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**HOUSE OF COMMONS**  
**OFFICIAL REPORT**

**PARLIAMENTARY**  
**DEBATES**

**(HANSARD)**

**Monday 7 April 2025**

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# House of Commons

*Monday 7 April 2025*

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

## PRAYERS

[MR SPEAKER *in the Chair*]

## Oral Answers to Questions

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

*The Secretary of State was asked—*

#### New Towns

1. **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): What steps she is taking to build new towns. [903620]

6. **Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): What recent progress she has made on the new towns programme. [903626]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** Our vision for the next generation of new towns is setting the stage for a house building revolution in the years to come. These will be well-connected, attractive places with all the infrastructure and services needed to sustain thriving communities, including public transport, GP surgeries and schools.

**Peter Swallow:** Bracknell was designated a new town 76 years ago in the aftermath of world war two, and it has been a huge success, in part because of the way it was designed, with leisure facilities, access to nature and transport links built into the town's DNA. As the Government look to build the next generation of new towns, will my right hon. Friend commit to learning from the new towns that went before?

**Angela Rayner:** I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. There is a lot to admire from the past, including in new towns such as Bracknell. We are learning the lessons from the past for our next generation of new towns, to ensure that they are well connected, well designed, sustainable and attractive places, where people want to live, and it is important that they have the infrastructure, amenities and services that they need to thrive.

**Ben Goldsborough:** The housing crisis is an issue in not just our city centres but our rural communities. A new town would be excellent for our area of South Norfolk. It would help tackle our local housing crisis and ensure that we could deliver affordable housing for local people, where they need it.

**Angela Rayner:** I agree with my hon. Friend that the housing crisis is a challenge across the whole of England. The independent new towns taskforce is reviewing submissions to the call for evidence as it continues its work on recommending locations for new towns. The responses to the call for evidence will support the taskforce's work of developing its recommendations, and the responses demonstrate significant enthusiasm across the country.

**Mr Mark Francois** (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Our local paper, *The Echo*, revealed last week that Labour-led Southend council and Lib Dem-led Rochford council are planning to build a new town of up to 10,000 houses on the border between the two. I understand that if this is done under the new towns fund, those numbers would be in addition to Rochford's housing target, rather than making up part of the target. We would be talking about building nearly 20,000 properties by 2043, which is totally unsustainable, given that our infrastructure is creaking as it is. Can the Secretary of State confirm whether those new-town houses on the Rochford side would go towards our meeting the target or be in addition to it?

**Angela Rayner:** We have not selected the positions for the new towns; the new towns taskforce is still working on those. We have been clear that what the new towns will deliver will be over and above the targets for housing produced through the standard methods, but this is not one of those new towns, because we have not chosen them yet.

**Rebecca Smith** (South West Devon) (Con): In the new town of Sherford, which is already being built in my constituency, there will be up to 5,500 new homes built over the coming years. However, there are challenges around FirstPort, the delayed delivery of a supermarket and other vital local amenities, and delays and escalating costs relating to the delivery of a new GP surgery. Also, National Grid pylons are being moved to make way for further new homes, at enormous cost to the taxpayer. What conversations is the Secretary of State having with key providers of national infrastructure, including the NHS and National Grid, to ensure that such obstacles are removed, so that these homes can be built?

**Angela Rayner:** We are bringing forward the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, as the hon. Member knows, and we have set mandatory targets. Unlike the previous Government, we believe that infrastructure has to come through this process, and we are working across Government to ensure that. We are already pushing further on section 106 notices in our work with developers. We are telling them that we want the houses, need the infrastructure, and want them to do this properly.

#### New Homes: Sustainability

2. **Cameron Thomas** (Tewkesbury) (LD): What steps she is taking to ensure that new homes are sustainable. [903622]

10. **Michelle Welsh** (Sherwood Forest) (Lab): What plans she has to build more sustainable housing. [903630]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** The Government are committed to ensuring that the 1.5 million new homes that we will build during this Parliament will be high-quality, well designed and sustainable.

We intend to amend building regulations later this year as part of the introduction of future standards that will set more ambitious energy efficiency and carbon emissions requirements for new homes.

**Cameron Thomas:** I thank the Minister for his response. While visiting the Netherlands with the Environmental Audit Committee, I saw the benefits of long-term, joined-up, strategic planning. In Rotterdam city centre, rooftop gardens provide mental health benefits and allotment space, while at ground level, sunken community spaces and underground car parks mitigate flooding. The Tewkesbury garden town will bring 4,000 new homes to my constituency. Will the Minister meet me and stakeholders who support the garden town, so that we can set the standard for development across the country?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The approach of the Netherlands, not least to spatial planning and design standards, has much to commend it, but we would need a stand-alone debate to do that subject justice. As for the Tewkesbury garden communities, they are precisely the kind of sustainable and infrastructure-led development that the Government want to see more of, and that we are backing through legislation and policy. I would be more than happy to meet the hon. Member and local stakeholders to discuss what more might be done to deliver on the aspirations set out in the Tewkesbury garden communities charter, which was published last year.

**Michelle Welsh:** Last week, I visited Howgate Close housing development in Eakring in my constituency, and I am proud to say that the homes are the most energy-efficient in the country. It would be easy to assume that houses such as those cost a fortune, but what is remarkable about that development is that they are affordable, including for some of the most vulnerable in our society. Does the Minister agree that it is vital that energy-efficient homes are affordable and accessible to everyone, and will he come with me to visit Eakring to see that incredible development?

**Matthew Pennycook:** It may not surprise hon. Members to hear that I am indeed aware of the nine high thermal mass buildings that have been constructed for rent at Howgate Close, and I commend the site owner, Dr Parsons, for championing such high-quality, sustainable development on his land. We need to ensure that all new homes are future-proof, with low-carbon heating and very high-quality building fabric, including those made available for local people at affordable rents. I will ensure that my hon. Friend's request for a Minister to visit Howgate Close is given due consideration.

**Sir Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con):** I genuinely thank the Minister for the time he took to meet me and the chairman of a local residents' association in an apartment block to discuss the problems of building new homes on top of existing apartment blocks, if the work is done badly. Has he drawn any conclusions from that meeting about how to safeguard against unsuitable and unsustainable developments of that sort?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question; we had a very productive discussion about the issue that he highlights. I think he acknowledges

some of the bad outcomes that we have seen from the previous Government's expansion of permitted development rights since 2013. We are keeping the matter under review, and I am more than happy to have another conversation with him as we further consider policy in this area.

**Helena Dollimore (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op):** As we build new homes, it is important that we make sure that existing homes are as safe as they can be. I recently met representatives of a leading fire safety business in my constituency, who told me of the unacceptably long delays that it faces from the Building Safety Regulator. Will the Minister meet me and my local business to discuss those delays, and how we can tackle them?

**Matthew Pennycook:** My hon. Friend raises an important issue. The newly established Building Safety Regulator is crucial to upholding building safety standards, but I acknowledge that its operation is causing delays in handling applications for some building projects. She will be aware that in February, the Government allocated £2 million to the BSR to accelerate the processing of applications. We are working closely with the regulator to support the plan for improved delivery, and we will continue to keep its performance under review.

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

**Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con):** The Government's much-lauded policy of building 1.5 million new sustainable homes has been doomed from the start of this Parliament, and we now have that confirmed, with the Chancellor saying last week that only 1.3 million homes will be delivered by the end of this Parliament. But it is worse than that. Office for Budget Responsibility figures show that only 1.06 million homes will be built in England, which is 500,000 fewer than the Government's target, and around 200,000 fewer than the last Conservative Government built in the past five years. Will the Minister confirm that the goalposts have moved, and that Labour will not meet its target for housing in this country?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I am very fond of the hon. Gentleman, but I am afraid that, characteristically, he has got this one completely wrong. The 1.3—[*Interruption.*] Will the hon. Member for Thirsk and Malton (Kevin Hollinrake) give me time to answer? The OBR estimated that our changes to the national planning policy framework alone will increase house building to 1.3 million. That does not take into account the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, and the other changes coming forward. The hon. Member for Hamble Valley (Paul Holmes) is simply wrong. We are on course for 1.5 million homes in this Parliament.

### Housing Supply

3. **Katie Lam (Weald of Kent) (Con):** What steps she plans to take to support house building in London.  
[903623]

15. **Andrew Cooper (Mid Cheshire) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to increase the supply of housing.  
[903636]

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** Our country is in the midst of a housing crisis, decades in the making. As our plan for change set out, the Government are committed to the biggest increase in social and affordable housing in a generation. We have already taken decisive action to increase the supply of new homes, with bold reforms to the planning system and the launch of the new homes accelerator programme, which will unblock thousands of homes stuck in the planning system. In the spring statement, we announced a £2 billion down payment to deliver up to 18,000 new social and affordable homes, and we are investing £600 million in training for new construction jobs.

**Katie Lam:** Demand for housing is greatest in London, which is where the economy most needs new homes. Building in London means less pressure on commuting infrastructure and house prices in places like rural Kent, but the housing targets for London have been cut. The Government justify that by saying that London has “the biggest proposed percentage increase against delivery”.—[*Official Report*, 12 December 2024; Vol. 758, c. 1067.]

Why is the right hon. Lady rewarding the London Mayor’s failure to build Britain’s most needed houses with lower targets?

**Angela Rayner:** We are asking London to deliver record levels of house building. Our revised standard method sets the housing need for London at nearly 88,000 homes per year. The previous Government artificially boosted targets for London using an extra 35% urban uplift. That resulted in a target of nearly 100,000 homes—a third of the previous national target—which could not be justified. The London Mayor has started building more new council homes than at any time since the 1970s. He is getting on with building homes while the Tories have failed and are the blockers.

**Andrew Cooper:** With around 1.3 million people on housing registers in England, it is vital that we achieve a step change in the supply of housing, particularly social housing, over this Parliament; however, in my constituency and across the north-west, housing associations are managing many ageing, low-quality homes that require ongoing investment and maintenance. Homes for the North warns that many of these properties will become uninhabitable and unsuitable for social housing over the next decade. What consideration has my right hon. Friend given to targeting the renewal of social housing, such as through pooling funding with money for decarbonisation, so that registered social landlords can use the money flexibly to combine retrofit, demolition and new build? That would drive regeneration and reduce carbon emissions.

