secretary of State for Business and Trade, my right hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds), held a positive and constructive meeting with Takahito Tokita (CEO, Fujitsu Ltd) and Paul Patterson (Director, Fujitsu Services Ltd).

The Secretary of State welcomed Fujitsu's agreement to begin talks on Fujitsu's contribution to compensation costs, ahead of the conclusion of Sir Wyn Williams's Horizon IT inquiry—a joint statement was issued after the meeting and published on gov.uk and Fujitsu's website. Fujitsu has previously stated its moral obligation to contribute to compensation for the victims of the Post Office scandal, which we have welcomed.

Officials from the Department for Business and Trade will continue to engage with Fujitsu representatives in full. We will not provide a running commentary on these discussions, but will keep both Houses informed at key points.

The Secretary of State commented after Friday's meeting that we must never forget the lives ruined by the Horizon scandal and no amount of redress can take away that pain. But, as I am sure Members of this House agree, justice can and must be done. This Government are determined to hold those responsible to account, and will continue to make rapid progress on compensation and redress.

[HCWS507]

## CABINET OFFICE

### Infected Blood Compensation Authority Framework Document

**The Paymaster General and Minister for the Cabinet Office (Nick Thomas-Symonds):** Today, the "Infected Blood Compensation Authority Framework Document" will be published on gov.uk and ibca.org.

The framework document is a core document for an arm's length body. It provides clarity between the role of the Cabinet Office as sponsor Department, and the Infected Blood Compensation Authority as an operationally independent organisation. The agreement in the framework

document follows standard guidance for sponsor Departments and arm's length bodies, as set out in managing public money guidance from HM Treasury. The framework document has been agreed between Cabinet Office, the board of the Infected Blood Compensation Authority and HM Treasury.

Publishing this document, which sets out how the relationship between the Cabinet Office and the Infected Blood Compensation Authority will operate, is an important demonstration of the commitment of the Government and the authority to transparency for victims of the infected blood scandal.

[HCWS509]

## CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

### Gifting of Navy Commissioners' Barge

**The Minister for Creative Industries, Arts and Tourism (Chris Bryant):** The National Maritime Museum, the organisation known by its brand name Royal Museums Greenwich (RMG), is seeking to dispose of a Navy commissioners' barge via transfer by gift to another heritage body in the UK.

The barge was donated to the museum in 1935. There is no likelihood of the barge being displayed at any of the RMG sites in the foreseeable future and it is too large to store on any of the sites and make it accessible. Public accessibility is therefore best served elsewhere. RMG intends to deaccession and transfer the barge to Chatham Historic Dockyard Trust. Such transfers and disposals are a routine part of museum business and reflect museums' ongoing review of their purpose, with changes to the collection reflecting that.

The barge has been valued at £400,000. It is the normal practice when a Government Department—in this instance an arm's length body of the Department—proposes to make a gift of a value exceeding £300,000 for the Department concerned to present to the House of Commons a minute giving particulars of the gift and explaining the circumstances, and to refrain from making the gift until 14 parliamentary sitting days after the issue of the minute, except in cases of special urgency.

DCMS has written to the Chair of the Public Accounts Committee and the Chair of the Culture, Media and Sport Committee, informing them of the proposed course of action.

The Treasury has approved the proposal in principle. If, during the period of 14 parliamentary sitting days beginning on the date on which this minute was laid before the House of Commons, a Member signifies an objection by giving notice of a parliamentary question or a motion relating to the minute, or by otherwise raising the matter in the House, final approval of the gift will be withheld pending an examination of the objection. I inform the House today of the departmental minute which sets out the detail of the decision, which has been laid in both Houses.

The transfer is expected to take place during the financial year 2025-26, subject to completion of the departmental minute process.

A copy of the departmental minute will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses of Parliament.