**Angela Rayner:** My hon. Friend is right to highlight the absolute mess that the previous Government left our housing stock in. We will ensure the biggest increase in social house building in a generation, and provide safe, warm and decent homes, by introducing minimum energy efficiency standards and reviewing the decent homes standard. Recent funding includes £1.29 billion for the warm homes social housing fund, £800 million in top-ups to the current affordable homes programme, and a £2 billion down payment on the future programme, which will be used for regeneration projects that will result in a net increase in the number of homes.

**Graham Stuart (Beverley and Holderness) (Con):** The housing numbers for London were cut by 20% by the Government, but again and again we find in *Hansard* the Secretary of State asserting that 1.5 million homes will be built during this Parliament in England. Why did the Chancellor tell us a few days ago that only 1.3 million will be built across the whole of the UK, and will the Secretary of State please confirm that the 1.5 million target has gone?

**Angela Rayner:** The Minister for Housing and Planning answered this question just a moment ago. Perhaps my Mancunian accent will help: the OBR scored the national planning policy framework changes that we have already made. That is where that figure came from. Our other plans, including the new homes accelerator programme, the money that we have invested since then, and the changes in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill, mean that the number will increase, and we will meet our 1.5 million homes target. I do not think that I can put it much clearer than that.

**Dame Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op):** There is a real housing crisis in Hackney, where we spend £54 million a year on temporary accommodation. I visit families, most of them working families, in tragically overcrowded accommodation. We need this social housing as quickly as possible, and I know my right hon. Friend is putting her shoulder to the wheel. Will she visit Hackney to see the work that the council has been doing to build properly affordable social rented council housing? The council could do so much more with more Government support.

**Angela Rayner:** We have over 160,000 children in temporary accommodation, as I have said at the Dispatch Box a couple of times, and it is a scandal that we are in this situation. That is why the Government are making these changes. We make no apology for changing the mandatory housing targets to get Britain building again, because we need those homes and those kids deserve better. We also need to cut the number of children living in temporary accommodation, including B&Bs. We are determined to do that.

### Homelessness and Rough Sleeping

4. **Uma Kumaran (Stratford and Bow) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to work with local councils to prevent homelessness. [903624]

7. **Lee Pitcher (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab):** What steps her Department is taking to support people sleeping rough in colder months. [903627]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** This Government have increased funding for homelessness services by £233 million, to a total of nearly £1 billion for 2025-26. The Government have also provided £60 million of additional emergency winter pressures funding to support people sleeping rough during the colder months.

**Uma Kumaran:** According to media reports, Conservative shadow Ministers met representatives of the Get Living property group, which manages thousands of properties

in my constituency. In the meeting, they discussed how to stop the Renters' Rights Bill, in their words, "dead in its tracks." After years of promising to ban no-fault evictions, the Tory Government failed to deliver. Now they are colluding with the property industry to keep no-fault evictions in place. Will this Labour Government do the right thing and ban no-fault evictions for good?

**Rushanara Ali:** The Government remain committed to abolishing section 21 no-fault evictions for both new and existing tenancies as soon as possible. We will ensure that the sector has adequate notice of the system taking effect, and we will work closely with stakeholders to enable a smooth transition.

**Lee Pitcher:** I recently took part in an organised sleep-out event at Doncaster's Eco-Power stadium. The event was set up by the Club Doncaster Foundation to raise money for projects supporting homeless people. Such fundraisers, and the work done by charities like Shelter and Doncaster's People Focused Group, are vital, but it is ultimately up to the Government to solve the problem of homelessness. Can the Minister update us on what the Government are doing to fulfil the need for social housing?

**Rushanara Ali:** Since taking office, we have made £800 million of new funding available to deliver 7,800 new social and affordable homes. From 2026-27, we are injecting £2 billion to build up to 18,000 more homes by the end of this Parliament. We will announce additional funding for next year and beyond at the spending review.

**Ben Maguire (North Cornwall) (LD):** Cornwall faces a homelessness crisis, with 22,000 families on the housing waiting list. Following a meeting last week with the Minister for Housing and Planning, I propose an Airbnb Bill that will require second home owners formally to seek planning permission for any change of use of their properties. There is an easy loophole that allows property owners to avoid paying council tax altogether by passing off a home as a short-term holiday let. Will the Minister please confirm that she will give this proposal due consideration, and will she visit Cornwall to discuss this further?

**Rushanara Ali:** The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. Our priority is to make sure that we tackle the root causes of the housing shortage and homelessness. That is why we are building 1.5 million homes and investing record amounts in housing and tackling homelessness, including £1 billion for the next year.

**Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con):** Since the Homelessness Reduction Act 2017 was passed, local authorities have prevented 1.4 million people from becoming homeless. However, there is still evidence of local authorities refusing to plan to prevent people becoming homeless. Will the Minister take up the private Member's Bill that I championed the other week, and that was given an unopposed Second Reading, so that we put pressure on the people who should provide the housing, and no one in this country is forced to sleep rough?

**Rushanara Ali:** The hon. Gentleman has done a great deal of cross-party work in support of housing. We have a consultation in place. I am pleased to say that I have

met him on a couple of occasions, and he will be aware that we are working hard and at pace to tackle the underlying challenges. There are 164,000 children in temporary accommodation, and rough sleeping has gone up by 164% since 2010. We are determined to take action to deal with the challenges, but that will require concerted work. The Deputy Prime Minister is leading the interdepartmental taskforce on homelessness. I look forward to continuing to work with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman).

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

**Paul Holmes (Hamble Valley) (Con):** Quite rightly, the Government said in their manifesto that they wanted to reduce homelessness and rough sleeping, but instead there has been a 20% increase in rough sleeping—at its highest in London but rapidly climbing in other parts of England, such as by 67% in Derbyshire. Homeless Link states that the Budget removed £50 million to £60 million from the sector due to national insurance increases and has called for a reset on homelessness funding. Where is the Minister's long-term plan for reducing homelessness? Will she commit to seeing a fall in homelessness in the next year?

**Rushanara Ali:** The shadow Minister should be aware of the record of his Government—a record increase in rough sleeping. Since 2010 it went up by 164%. The previous Labour Government cut rough sleeping by two thirds. We have put in an additional £233 million, taking the total to £1 billion. We have provided additional funding of £60 million to tackle winter pressures. The hon. Gentleman should look at the record of his Government and face up to the fact that over 14 years the Conservative party presided over record increases. We are determined to tackle that, which is what we are doing through our cross-cutting work across Government.

### Social Rented Housing

5. **Jessica Toale (Bournemouth West) (Lab):** What plans she has to improve security and standards in the social rented sector. [903625]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** The Government are taking concerted steps to drive a transformational and lasting change in the safety and quality of social housing, including introducing Awaab's law, and consulting on the new decent homes and minimum energy efficiency standards. The majority of social housing tenants already have security of tenure, and our Renters' Rights Bill will abolish section 21 evictions where those are used by housing associations.

**Jessica Toale:** I have been working with three groups of residents who live in buildings run by the same social housing provider in my constituency. Many residents have come to me having been left living in horrendous conditions, with leaking roofs, damp and mould, and unfinished and unremediated works. Following my intervention, the housing provider has agreed to a multimillion-pound upgrade in one of the buildings, to hire extra staff, and to communicate better with residents. That is great news, but it should not have had to get to this point. What more can be done to ensure that residents such as my constituents are not left waiting years for repairs, and that social housing providers are meeting their obligations?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I very much agree with my hon. Friend that her intervention should not have been required to force the provider in question to take action. In addition to the forthcoming reforms that I referred to in my previous answer, she will know that all registered providers of social housing are required to deliver the outcomes of the regulatory standards set by the independent Regulator of Social Housing. The regulator works intensively with providers that are not delivering those outcomes, and has a series of powers at its disposal when it identifies serious failings. I am more than happy to discuss further with my hon. Friend how she might seek redress for her residents.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): My interests are in the register, Mr Speaker. In what precise ways is the Minister intending to improve the decent homes standard?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We have been very clear that we are going to consult on a new decent homes standard that applies to both the social rented and private rented sectors, and I would welcome the right hon. Member's engagement when that consultation is published.

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

**Gideon Amos** (Taunton and Wellington) (LD): Despite the announcements referred to earlier, the Building Safety Regulator is now advising applicants to plan for 16 weeks to clear gateway 2. That is holding up a disproportionate number of social homes, including 100 in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey), and it is much longer than is required for planning permission. What steps will the Government take to reduce the wait back down to eight weeks, as it was?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Like my hon. Friend the Member for Bournemouth West (Jessica Toale), the hon. Gentleman raises an important issue. The newly established Building Safety Regulator is crucial to upholding building safety standards, but we acknowledge that it is causing delays in handling applications, particularly for high-rise building projects on gateway 2, and there is gateway 3 after that. The funding we have announced will make a difference, but as I have said, we are working with the regulator to support its plan for improved delivery, including increasing caseworker capacity and guidance to the sector. We will continue to keep its performance under close review.

#### Local Development: Public Consultation

8. **Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Whether she plans to include more local people in discussions on development in their area. [903628]

18. **Claire Young** (Thornbury and Yate) (LD): What her policy is on the future role of planning committees in the planning process. [903639]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** Local plans are the best way for communities to shape decisions about how to deliver the housing and wider development that their areas need. We want more people to be involved in the development of those local plans, and a key objective of our digital planning reforms is

increased public engagement with them. Measures in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will ensure planning committees play their proper role in scrutinising development without obstructing it, while maximising the use of experienced professional planners.

**Robbie Moore:** Across my constituency, local people are hugely frustrated at Labour-run Bradford council inundating our communities with hundreds of new houses, while not investing in local services and roads. Despite protests and valid concerns, the council has steamrollered through developments at every stage. Yet when vast numbers of local people in Silsden supported the development of a new farm shop on the periphery of the town—exactly the kind of new service that would promote local growth and deliver the new sustainable housing we need—Bradford council blocked the proposal. How will the Minister ensure that local councils listen to local people and are not dictating development plans to them?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I appreciate that the hon. Gentleman needed to make a political point to get his clip, but I am glad that we have Labour councils across the country that back development. Of course residents should have their say, but it is the role and responsibility of local authorities to make decisions about material considerations in planning applications, and I have no reason to think that the local authority in question has done anything other than that.

**Claire Young:** When I was leader of South Gloucestershire council, in partnership with Labour, we restored the right of local people to speak at planning committee site visits, giving people back their voice in the affected community. However, clause 46 of the Planning and Infrastructure Bill would enable the Secretary of State to bypass planning committees altogether. If the Minister truly wants to get Britain building, will he think again and give communities a real stake in local planning decisions?

**Matthew Pennycook:** As I have made clear, we want more people involved in the development of local plans. There is nothing in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that will prevent them from objecting to individual applications. The measures simply ensure that the process of determining applications at a local level is more streamlined and efficient. As I made clear in closing the Bill's Second Reading on 24 March, the Government intend formally to consult on proposals relating to the delegation of planning decisions in England, so the hon. Lady and other hon. Members will be able to engage with the detail alongside the Bill's passage.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): The number of people needing a social home in Luton has gone up from 8,500 last year to 11,500 this year, so I welcome the Government's plan for 1.5 million new homes. While we are crying out for houses in Luton, just over the border with Central Bedfordshire developments are taking place right on our border, but without people in Luton getting a look in. What can the Minister do to ensure that local authorities co-operate with each other to deliver the homes that we need?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We are taking measures to address precisely the problem that my hon. Friend outlines. Proposals in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill will make spatial development strategies mandatory at sub-regional level, so neighbouring local authorities have to co-operate effectively on housing delivery and infrastructure provision across boundaries in just the way she sets out, which will address the challenges she outlines.

**Graeme Downie** (Dunfermline and Dollar) (Lab): Dunfermline is Scotland's newest city and as such a large number of homes are being built all the time. However, too often those large-scale housing developments are done without reference to local services, such as GPs, and without proper consultation with local people, partly due to failures in the Scottish SNP Government's planning policy. What advice does the Minister have about how those issues might be overcome? Will he engage with the Scottish Government to ensure they are learning any lessons from the excellent changes being made in that part of the UK?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Housing is a devolved matter, but I am always keen to convey to colleagues in the Scottish Government precisely the benefits of the proposals we are taking forward when it comes to planning reform and renewed drive for house building.

#### Victims of Domestic Abuse: Accommodation

9. **Lee Barron** (Corby and East Northamptonshire) (Lab): What steps her Department is taking to provide safe accommodation for victims of domestic abuse. [903629]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** Local authorities in England must ensure that support is available in safe accommodation for domestic abuse victims who need it. My Department has allocated £160 million for 2025-26, a £30 million uplift from the previous year. That funding is for local authorities to commission lifesaving support for victims in safe accommodation.

**Lee Barron:** One of my constituents is a victim of domestic abuse and on a 999 priority list. She was served a section 21 notice by her landlord and denied band A housing by the council because, in order to keep custody of her children, she had signed a police protection order stating that she was not at risk of domestic violence. She was forced to choose between her children and a safe home. What is my hon. Friend doing to ensure that councils properly prioritise domestic abuse victims so that no one faces such an impossible choice?

**Rushanara Ali:** I am so sorry to hear about the difficulties that my hon. Friend's constituent has faced. That is horrific. He will be aware that the Government are focused on tackling violence against women, working across Departments and being led by the Home Secretary and the Deputy Prime Minister. Local authorities are strongly encouraged through statutory guidance to give priority for social housing to victims of domestic abuse and their families, particularly if they are homeless and require urgent rehousing. We are also taking action to exempt victims of domestic abuse from local connection tests, where they apply, to ensure that there are no barriers to victims accessing social housing.

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): Over the weekend, I dealt with a case in which a homeless pregnant woman, who was a victim of domestic abuse, was kicked out of her temporary accommodation by Kirklees council for no real reason and left on the street. Will the Minister explain or share with this House what steps will be taken to prevent councils from turfing out pregnant women who are victims of domestic abuse on to the street?

**Rushanara Ali:** I would be grateful if the hon. Member could write to me about that specific case. I will follow up with him.

**Marsha De Cordova** (Battersea) (Lab): I recently visited the Glass Door night shelter in my constituency to hear more about the work it is doing to alleviate homelessness. One of the things it told me was that many of the women who visit the shelter are fleeing domestic abuse. We all know the challenges if somebody is homeless: it is almost impossible to get a job, let alone to find somewhere safe and decent to live. The Minister has highlighted the investment. Can she set out a little more about the money being invested in services not only to support but to protect women fleeing domestic abuse?

**Rushanara Ali:** My hon. Friend will be aware that the Deputy Prime Minister is chairing an interdepartmental taskforce on homelessness and rough sleeping. A key part of our work is ensuring that we support victims of domestic abuse and violence. As I stated, we have already allocated funding to local authorities, and we will continue to work across Government to tackle the root causes of homelessness as well as violence against women.

**Zöe Franklin** (Guildford) (LD): Victims of domestic violence urgently need safe and stable accommodation. However, councils have no obligation to offer like-for-like housing. Too often, the duty is discharged by suggesting private rentals, which are frequently unaffordable or unsuitable for those on low incomes. That creates a significant barrier for many victims; it even places them in a situation where they choose not to leave, because they cannot have the housing that they need. Will the Minister further explain how she is taking steps to ensure that victims are offered genuinely safe, appropriate and affordable housing? Will she consider strengthening the statutory duty on councils to better support those fleeing domestic abuse?

**Rushanara Ali:** The hon. Member will be aware that there is a massive housing shortage and that there are challenges around supported housing. We need to ensure, as we are doing, that victims of domestic violence get the support they need, which is why we provided the additional uplift of £30 million, to a total of £160 million. We are working across Government to tackle the root causes of violence against women, within which work economic and housing support are crucial. I look forward to working with her and others on this very important agenda.

#### Town Centres: Population Growth

11. **Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): What steps she is taking to ensure that town centres can support growing communities. [903632]



**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** We all want to see our town centres thriving. Through our plan for neighbourhoods, the Government are investing £1.5 billion in the future of towns and communities. The Government have also committed to strengthening the developer contributions system to ensure that new developments provide the necessary infrastructure. To address vacancy in town centres, we have given councils the powers to force the auction of empty shops.

**Alison Bennett:** I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. Burgess Hill is fast-growing, and the Lib Dem-run council is working hard with Homes England to deliver 3,500 new homes, hundreds of which will be affordable. However, after years of Conservative failure, my constituents are worried that housing growth will go hand in hand with the hollowing out of the town centre. My Lib Dem colleagues want to deliver a buoyant town centre through a public-private partnership, so will the Minister visit Burgess Hill to see the innovative approaches we are taking to make it thrive again?

**Alex Norris:** I am grateful for that question, and for the spirit in which Burgess Hill is taking on the need to build housing in its community. We believe that sustainable housing with complementary infrastructure will drive the local economy—it will drive footfall to town centres and help bring private investment to high streets. Clearly, something interesting is happening in Burgess Hill, and I would very much like to visit.

**Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab):** In Sandwell, we have almost 20,000 people on the housing waiting list—we desperately need more affordable and social homes. We also have a town centre in West Brom that is busy during the day, but very quiet at night, with no night economy whatsoever. Both of those challenges could be addressed through development of residential properties in the town centre. We have a few places earmarked for development, but that has completely stalled, so can the Minister say what more he can do to help West Brom to get building and build the homes that people need?

**Alex Norris:** My hon. Friend is exactly right—those two challenges can be taken on together. Creating opportunities for people to live in local communities brings footfall and reduces crime, which are both excellent things. She has heard what my hon. Friend the Minister for Housing and Planning has said about our support for house building. We stand ready to support her community to make sure they can build houses in their town centres.

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

**David Simmonds (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con):** The Opposition broadly support the Government's proposals in the plan for neighbourhoods, which carries on the excellent work started under the previous Government. However, how will the proposals to diversify the base of consultees to prioritise the voice of trade unions—which, by definition, are found mainly in large

public sector and corporate organisations—not drown out the voice of the small businesses on which our town centres depend?

**Alex Norris:** I am grateful for the opportunity to remind the House, and the hon. Gentleman and his Front-Bench colleagues, that they of course wanted the predecessor programme to the plan for neighbourhoods, but did not provide any money for it. That was a slight oversight, which we have been able to address in order to keep the promises that they made but would have had to break. On the point about trade union boards, I can understand why Opposition colleagues do not want the voices of millions of ordinary people in the room when decisions are made; they never do, and they never will. However, trade unions are not in competition with small businesses—far from it. There is room for both in the discussions, and both will add lots to those discussions.

### Supporting Local Growth

12. **Josh Dean (Hertford and Stortford) (Lab):** What recent progress her Department has made on supporting growth in local areas. [903633]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** We are giving local leaders the tools they need to deliver growth for their areas by devolving power and money from central Government to local communities. We are investing in programmes that drive growth, and we will set out our refreshed vision for local growth funding at the multi-year spending review.

**Josh Dean:** Local high streets such as those in Hertford and Stortford are the beating heart of our communities, and they power economic growth. I welcome the fact that the Government are already working with local authorities to implement high street rental auction powers, to breathe life back into high streets and ensure that vacant shops are occupied. Will the Minister set out in further detail how this will help to drive up occupancy rates on our high streets and drive growth in Hertford and Stortford?

**Alex Norris:** High street rental auctions are a great tool for enabling Hertford and Stortford and the rest of the country to take on persistent vacancy. We already have trailblazers that are moving forward at great pace to implement those auctions, but the powers and the extra resources we have provided are available for all councils, and we ask them to come forward, to designate those town centres and high streets, and to start those auctions.

**Mr Andrew Snowden (Fylde) (Con):** I was delighted to see recently that Lancashire county council and Fylde borough council have committed more funds to the St Annes pier link project, and are also looking at the Island site, which is critical for driving growth in the town centre to get that development off the ground. What funds or grants are now available from the Government for that kind of project for which Fylde council can apply, so that it can really catalyse growth on the Island site in St Annes?