[HCWS508]

## TREASURY

### Performance Review of Digital Spend

**The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Darren Jones):** The Government are committed to the digital transformation of public services and modernising the state. Successful digital transformation will improve user experience, help target support to the people who need it, and ensure sustainable public finances.

While to date, digital transformation has been incremental and lacked ministerial leadership, the Government's comprehensive "Performance Review of Digital Spend" marks a step change, seeking to understand what barriers to reform are created by Government themselves and what steps can be taken to remove those barriers. This review was led jointly by HM Treasury and the Department for Science, Innovation and Technology.

The review highlighted significant challenges in how digital projects are funded, managed and tracked. Current processes can be overly complex for many digital initiatives and experimental technologies, delaying decision-making and service delivery. There is often insufficient funding for service maintenance and improvement, and financial pressures can mean that short-term savings are prioritised over long-term digital investments.

Many Departments face the dual burden of managing growing reliance on legacy IT systems while being constrained by funding models that prioritise the control of inputs rather than long-term strategic impact and delivery against outcomes. The absence of agreed-upon metrics to measure project outcomes also limits the ability to demonstrate value for money in digital spending.

The review also found that current approaches to policymaking can inadvertently narrow delivery choices early, limiting the range of options considered during investment appraisals and preventing a full exploration of potential solutions. Furthermore, misunderstood guidance and the unsuitable application of appraisal methods by Departments risks hindering digital investment.

The Government will take forward a number of important reforms to address these issues built on three key pillars:

- testing alternative funding mechanisms;
- enhanced training and guidance; and
- improved outcomes metrics and evaluation.

Four new funding mechanisms, which focus on improving funding processes for innovative technologies such as AI, live digital services, portfolios and risk reduction respectively will be tested and scaled. Further details of each of these funding mechanisms is set out in the report. The Government's aim is to test, iterate and institutionalise different approaches to both funding and evaluation of digital spend with a strong focus on demonstrating progress against outcome metrics in exchange for faster and more agile funding arrangements.

Targeted training for Departments and teams involved in the approvals process will focus on building better evidenced bids for spending reviews and on how to use agile funding approaches. New Green Book supplementary guidance for digital will be published to help Departments provide better evidence proposals. The Government are also taking a digital first approach to spending decisions

in spending review 2025 to ensure that strategic judgements about the UK Government's digital needs inform departmental allocations.

There will also be a strong focus on developing new and improved outcome metrics and robust evaluation plans for major digital programmes. These efforts will be enabled by a proactive support package provided by the Government Digital Service (GDS), National Infrastructure and Service Transformation Authority (NISTA), the Evaluation Task Force (ETF) and HM Treasury. Finally, strategic digital, data and technology priorities for new business case development will be agreed by Ministers at least six months before future spending reviews, to help ensure that decisions can be made on the basis of a more robust evidence base.

The report has been published on gov.uk at <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/performance-review-of-digital-spend> and I have deposited a copy of the report in the Library of the House.

[HCWS511]

## HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

### Statutory Consultee System Reform

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** Statutory consultees play an important role in the planning system, providing expert advice and information on significant environmental, transport, safety and heritage issues to ensure good decision making. However, their involvement introduces additional requirements into the process of securing permission for some developments.

We need a planning application process which considers the correct statutory and technical issues in a timely and proportionate manner, enabling confident and timely decision making. It is therefore a matter of concern that local planning authorities and developers report that the statutory consultee system is not currently working effectively.

The concerns expressed by local planning authorities and developers in relation to the operation of the statutory consultee system are wide-ranging. They include statutory consultees failing to engage proactively; taking too long to provide their advice; reopening issues that have already been dealt with at the plan-making stage; submitting automatic holding objections which are too often subsequently withdrawn at a very late stage in the process; and frequently issuing holding responses that allow statutory deadlines to be met while seeking over-specified levels of information from developers over longer timeframes. The final advice that statutory consultees provide can also often seek gold-plated outcomes, going beyond what is necessary to make development acceptable in planning terms.