**Alex Norris:** We are changing the way in which local growth is done in this country, exactly for that reason. The previous Government wanted to subject communities to beauty parades for short-term funding, according to criteria decided by them. Our funding plans, which will come forward at the spending review, will be long-term, allocative, and based on what the hon. Gentleman's community wants rather than what Ministers want.

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

**David Simmonds** (Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner) (Con): I agree with the Minister that the Government have changed how growth is happening in local government, because apart from the massive growth in the numbers of people rough sleeping and the massive growth in piles of rubbish uncollected in Birmingham, there is little evidence of economic growth at the local level. Does the Minister acknowledge that when we compare band D equivalents, Conservative councils consistently charge much lower council tax than Labour or Lib Dem ones? The best way for our constituents to ensure local growth is to vote Conservative at the council elections.

**Alex Norris:** I have been there. It is horrible in opposition. It gets to the point where, a couple of hours before orals, someone tells you that have to ask the clip question on council tax. All I will say to the hon. Gentleman is that I know that the people of our country are smart enough to decide which of us they would rather.

### Property Management Companies

13. **Lincoln Jopp** (Spelthorne) (Con): What steps she is taking to ensure that property management companies are adequately regulated. [903634]

20. **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): What steps her Department plans to take to limit excessive service charges imposed on leasehold properties. [903641]

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** The Government recognise the considerable financial strain that rising service charges are placing on leaseholders. That is why we intend to consult on the Leasehold and Freehold Reform Act 2024's provisions on service charges and bring them into force as quickly as possible thereafter. This year, we will also consult on strengthening the regulation of managing agents, including, as a minimum, introducing mandatory professional qualifications to set a new basic standard that managing agents will be required to meet.

**Lincoln Jopp:** On Friday, I met with Jacqui, Gary and Simon in Fairwater Drive in my Spelthorne constituency. Jacqui's service charge is going up from £1,500 a year to £4,800. I sat down and had a look at the bills, and they are without any itemisation, so it is impossible to know where to start with the property manager. The Minister wrote in response to a recent written question:

"We will set out our full position on regulation of estate, letting and managing agents in due course."

Can he give some reassurance to Jacqui, Gary and Simon that their interests will not be put on to the back-burner and suggest when "in due course" might be?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I am sorry to hear about the experience of Jacqui, Gary and Simon. As I said, the Government are fully committed to protecting leaseholders from abuse and poor service at the hands of unscrupulous managing agents. Despite committing to regulate the property agent sector in 2018, the hon. Gentleman will know that the previous Government failed to do so. This Government will act. We are looking again at the recommendations of the 2019 report commissioned from Lord Best, which was not acted upon by the previous Government over many years. As I have made clear, we intend to consult on the regulation of managing agents this year.

**Darren Paffey:** Many leaseholders in Southampton Itchen who are still waiting for fire remediation work to be done are now being clobbered by extortionate service charges. In one case, a constituent went from paying £800 a year to £3,300 a year, with next to no clarity that that money is being spent well. Despite my recent meetings with developers and management companies, I am yet to be convinced that there is any end in sight for my constituents. What conversations are the Government having with management companies that are letting service charges spiral out of control?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I recognise, as I said, the challenges experienced by leaseholders. When it comes to insurance, the Minister for Building Safety recently met the industry to discuss how we can bring premiums down. When it comes to service charges, I assure my hon. Friend the Member for Southampton Itchen that we understand, not least because I have significant numbers of such cases in my constituency, the considerable and, in some cases, intolerable financial strain being placed on leaseholders as a result of opaque and unaffordable service charges. We are committed to empowering leaseholders to challenge unreasonable service charge increases, and my hon. Friend will not have to wait long for us to take action to that end.

### SEND Funding: Council Insolvency

14. **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Chancellor of the Exchequer and the Secretary of State for Education on the potential implications for her policies of councils becoming insolvent due to inadequate funding for SEND education. [903635]

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** The Government recognise the impact that spending on special educational needs and disabilities is having on council finances. A £1 billion increase to SEND and alternative provision was announced for 2025-26 in the autumn statement. The Government intend to set out plans for reforming the SEND system in further detail this year. That will include details on how the Government will support local authorities to deal with their historical and accruing dedicated schools grant deficits.

**David Davis:** Next March, when local authorities can no longer exclude the high needs elements from their balance sheets, half of them will go bankrupt as it now stands. For the East Riding, it is estimated that this year's education budget is £17 million in deficit. That is largely because of increased high needs spending on

pupils with special education needs. Can the Minister give me an undertaking that we will not next year find ourselves either crushing the needs of special needs children or those of other needs in society?

**Jim McMahon:** First, we need to repair the system of SEND provision and deal with its impact on local authorities. The system is not sustainable in its current form, and we must reform it from the ground upwards. Secondly, deficits have been accruing and are still accruing, and that is a big issue. We certainly do not intend councils to be the victims of a system over which they have had no control, and we will work with them in our endeavour to prevent that.

**Jen Craft (Thurrock) (Lab):** As a SEND parent, my view of my child's needs is holistic: I do not believe that they simply stop where the responsibilities of a local authority lie. What steps is the Minister taking to ensure that our SEND policy reflects such needs and the responsibilities of, for instance, the Department of Health and Social Care, the Treasury and the Department for Education, as well as local authorities?

**Jim McMahon:** As my hon. Friend says, this issue requires a whole-of-Government approach. When Governments work in silos, it is those who need support the most who fall through the gaps in the end. This Government do work across Departments, including our own and the Department for Education, to ensure that we have a single plan. Ultimately, of course, we have to deal with the financial impact on councils, but it is the young people going through the system who really matter.

### Topical Questions

T1. [903645] **David Davis** (Goole and Pocklington) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

**The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Angela Rayner):** I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests, which states that I am a trade union member.

Let me update the House on the waste dispute in Birmingham. Our priority is tackling the misery and disruption caused to residents. The Government have consistently urged the council and Unite to sit down and resolve the dispute; it is welcome that they met yesterday and that further talks are taking place today, but we continue to press all parties to negotiate that urgently needed resolution.

It is essential to protect public health by tackling the backlog of waste, and my Department is in close contact with the council. This weekend I met the council leader and the managing director, and we are providing ongoing support to address the public health emergency. Collections took place over the weekend, and will continue this week to clear the backlog and protect public health. The Government continue to support Birmingham's recovery.

**David Davis:** Needless to say, everyone wishes the Secretary of State well with that.

In March, the Chancellor said:

"The regulatory system has become burdensome to the point of choking off innovation, investment and growth. We will free businesses from that stranglehold".

In my constituency, the Finnish company Metsä Tissue wants to invest hundreds of millions to build a state-of-the-art tissue manufacturing plant. The investment will provide 400 direct jobs, thousands of other jobs and £30 million a year for the local economy, but although the site is a freeport, the investment is hampered by monumental costs of £113 million to make it ready, although the same process on an equivalent site in Sweden will cost £4.5 million. What are the Government doing to correct this problem?

**Angela Rayner:** We have been doing a lot to try to ensure that, under this Government, taxpayers get value for money from the fair and reasonable amounts that we can invest to make land ready for development. As the right hon. Member said, we have the freeports—some of them a legacy from the previous Government—but we want to see infrastructure built, which is why we are bringing forward the Planning and Infrastructure Bill. We have committed ourselves to 150 new major infrastructure projects, so hopefully we will kick-start the economy in a way that his Government was unable to.

T2. [903646] **Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I was delighted recently to see civic and business leaders in Southampton join the Labour council in launching their Renaissance Vision, setting out an ambitious agenda for regeneration and house building in the city. What steps will the Government take in the upcoming spending review to support and enable house building visions such as this?

**The Minister for Housing and Planning (Matthew Pennycook):** I do not begrudge my hon. Friend his attempt, but he will have to wait for the spending review outcomes to receive an answer to his question.

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

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The effects of the Birmingham bin strike have been declared a major incident, they are a national embarrassment, and with 21° temperatures forecast for later this week, they will become a public health emergency. While Labour Members in Birmingham are busy campaigning for an airport in Pakistan, the Secretary of State is unwilling to visit the city or take on Unite. Is that because of the tens of millions of pounds that her party receives from Unite, or, indeed, because of the £10,000 that she received for her own election campaign?

**Angela Rayner:** I thought the shadow Secretary of State was better than that, but heigh-ho.

This is a local dispute, and it is right that the negotiations are led locally. We have made it clear that both parties should get round the table, and I am pleased that that happened on Sunday and talks continue today. Birmingham city council did declare a major incident last week; we expect the rubbish to be cleared, we expect the parties to get round the negotiating table, and we expect this to be sorted out.

**Kevin Hollinrake:** The right hon. Lady still has not explained why she has not visited the city to look at this issue at first hand.

The right hon. Lady's manifesto sets out the issue of preserving the green belt. In this very House, she said that she would transform grey-belt land such as wasteland or old car parks, but also that she would protect the green belt. In its report accompanying the spring statement last week, the Office for Budget Responsibility stated that most of the additional homes delivered—up to 500,000, according to her—will be built on the green belt. Is it not the case that she has conned the public with her grey-belt policy, and that she has unintentionally misled this House?

**Angela Rayner:** I thought the hon. Member was going to do better, but he did not. The Minister for Local Government was in Birmingham on Thursday, and I am always happy to visit Birmingham. It is a great city and has always been a fantastic place, and I have probably been there more times than the hon. Member has. Under the Tories, the number of homes approved on green-belt land increased nearly tenfold since 2009, so I will not take any lectures. We have said that we will develop on brownfield sites first, and we are taking action to make sure that we deliver the homes and infrastructure that people need. He could learn a lot from me.

T3. [903648] **Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): At the end of January, 14,000 people were still on Northumberland county council's social housing waiting list, yet hundreds of properties right across the county, including in rural Allendale, remain empty. Given the number of people on the housing list and in desperate need of accommodation, it is a disgrace that the Conservative administration has left them empty for so long. Does the Minister agree that a Labour council, backed by a Labour Government, will do much more to get people off the housing list and into homes?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Local authorities already have a range of powers to bring empty homes back into use, but I am more than happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this specific issue in more detail.

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

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Last month, I was in a field near the East Carr estate in Hull. With the River Humber in the distance, the field lay submerged under water and sat clearly below sea level. Residents told me that the field acts as a barrier between their homes and the water, and they were really worried that the planned development, which is in the Hull local plan, will leave them with flooded homes. Can the Minister reassure me, and residents in Hull and other low-lying communities, that the Government will ensure that the land use framework for determining areas for development will consider flood risk management and the delivery of sustainable drainage systems?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We took action on SUDS in the national policy planning framework, and we have made very welcome improvements in that area. The Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs has launched a consultation on the land use framework. I take it that the hon. Lady has submitted her views, and we will publish the response to that consultation in due course.

T4. [903649] **Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): I alluded earlier to Bracknell being 76 years old. One of the challenges we face, especially in our older estates, is insufficient parking. Will the Minister meet me to discuss how the Government, the council and social housing providers can work together to address this issue?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** We are determined to drive up standards across the private parking sector, and my colleagues in the Department for Transport are across the other elements of the parking sector. We will announce our plans regarding the private parking code of practice in due course, and I would be very happy to meet my hon. Friend to discuss this issue further.

T5. [903651] **Wendy Morton** (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con): With rats as big as cats, over 17,000 tonnes of rubbish piled up in the streets of Birmingham, and stories of rubbish being set alight in some streets, the bin strike is a problem that needs to be sorted out by Labour-run Birmingham city council and this Government. Can the Minister reassure me that neighbouring authorities, such as Walsall borough council, will be reimbursed for any additional costs that we incur as a result of the strike?

**The Minister for Local Government and English Devolution (Jim McMahon):** All of us understand how difficult things are in Birmingham, and it is the Government's job to support Birmingham to recover and get services back to normal. There are three strands: regularising the negotiations with the trade unions to find a long-term solution, dealing with routine collections and getting more trucks out of the depot, and dealing with the clean-up of waste that has accumulated on the streets. We are supporting the council in doing that. On the question of mutual aid, any mutual aid that is provided by local authorities will be reimbursed.

T6. [903652] **Rachel Hopkins** (Luton South and South Bedfordshire) (Lab): With the recent announcement that Goodman has bought Luton's Vauxhall van plant site for redevelopment, does the Minister agree that local government has a key role to play in local business and regeneration plans to help drive economic growth?

**Alex Norris:** Yes. Economic growth is this Government's No. 1 mission. As I have said multiple times at the Dispatch Box, that is an inside job and it takes great local leadership. That is why we have made a commitment to the devolution of power and resources from this place to such communities, by creating new devolved institutions and backing our existing ones.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): Devolution goes alongside revolution in local government in Essex, where we are expecting numerous unitary authorities to be created. However, local people are concerned that they will not get a say in the structure of those local authorities, so can the Minister tell me whether they will? There is also concern about local elections being delayed by multiple years. Can the Minister also tell me whether, year after year, Basildon council will not be held accountable for the decisions it takes?

**Jim McMahon:** I pay tribute to local leaders in Essex and other places for the leadership they have shown to make sure that there is sustainable and accountable local government at the end of the devolution and reorganisation process. The right hon. Member has our absolute commitment that we will work through those issues with local leaders. As for the election question, elections have been postponed for a year, and it is our intention that routine elections will take place as planned.

T7. [903653] **Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): Many of my constituents in Bolton South and Walkden are living in temporary accommodation. They cannot get a social house and they cannot buy a house, so they have to go into the private rental sector, where rents are sky high. What action are the Government taking to stop landlords exploiting this crisis and to give my constituents a way out of temporary homes?

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Rushanara Ali):** This Government are tackling the root causes of homelessness by delivering the biggest increase in social and affordable house building in a generation, and that is being backed by £2 billion of investment for social and affordable housing. Our Renters' Rights Bill will abolish section 21 no-fault evictions.

**Lewis Cocking** (Broxbourne) (Con): My constituents in Broxbourne rightly expect new schools and health facilities, particularly GP surgeries, to be in place before any new housing development. What action is the Minister taking to force developers to deliver infrastructure first?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The Government recognise the importance of ensuring that new housing development is supported by appropriate infrastructure. The revised national planning policy framework, which we published last year, included changes designed to improve the provision and modernisation of various types of public infrastructure. As the hon. Gentleman is well aware, we are also committed to strengthening the existing system of developer contributions to ensure new developments provide the necessary infrastructure that communities such as his expect.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I have been campaigning for fair renting in Bournemouth, and I recently held my first renters roundtable at the Bournemouth food bank's café. It was attended by, among others, my constituent Alison Thomas, who cannot cook in her home because water is leaking through her kitchen ceiling and she is scared to turn on any electrical devices. My constituents the Al-Mubaraks, a family of six, rent an overcrowded home, with black mould so harmful that the headteacher of the four children living there has written to my office to express concern. Does my hon. Friend agree with me that we need urgent action to improve the state of the private rented sector in Bournemouth East?

**Matthew Pennycook:** I thank my hon. Friend for all he does to support private renters in his constituency. I am saddened but, in all honesty, not shocked by the cases he raises. Such experiences are still far too common in both the social sector and the private rented sector. In particular, we know the health risk posed by damp

and mould. That is one reason we have chosen to sequence the implementation of Awaab's law in the way we have, as it will allow us to apply the protections to damp and mould earlier than would otherwise have been the case.

**David Reed** (Exmouth and Exeter East) (Con): In my constituency of Exmouth and Exeter East, the Lib Dem local council is proposing to build tens of thousands of new homes with little thought for corresponding infrastructure. I have spoken to local councillors, and they believe they have no agency in this process and central Government are telling them what to do. What more can be done to ensure that local authorities are held accountable for their decisions?

**Matthew Pennycook:** Local electors can hold local authorities accountable for all of the decisions they make. On infrastructure, I refer the hon. Member to my previous answer. However, local authorities should, as part of the local plan development process, have infrastructure strategies in place that set out the requirements for infrastructure and how they should be funded.

**Sean Woodcock** (Banbury) (Lab): Next month marks 80 years since victory in Europe, and I look forward to attending many VE Day events in my constituency to thank our service personnel of yesteryear. Homelessness is an issue that affects many veterans, so while I welcome the Prime Minister's pledge to guarantee a roof over the head of every veteran, can the Minister confirm what extra support there is with homelessness for the veteran community in Banbury?

**Rushanara Ali:** Homeless veterans in Banbury will be able to benefit from extra support thanks to a £371,927 increase in funding for homelessness services in Cherwell and West Oxfordshire in 2025-26. Veterans in Banbury can also access housing support through Op Fortitude. This nationwide system provides housing guidance and assistance to veterans who are experiencing homelessness or at risk of homelessness.

**Munira Wilson** (Twickenham) (LD): In the London borough of Richmond we desperately need more social homes, but we are really short of sites we can build on. I have long run a campaign for the disused Teddington police station to be turned into a GP surgery and social homes, but understandably the Met wants top dollar to fund its services. Will the Secretary of State look at ways to incentivise public bodies to sell assets below market value for community benefit?

**Matthew Pennycook:** The hon. Member will forgive me, but I am not going to comment on the specifics of the case she raises. We are giving serious consideration to how we better utilise public land in general, particularly in areas with constrained land allocation such as her own.

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): More than half my constituency casework consists of substandard repairs, poor quality communications from social landlords, and damp and mould. That is why this week I am launching a new safe and healthy homes campaign in Kensington and Bayswater. Will the Minister outline how the Government will work with councils and housing

associations, ahead of changes in the law and policy frameworks such as Awaab's law, to improve standards for social tenants, including in my constituency?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We are working closely with the sector and talking through how we can best implement reforms such as Awaab's law and our intended overhaul of the decent homes standard. As I said in a previous question, all resident providers of social housing are required to deliver the outcomes of regulatory standards that are set by the independent regulator. The independent regulator has powers at its disposal to identify when serious failings are taking place.

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): This morning, firefighters in Birmingham made it plain that they will stand in solidarity with the bin strikers in Birmingham and not collect the rubbish. We know that there are only 17 workers, which means this is a drop in the ocean financially. Given that the Government have said they will do all they can to bring the strike to an end, will the Deputy Prime Minister confirm that they will force the council to make the payment, and that they will deploy the Army to assist the local charities and organisations that are helping to clear up and need extra support?

**Jim McMahon:** The hon. Gentleman does very well to go from zero to 100 pretty quickly on the issue, but let us step back from the immediacy of it. Clearly,

we want all parties to be in the room negotiating the underlying pay, terms and conditions dispute that is at play. To be absolutely clear, there has to be a red line. This cannot stray into potentially compromising the equal pay settlement that has been agreed, so that that all begins to unravel. Bear in mind that that has already cost the local authority £1 billion. We support them, and we want people in the room. The deal has to be a sustainable one that will hold.

**Mr Speaker:** For the final question, I call Alice Macdonald.

**Alice Macdonald** (Norwich North) (Lab/Co-op): As the Minister will be aware, nutrient neutrality has had a big impact on Norfolk, holding up many homes and planning applications. The launch of the Norfolk nutrient mitigation fund has helped to make a difference, but we need more environmental solutions. Will the Minister update us on what else we will be doing to address nutrient neutrality, so that good homes and growth can be unlocked in our local area?

**Matthew Pennycook:** We are supporting a range of targeted interventions to deal with constraints such as nutrient neutrality. In the longer term, the measures in the Planning and Infrastructure Bill that introduce the nature restoration fund will allow us to provide a win-win for both development and nature, dealing with constraints such as nutrient neutrality and unlocking the development of new homes.

## Scunthorpe Steelworks

3.39 pm

**Martin Vickers** (Brigg and Immingham) (Con) (*Urgent Question:*) To ask the Secretary of State for Business and Trade what actions the Government are taking to prevent the closure of Scunthorpe's steelworks.