Where there is inconsistency in advice, or delays in the provision of final responses, there can be substantial uncertainty and delay for applicants. Local planning authorities and developers can also often exacerbate these problems, by providing inadequate or poor quality information, or through blanket and inappropriate referrals

to statutory consultees. This diverts resource from supporting those significant applications which require statutory consultee expertise.

The Government are determined to return the statutory consultee system to meeting their goal of supporting high-quality development through the swift provision of expert relevant advice to inform decision making. It is essential that statutory consultees look to provide practical, pragmatic advice and expertise which is focused on what is necessary to make development acceptable. That is why on 26 January, the Deputy Prime Minister and the Chancellor announced a moratorium on the creation of new statutory consultees and committed to reviewing the existing arrangements.

Today, I am confirming to the House a number of steps we are taking to improve these arrangements in England: putting support for growth at the heart of the system; limiting the scope of statutory consultees to where advice is strictly necessary; reminding local planning authorities that they are able to proceed with a decision where advice is not provided on time if they have sufficient information to do so; establishing a new performance framework with greater ministerial scrutiny of the actions of statutory consultees; and ensuring the system has the right funding with the right incentives.

#### *Ensuring the statutory consultee system supports economic growth*

First, the Government are clear that the statutory consultee system must work in support of development and economic growth—reflecting the central place of these objectives in the Government’s plan for change. This principle must run through the actions of all those involved in the system, from local planning authorities—reflecting the economic growth policies set out in the national planning policy framework—to the statutory consultees themselves. In seeking advice and providing it, the goal should be to ensure that wherever possible good quality development can progress, drawing on the right expert input where necessary.

#### *Scope of statutory consultees in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 regime*

Secondly, we want to limit the statutory requirement to consult to only those instances where it is necessary to do so, and remove gold-plating where advice and support can be provided through other means. This means looking at both the existing set of statutory consultees, and the specific application types on which they provide advice.

We will therefore consult this spring on the impacts of removing a limited number of statutory consultees. Our initial intention is that this will include Sport England, the Theatres Trust and the Gardens Trust. We continue to recognise the importance of the policy areas with which these organisations are engaged, and recognise their value to local communities. Access to culture is an important driver of local growth and access to open green spaces and playing fields is crucial to our ambitions to increase physical activity levels across the nation and deliver on our health mission. We remain committed to ensuring our playing field capacity is protected and extended. Our national planning policy framework ensures these interests are maintained in the planning system and there is an important, ongoing role for these organisations working with local authorities

and developers on the development of local and strategic plans, and through the publication of guidance and advice.

In addition, we will review the range and type of planning applications on which statutory consultees are required to be consulted and consider whether some types of application could be removed, or addressed by alternative means of engagement and provision of expert advice. In some cases, this could be done through undertaking more effective strategic engagement at the local and strategic plan level, reducing the need for comments on individual planning applications, and increasing the role of standing advice. We will consult on these changes in the spring alongside the impact of removal of the organisations identified above, before taking forward any resulting changes in secondary legislation later this year.

#### *Expectations on local planning authorities in the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 regime*

Thirdly, and reflecting the focus on supporting economic growth, local planning authorities should limit consultation of statutory consultees to only those instances where it is necessary to do so. Local planning authorities must still consult with statutory consultees where there is a legislative requirement to do so, noting that if there is relevant and up to date standing advice published with respect to that category of development, then consultation is not required. Applications may need to be referred to particular statutory consultees outside of the statutory requirements where their expertise is required, given the nature of the development, but should not be referred where standing advice is sufficient.

However, routine and blanket referrals to statutory consultees outside the statutory requirements should not take place, as this creates unnecessary administrative burdens for both local planning authorities and the statutory consultee. Where a statutory consultee has not provided advice within the agreed period, the decision maker should consider whether they can make a decision in the absence of this advice.