**The Minister for Industry (Sarah Jones):** I appeared before this House on 27 March, just moments after British Steel's devastating announcement of early asset closures at Scunthorpe and its commercial decision to consult on large-scale redundancies. The course of action chosen by British Steel's owner is deeply disappointing, and our thoughts remain with British Steel workers and their families at this very concerning time. Government's contingency plans have kicked in, and teams from the Departments for Work and Pensions and for Education are there to provide support and advice to affected workers. We will ensure that support is in place for as long as possible.

Looking ahead, I can assure this House that early blast furnace closures at Scunthorpe are far from a done deal. We have been clear that the best way forward is for British Steel to continue as a commercially run business with private investment and Government acting in support, which is why we made the company a generous offer of public funding on 24 March. As Members are aware, British Steel's owner did not accept our offer or the necessary conditions attached, which were designed to protect workers, safeguard taxpayers' money and deliver a sustainable company at the core of the future of British steelmaking.

However, that is not the end of the matter. The Business and Trade Secretary and I met Jingye, the owner of British Steel, on Friday, and there are plans to meet again this week. The Government remain resolute in our desire to secure a long-term future for the Scunthorpe steelworks, retaining steel production and putting an end to the years of uncertainty, and I can assure the House that no options are off the table to achieve that. We will continue to work tirelessly across Government and with British Steel's owner to find a better outcome.

I cannot go into further detail at this stage. It would be damaging to British Steel's workers and their families, the company and its supply chain for me to speculate on how events might unfold in the coming days and weeks while a live negotiation is under way and policy is being developed at pace. However, Members should be in no doubt that there is a bright future for steelmaking in the UK under this Government, and we believe that British Steel and its superb workforce at Scunthorpe have an integral role to play in it.

**Martin Vickers:** I thank the Minister for her comments. While it is welcome that work is being done through DWP and so on to support potential redundant workers, the reality is that Jingye is not involved in meaningful negotiations. The Government have been critical of it in previous responses to my questions. It is very obvious that Jingye has cancelled the raw material orders that are essential to keep the furnaces going; those orders were due in mid-May. When I was at the steelworks on Friday, I was told that unless another order for iron ore pellets could be placed this week, it would be too late.

The Minister was somewhat reluctant to go down the nationalisation route when I raised the matter a couple of weeks ago. However, the majority opinion in the area and among leading politicians is that nationalisation on a temporary basis is the only solution to keep the furnaces burning come the middle of next month. Can the Minister therefore confirm that it is something the Government are actively considering? It would provide an opportunity to rebuild the industry, hopefully secure new private sector involvement and convince the customers—most notably Network Rail, which gets 95% of its rail track from the Scunthorpe works—that supply will continue.

I have come round to the view that nationalisation on a temporary basis is, in this instance, the only way. It will secure the jobs and secure a future for steel production in Scunthorpe. I urge the Minister not to rule it out, and indeed to commit to it.

**Sarah Jones:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for securing this urgent question and for his comments. I know we will continue to talk and have honest conversations.

Jingye is very much talking to us. As I said, I met Jingye with the Secretary of State and others on Friday, and we hope to do so again this week.

Our priority is respecting the workers, safeguarding jobs and retaining steelmaking. We have been clear in our belief that the best way forward is for Scunthorpe and British Steel to continue as a commercially-run business with private investment and with the Government acting in support, but I can tell the hon. Gentleman that no options are off the table.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I was concerned to read about the cancellation of shipments of essential coking coal and so on for Scunthorpe. The Business and Trade Committee heard from British Steel and Tata about some of their needs. The Minister will be aware that an area where we have failed as a country over the last six years or so is not having an industrial strategy, so I make clear to her once more the absolute urgency for us to establish a steel plan to set out the UK's needs and ensure that we have resilience across our industries and for our economy.

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we talked about exactly that at the Business and Trade Committee. This country has seen a significant decline in steel manufacturing over the last decade, and we want to turn that around. Long before we got into government, we committed to a plan for steel, which represents a £2.5 billion investment in UK steelmaking. As we speak, there is a roundtable at JCB in Stafford on the plan for steel, on this occasion discussing trade barriers—I was due to be chairing but came back to be in the Chamber. We have been having a series of roundtables to gather evidence and pull the facts and figures together so that we can put the right investment in place.

**Mr Speaker:** I call the shadow Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government.

**Kevin Hollinrake** (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers) and Rob Waltham, our excellent candidate for Mayor of Greater Lincolnshire, for their engagement and work on this issue.

[Kevin Hollinrake]

Despite repeatedly promising to protect and support virgin steelmaking capacity when in opposition, the Labour party is potentially presiding over its total demise. In the process, thousands of blue-collar jobs in this once proud industry have either gone forever or are at risk, including 5,000 directly employed roles at Port Talbot and Scunthorpe alone and many more in the supply chain.

Given that the regions with the highest numbers of steelworkers are Wales and Yorkshire and the Humber, the situation is dealing a hammer blow to efforts to address regional inequality. Steel is obviously a key strategic industry—even more so given our need to increase defence spending and infrastructure investment, and even more so again given President Trump's game-changing imposition of tariffs.

The Prime Minister keeps saying that the world has changed, and that we are witnessing the end of globalisation. I cannot say that I totally agree, but if that is the Government's position, surely they have no choice but to intervene to support domestic production. The alternative could see us locked out of reliable, consistently priced sources of steel. The Government have stepped in to help car manufacturing in recent days, so will the Minister now redouble her efforts to reach a deal with British Steel?

Steel production is just one of the industries closing due to our high energy prices, which are 50% higher than our competitors in France and Germany and 400% higher than in the USA. Other manufacturers such as CF Fertilisers on Teesside and Ineos at Grangemouth have closed their doors or are in the process of doing so. Will the Minister press with the Chancellor the case for permanently lower industrial energy prices?

The Minister mentions support for steelworkers. How many steelworkers have the Government engaged with? What support has been given to account for the knock-on effect to communities? What assessment has the Minister made of the effects this situation will have on national security? She mentions a bright future for steelmaking in this country. Will she confirm that that means primary steelmaking capability?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution and for welcoming the Prime Minister's announcements today on the zero emission vehicle mandate and the changes we have made to support the automotive industry, which is incredibly important.

The hon. Gentleman talks about the number of good steel jobs that have gone forever or are at risk, but that happened because the previous Government failed to intervene to support our steel industry. That is why we lost so many jobs over the last decade. Not having an industrial strategy or a plan for steel meant that we allowed offshoring of our jobs in the steel sector, which has damaged us. He rightly said that in many key parts of our country we need good jobs. I should say that steel produced really good jobs, which are better paid than the average in the area and are done by really good, qualified people we want to retain in the UK.

The hon. Gentleman talked about energy. Again, the reason why we are here is that we had years of the previous Government not intervening in this space. We are well aware of energy prices in this country and are doing all we can to bring those down. [Interruption.]

I was asked by the hon. Gentleman to redouble my efforts in the negotiations we are having with British Steel. I will do everything that I possibly can—as we are doing. I hope he understands that I cannot go into detail about the state of those negotiations because that would be bad for the workers, bad for our supply chains and bad for the outcome.

The hon. Gentleman talked about national security and primary steel. We are conducting a review of primary steel as part of our plan for steel and we will have the results of that soon. We will look at those results and see what we need to do. I should stress that there is defence equipment made in the UK from electric arc furnaces; there is not much defence work either in British Steel or at Tata in Port Talbot at the moment. People such as Sheffield Forgemasters produce steel from electric arc furnaces. However, the hon. Gentleman is right to talk about the importance of national security and to say that the world has changed and things have moved on, so we need to ensure that we are protecting our country as we need to.

As I said in the Chamber in response to the last urgent question on this issue, there is a reason why Putin bombed the blast furnaces in Ukraine pretty much first: it was because a country wants to have that steelmaking capacity. We are alive to those issues, and that is why nothing is off the table. We are doing everything that we can.

**Hon. Members:** You're not!

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): It is a shame that the Conservative Members who were heckling the Minister have forgotten their own Government's failure to tackle the problems of high industrial energy prices. [Interruption.] They can heckle again now, but they did nothing in government.

Two weeks ago, I was at the Tata steelworks with the Energy Security and Net Zero Committee. We spoke to people locally, who had great concerns that when the blast furnaces there shut—it was too late for this Government to take action to prevent that when they came in—it was some years before the new electric arc furnace technology was ready to be installed and to operate.

Will my hon. Friend do everything in her power to ensure that there is not that same gap here? The problem that has caused in south Wales has reminded people of the damage done by previous eras of deindustrialisation, and they are concerned that we are now repeating the same mistakes. Will she confirm that the Government will do everything in their power to ensure that we do not make those same mistakes of deindustrialisation this time?

**Sarah Jones:** We are very much planning not to make the mistakes that my hon. Friend talked about. We do not want the blast furnaces to shut—that remains the Government's view—and we will do everything we can to reach a deal with British Steel to protect workers and secure those jobs and the production of steel in the long term.

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



**Sarah Gibson** (Chippenham) (LD): Speculation around British Steel at the Scunthorpe plant is deeply concerning for the workers and business owners alike, who are desperately waiting for the Government to deliver just one piece of good news. Steel is vital to our green economy as it plays a huge role in our ability to extend our railways and to build zero carbon homes. What incentive does British Steel have to keep going? It has had to contend with the Chancellor's decision to hike national insurance contributions and with Trump's terrifying tariffs.

Manufacturing businesses need the Government to offer reassurance, certainty and stability. We need to move from a patchwork of last-minute rescues to a long-term plan that will see industry on a sustainable footing. We need a robust industrial strategy with a proper plan for steel within it. We have been told to expect this industrial strategy shortly. Will the Minister confirm exactly when we will have it? Can she reassure the small and medium-sized manufacturing businesses in my constituency and across rural England that Britain wants them to grow? Will the strategy include a long-term vision that will allow the UK to secure the investment that we need for virgin steel production?