Decisions should not be delayed in order to secure advice from a statutory consultee beyond the 21—or 18—day statutory deadlines unless there is insufficient information to make the decision or more detailed advice may enable an approval rather than refusal. The national planning policy framework sets out that significant weight should be placed on the need to support economic growth, and timely decision making is in line with this objective.

In those limited circumstances where the statutory consultee is expected to provide advice on significant issues and it is necessary—for example, on safety critical issues—appropriate extensions to the 21 day deadline should be granted so that sufficient and timely information is available to inform the decision.

#### *Performance of statutory consultees*

Fourthly, the role of statutory consultees is to provide evidence of impacts and expertise in a timely manner so that the decision maker has all relevant considerations before them. This should be provided in the form of advice to the decision maker, and should not be framed as an objection to the development.

In circumstances specified through direction, a local planning authority may be required to consult the Secretary of State, including where they propose to determine an



application against the recommendation of a statutory consultee. The Secretary of State may then direct the manner in which the application is determined, including calling in the application. As part of the review, we will consider existing directions and when such directions may appropriately be made in the future.

To support timely and effective engagement with the planning system, we will also institute a new performance framework. As part of this framework, an HM Treasury and MHCLG Minister will meet annually with chief executive officers of key statutory consultees in order to review their performance. We will work with all statutory consultees to develop action plans and key performance indicators to ensure that the service they deliver is effective, proportionate and timely. We will also explore where greater digitisation, improved guidance, and improved local authority training can support performance improvements.

#### *Funding of statutory consultees*

Finally, the Government recognise that statutory consultees need to be resourced adequately, and on a sustainable basis to enable them to support the Government's growth objectives in full. We intend to develop a model to support this sustainable funding, while ensuring we are incentivising efficient and constructive engagement in applications, and in the planning system more generally—and we will set out further details in the coming weeks.

Taken together, these steps will help refocus the statutory consultee system on its core purpose: supporting development through the swift provision of expert relevant advice to inform decision making.

[HCWS510]

# Petition

*Monday 10 March 2025*

## OBSERVATIONS

### BUSINESS AND TRADE

#### **Roughton Post Office**

*The petition of the residents of the village of Roughton in North Norfolk,*

Declares that Post Office services in the village must be protected as they are a vital lifeline for many residents.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to work with the Post Office to review the closure of Roughton Post Office, seek alternative arrangements to protect the existence of a Post Office in Roughton, and ensure that there is reliable and appropriate access to Post Office services within Roughton.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—*[Presented by Steff Aquarone, Official Report, 17 January 2025; Vol. 760, c. 699.]*

[P003034]

*Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Gareth Thomas):*

Thank you to the petitioners for raising concerns regarding the closure of Roughton post office. The Government recognise how important post offices are to their communities, and thus fully appreciate the impact a post office branch closure can have on a community.

Roughton post office closed on 7 January following the resignation of the postmaster and withdrawal of premises for post office use. Post Office Ltd has been exploring how it can maintain a post office service in Roughton but no suitable retailers in Roughton have been found to apply to operate the post office. The postmaster from Aylsham post office has agreed to run the mobile service, which presents the best possible solution to restore post office services to this community. The service commenced on 9 January and provides services at the New Inn car park, Roughton, NR11 8SJ, every Thursday between 3 and 4 pm.

The Government protect the post office network by setting minimum access criteria to ensure that 99% of the UK population lives within 3 miles of a post office. The access criteria ensure that however the network changes, essential services remain within local reach of all citizens.

The Post Office has the freedom to make commercial decisions regarding the composition of its network, providing it fulfils the Government-set access criteria. Decisions around individual branches are a matter for the Post Office.





# ORAL ANSWERS

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# PETITION

Monday 10 March 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>
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No proofs can be supplied. Corrections that Members suggest for the Bound Volume should be clearly marked on a copy of the daily Hansard - not telephoned - and *must be received in the Editor's Room, House of Commons,*

**not later than  
Monday 17 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.

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