**Sarah Jones:** I can reassure the hon. Lady that we are developing a long-term plan in the industrial strategy. We are developing the plan for steel, as I have said, and alongside that we have our trade strategy, which has become very significant in recent times. She is right to point to the tariffs that have been placed on steel and aluminium. This is a deeply difficult situation and I have met the steel sector on multiple occasions to talk about it. That is what the conversation that is happening in Stafford as we speak is about: what extra measures need to be put in place. The Secretary of State met the Trade Remedies Authority this morning to push on some of the issues around trade protections.

The hon. Lady talked about the SME manufacturing supply chain. Of course that is very important and we will do what we can within the industrial strategy and the steel strategy to support those businesses. I understand that the speculation about what may or may not happen at Scunthorpe is deeply distressing, not just to the workers and their families but to all those who are part of the supply chain. That is why we will continue at pace to have the conversations we need to have with British Steel to ensure that we do the right thing, and as I said, nothing is off the table.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): The whole of northern Lincolnshire will feel the brunt of this British Steel decision, should the site close, and I urge Jingye to reconsider the Government's generous £500 million offer. Support through the Department for Work and Pensions is really welcome but the truth is that people have been leaving British Steel for years because of the cycle of its uncertain future. I welcome the Government's comment that no options are off the table. In the interim, are the Government considering ordering the raw materials to keep the blast furnaces burning?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank my hon. Friend for her question and for pointing out that the uncertainty that has existed for many years is difficult for people, and that if they can secure jobs elsewhere, they will do that. I have

been to Scunthorpe and talked to people who work there and to the trade unions a lot, as she would expect, to make sure that we understand all the issues at play.

I understand my hon. Friend's question about what we may or may not do in the immediate term, but I hope she will respect the fact that we cannot at this point talk about what we might end up doing, because those conversations are commercially sensitive. I want to reassure her, and the whole House, that we are doing what we can to ensure we get the right solution and that we do not want the blast furnaces to close.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): About 10 days ago, I urged the Minister and the Government to use this decision by the Chinese to close British Steel as an opportunity to take British Steel into public ownership. The situation is urgent. It has stopped ordering the raw materials for the blast furnaces, and unless those raw materials are ordered within about 10 days, those blast furnaces will go cold in mid-May. The Minister says that no options are off the table. Will she confirm that the Government will make those decisions and come to a conclusion about the options within this very short timeframe to ensure that the blast furnaces stay open, and that the right long-term solution is to take British Steel into public ownership and invest in it for British industry, for British Steel and for the workers in Lincolnshire?

**Sarah Jones:** As I said about 10 days ago, economics and jobs, not ideology, will drive the decisions that we make. The hon. Member is right to point to lots of speculation about the need to buy raw materials. I assure him that we are having those conversations with British Steel, and we will continue to do so. As I said, our preference is for a commercial solution, with Government providing support, but all options remain on the table, and I can assure him that we are working at pace.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): Wolverhampton North East has the UK's largest steel processing and distribution centre. Will the Minister outline how the Government intend to protect jobs across this vital industry by backing a robust industrial strategy and the £2.5 billion plan for steel?

**Sarah Jones:** I would be happy to come to my hon. Friend's constituency to have a look at and to talk to some of the people who work in the steel business. Huge numbers of organisations and businesses across the country rely on, use, and produce things from steel, and we need to ensure that we factor them into the conversations we are having. We are looking at the supply chains and how we boost industry more widely through our industrial strategy. We are looking at all the things—whether it is skills, R&D or access to finance—that businesses of all sectors have told us they need. Whether it is through the industrial strategy or the plan for steel, we are trying to ensure that we have a robust industry in this country so that jobs are not offshored and we have the security of knowing that we are producing the things that we need here in the UK.

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): Between 1997 and 2010, about 36,000 jobs were lost in steelmaking, or about half the workforce—that was under Labour, of course. I am concerned to hear talk today about

[John Cooper]

nationalisation, and I say that with due deference to my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers); the old joke is that if we want to stop crime paying, we should nationalise it. Given that this Government could not run a bath, never mind the steel industry, would a better idea not be to support the industry with, as I have mentioned before, a golden share to give us some say over what happens? Again, is the truth not that the dogmatic pursuit of net zero is driving up energy bills in this country to a level that is simply not sustainable for industry?

**Sarah Jones:** I will repeat what I have said: we are looking at all the options on the table; we are talking to British Steel about the right outcome; and we will do what is right for our country and our industry. On energy prices, the hon. Member is right to raise the high costs of energy. The supercharger comes into effect this month, and British Steel will get support from that, as will other high-end energy-intensive industries. But he is right to point to that issue and we are looking at it.

**Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for her answers. As she will know, there has been intense media speculation that the blast furnaces will close before the consultation is complete. Will she reassure me and workers that everything is being done to ensure that does not happen, and that Jinye conducts its affairs with respect to UK law?

**Sarah Jones:** My hon. Friend is right, and we will do that. The offer that was put to British Steel and which was refused included conditions to do exactly that, as well as including a number of other things around jobs, as we would expect. It is very important that any deal using British taxpayers' money is done in a way that we know is within the law and is a good use of taxpayers' money. I am very mindful of that, and I am constantly mindful of the insecurity that people who work at British Steel will feel, as well as the need for all of us to try to work as hard as we can to ensure that we get a good outcome for those people.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for keeping an open mind about what to do to save the remnants of our steel industry. Does she not agree that it is vital that we maintain a strategic capability to make steel? Is it not unconscionable that we are building British warships with imported steel? I recognise that the situation represents the cumulative failings of Governments over many decades, but it is now time utterly to change our policy. That includes the energy policy, which has prioritised things other than price in relation to our energy-intensive industries. I am glad to hear that the Government have some answer to that, but to build up a strategic capability for wartime, which is what we now need to tool up for in this country, we need a wholesale change in energy policy. I hope that she will look for common cause between the two Front-Bench teams, because this should be done on a consensus basis. We do not need to tear chunks out of one another for the mistakes we have all made in the past.

**Sarah Jones:** I agree with the hon. Member's premise that we need to ensure that we have steel production in the UK, although there is some nuance around some of this. High-quality steel is being made, as we speak, for

defence purposes by electric arc furnaces. That is perfectly possible; we melt scrap and add about 20% of primary steel. For some things, depending on what we are making—I know too much about the steel industry now—we do not need any primary steel. We are conducting a review of primary steel, which will be finished shortly. Again, neither Tata nor British Steel is a critical supplier to defence programmes at the moment, but we need that steel production, as I said before, so that we can build whatever we might need in the future. Of course, we will work cross-party; if that is his offer, it is very gladly taken.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): The Minister should not waste the opportunity of a lifetime in the parties of the right urging a party of the left to nationalise a British industry. One organisation that has been utterly consistent in all this is the GMB union: it wrote to the previous Government's Defence Secretary saying that a business Minister had failed to answer clearly whether virgin steel was essential for defence. Today's Minister seems to suggest that it might not be, but we must have a quantity of virgin steel, even if we add other things to it, to embark on the process of making essential defence products. Seize the opportunity: keep the blast furnaces, and if necessary, nationalise them for good.

**Sarah Jones:** If we get into conversations about different types of steel, it is like the Facebook update "It's complicated", right? It is complicated. For some things, we absolutely need primary steel; and for some things, we do not. That is why we are carrying out a fundamental review of steelmaking and the need for it here in the UK. Those results will come out soon. The right hon. Member is right that the GMB has been an advocate for this, as have Community and Unite. We talk to them regularly about British Steel. I have not failed to notice the slightly odd position that we find ourselves in today. I repeat that we are looking at all options. The House will understand that we are talking about large amounts of taxpayers' money, which we have to spend in the right way, in a sensible way, and in a way that will get us what we need. That is what we are looking at, and it is what we will do.

**Lee Anderson** (Ashfield) (Reform): These steelworkers do not want visits from the DWP. They do not even want visits from out-of-touch Labour Back-Bench MPs. What they want is their jobs: they want to make steel. It is interesting to hear from the Minister that all options are on the table. Do they include Reform UK's policy of scrapping net zero and renationalising British Steel?

**Sarah Jones:** It is good to hear that the workers in British Steel do not want visits from politicians; I assume the hon. Member, and his party, will take his own advice. I hope that he will understand that we cannot talk about the conversations that we are having with British Steel. It would be very disruptive to the process, the workforce there, the supply chain and commercial confidentiality. I can only repeat that our preference is that we come to an agreement with British Steel based on commercial terms, with Government support, but we are looking at all options and nothing is off the table.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Does the Minister agree that we appear to have hammered out a cross-party consensus on the need to ensure that this country is able to continue to produce virgin steel,

just like every other G7 country, for a whole raft of reasons? Does she agree that the case is underscored and reinforced by the Trump slump, by her party's welcome, albeit belated, pragmatism on net zero and, one hopes, an attendant fall in energy costs, and by the Prime Minister's intriguing announcement of the end of globalisation? Does she agree that those three things have underscored and reinforced the case for continuing to produce virgin steel in this country?

**Sarah Jones:** I agree with the right hon. Member that the world has changed. We know that we are in a different position than that which we found ourselves in a few years ago. We need to ensure that we are secure as a country, and I believe steel is part of that answer.

We also need to ensure that we are stopping the decline of the steel industry, which was always the Labour party's wish in opposition. We are committed to the plan for steel—the £2.5 billion on top of the £500 billion that we are giving to Tata Steel in Port Talbot. This is a real commitment to changing how we operate the steel industry in this country, so that we stop this constant decline and start to grow the industry and ensure that we are producing the things we need.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Minister seems to be on the verge of acknowledging that, as the last virgin steel production in the UK, Scunthorpe is critical national infrastructure and that the Government will nationalise it, if necessary. Can she commit to the House that virgin steel production in the UK is critical national infrastructure and that, if necessary, she will indeed nationalise it to maintain this critical resource for UK defence?

**Sarah Jones:** I am afraid I have to disappoint the right hon. Member, as I am not on the verge of anything. I repeat what I said, because it is the right thing to do: we will continue to negotiate with British Steel, mindful of the workers and the insecurity of the consultation they are currently undergoing. We will ensure that we do the right thing through our plan for steel and our response to British Steel, and I cannot say any more than that at this point.

**James McMurdock** (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Reform): I thank the Minister for her comments. Given the vital importance of this industry, on which I believe the whole House agrees, does she recognise that it would be a siren to those who, on a national scale, would be less than trustworthy, if we were unable to produce virgin steel ourselves? Given the undoubted national security risk, does she agree that, despite no options being off the table, one outcome that is absolutely off the table is closure? If so, why not just commit to protecting and saving these jobs?

**Sarah Jones:** British Steel is a private company owned by Jingye, and it is for Jingye to make its own decisions. I have said multiple times that we will continue to talk to see if we can come to an agreement on the very generous offer that was made. We are looking at all options, because we know that is the right thing to do. To be clear, we do not want the blast furnaces to close, and we want to come to an agreement.

**Nick Timothy** (West Suffolk) (Con): I wish the Minister would stop saying that some of these issues are complicated, and therefore that we should not debate them. We are sent here to debate complicated issues, and she is supposed to be here to answer our questions.

We are witnessing the absurd spectacle of the Government begging a Chinese company to take taxpayers' money to keep British Steel alive, while China suppresses its own costs and dumps its steel on other countries. We may soon be the only G7 country incapable of producing primary steel. The Minister brushes off the reality of crippling British energy costs, which will only get worse in the years ahead as a matter of deliberate Government policy. Why will she not guarantee the supply of the raw materials needed to keep the blast furnaces open, and why will she not admit that steel has no future in this country so long as this Government's trade and climate policies continue?

**Sarah Jones:** If only the hon. Member had done something when he had some influence as an adviser to a previous Prime Minister. That would have been good, wouldn't it?

I was not sent here to divulge commercially confidential conversations with a private company that affect thousands of people's jobs, and if the hon. Member thinks that I was, he is wrong. We are not going to do that, nor are we begging anywhere for anything—

**Nick Timothy:** You are.

**Sarah Jones:** No, absolutely not, and I am disappointed that the hon. Member would speak in that way. As he knows, we are having a conversation about a potential deal that we believe is there to be done with British Steel.

On the wider issue, it is a fact that China produces 53% of the world's steel, and we have huge issues with that, as the hon. Member knows. The tariffs have over-complicated the situation, which is why the Secretary of State is meeting the Trade Remedies Authority today, why we are looking at our trade strategy, and why we are talking to the Americans to make sure we can do a deal with them. We will continue to ensure that we have all the protection we need, in terms of stopping the onshoring of steel as much as we can. Those conversations will continue. The TRA is now looking at steel, and we expect those results quite soon.

**Mr Andrew Snowden** (Fylde) (Con): The Minister used the interesting stat that 53% of the world's steel is produced by China. If we look back at the lead-up to Russia's illegal invasion of Ukraine, and the way that Russia started to dominate the nuclear fuel market in particular by pushing out western providers, we see that there is a reason why China and Russia are behaving this way: they want to control the raw materials that are critical for national security around the world. This House is debating the prospect of a Chinese-owned company turning off our blast furnaces in this country in a month's time. That cannot be an acceptable position to be in. This has been asked several times, but it has not been answered: will the Minister commit to ordering the raw materials to keep those furnaces on, if necessary? She said in response to a question on primary steel that a consultation was under way on a strategy, and that we would look at what we needed to do. It is clear what we need to do: produce primary steel.

**Sarah Jones:** That is what we were telling the previous Government for many years. British Steel is owned by a Chinese company because the purchase was made under the last Government in a commercial and private sector way. Labour Members believe in fair, open markets; I do not know quite what the Opposition are becoming. On China, our priority is UK jobs and steel production. We believe in a fair, open market for foreign investments, and in having mature and balanced relationships with trading partners such as China. We will ensure protections for the steel industry in the UK, and make sure we do the right thing. On primary steel and the materials that the hon. Member wants me to commit to spending millions of pounds on, I think most Members would understand that I cannot commit to anything like that at this time and place.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the Minister for her answers to the questions—they have been very helpful. My concern is not only about retaining UK steel, but for the workers. The potential for 2,700 people to lose their jobs is frightening, and I think of all the families who will be directly impacted by this. Will the Minister confirm that ahead of any announcement made on Scunthorpe steel, she will commit to meeting the workers who will be directly affected by any decision, and provide a way forward, so that workers in the steel industry are secure in their employment and are protected throughout the United Kingdom?

**Sarah Jones:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. We of course continue to talk to the trade unions, including Community, GMB and Unite, who have been incredibly strong voices for their workers in Scunthorpe. We will continue to talk to them and to people who work there, to understand exactly what they are going through. They have to be at the heart of all the decisions we make.

## Zero Emission Vehicle Mandate

4.18 pm

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander):** With permission, I shall make a statement about the zero emission vehicle mandate. Today, this Government are giving British car makers certainty and support on the transition to electric vehicles, as we set out plans to back industry in the face of global economic headwinds. We have worked in close partnership and at pace with colleagues in the Scottish Government, the Welsh Government and the Northern Ireland Executive, whom I would like to thank.

The automotive industry is a cornerstone of our economy. It supports over 150,000 jobs and generates £19 billion every year. Today, with Government backing, it must negotiate the turbulence of fresh global economic challenges. For too long, the sector has been held back by a lack of long-term certainty. That changes now. This Government listen and act. We have listened to car manufacturers, large and small, from Sunderland to Solihull, and from Crewe to Coventry. Car makers have told us what they need to not just survive, but thrive. What they want is what we are delivering: practical, sensible reforms that will unlock investment, protect jobs and strengthen Britain's leadership in the zero emissions transition.

Today, I can confirm that the Government are maintaining our manifesto commitment to phasing out the sale of new petrol and diesel cars by 2030. I can also reconfirm our commitment to all new cars and vans being 100% zero emission from 2035; there are no changes to the trajectory of the transition set out in the ZEV mandate regulations. We support the role of hybrid vehicles as a crucial stepping-stone in that journey; new full hybrids and plug-in hybrids will be on sale until 2035. That strikes the right balance. We are being firm on our climate commitments, but flexible on how we meet them, because our aim is not to impose change for its own sake, but to enable industry to make the transition in a way that matches supply with demand, and to support businesses, and the jobs that they provide, every step of the way.

We are significantly increasing the flexibility within the ZEV mandate. Manufacturers will have more freedom on how they meet targets, including the ability to sell more EVs towards the end of this decade, when demand is projected to be higher. We are also extending the ability to borrow and repay credits through to 2030, and the ability to earn credits for cleaning up non-ZEV fleets all the way out to 2029, so that companies can manage their pathways more effectively. This recognises the real-world challenges that British businesses face, and gives them the smoothest possible road to run on.

We are also reducing fines for missing ZEV targets from £15,000 to £12,000 per vehicle. Where fines are levied—for the vast majority of manufacturers, they will not be—the revenue will be recycled directly back into support for the sector, because this Government invest in solutions and do not punish ambition. Let me be clear: this is not a retreat from our ambitions on EVs—quite the opposite. It is right that the threat of fines remains, as it is an inescapable fact that the domestic transport sector remains the UK's single largest carbon emitter, accounting for 30% of emissions in 2024. That is why we are doubling down on our commitment to the

electric transition. There is more than £2.3 billion available to support industry and consumers. That includes funding for new battery factories, EV supply chains and charging infrastructure, and grants for zero emission vehicles.

The public are already leading the way. March saw a 43% increase in electric vehicle sales, compared to the same month last year. February was a record month too, with EVs accounting for one in four new car sales. That surge in demand shows that we are moving in the right direction, but it also shows the importance of maintaining momentum, so we will continue working with industry to ensure demand keeps pace with supply, building a sustainable market for the long term.

The infrastructure is growing, too. There are over 75,000 public charge points now available, and more than £6 billion of private investment is lined up for UK charge point roll-out by 2030. Today, a new charge point is installed every 29 minutes. That is more than 50 every day. Families charging at home can now save up to £1,000 a year, compared with petrol drivers. An EV charged at home overnight can run for as little as 2p a mile. That is putting money in people's pockets while relieving pressure on the planet.

We know that one size does not fit all, which is why small and micro-manufacturers will be exempt from the new measures. It is why vans will have five extra years to go green, because we recognise their unique role in the economy and in giving businesses the time that they need to adapt. It is why we are making space for hybrid vehicles in the mix, not as a compromise, but as a contribution. Hybrids offer lower emissions today without requiring overnight shifts in driving behaviour or infrastructure. They build public confidence, support choice and ensure that no one is left behind in the transition.

This is not just a transport, environmental or economic policy; it is part of this Government's plan for change. It is a long-term effort to deliver clean, sustainable and high-quality growth, creating new jobs in battery production, EV supply chains and infrastructure, anchoring manufacturing here in the UK and supporting skilled apprenticeships in clean tech and advanced engineering. With today's announcement, British names such as Rolls-Royce, Land Rover and Vauxhall will have the certainty they need to plan, invest and lead. We are backing British businesses to succeed at home and abroad. These reforms are fair to manufacturers, reasonable for workers and right for the climate challenge ahead.

I know some people might retreat to tired arguments about a war on motorists, but this Government are focused on real challenges, not imaginary grievances. Most of us are motorists or passengers; we are all in this together. What we need is not division, but direction, and that is what we are delivering today by listening to industry, following the data and building a strategy grounded in evidence and ambition.

When we came into government, we promised to prioritise one thing above all else: growth—for industry; for clean transport; and for people, places and pay packets. With these bold, practical reforms, backed by the Prime Minister's plan for change, that is exactly what we are delivering. I commend this statement to the House.

**Mr Speaker:** I think, on his birthday, we should hear from the shadow Secretary of State.

4.27 pm

**Gareth Bacon** (Orpington) (Con): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I will not embarrass myself by announcing how old I am, but it is far too old.

**Mr Speaker:** We have just checked.

**Gareth Bacon:** I thank the Secretary of State—*[Interruption.]* That was a very helpful intervention by the hon. Gentleman; he is completely right. I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and for advance sight of it. The announcement by the United States of America that 25% tariffs will be imposed on UK automotive exports has understandably caused significant concern in the automotive sector. Automotive manufacturers now face tariffs of 25% on around £8 billion-worth of car and auto parts exports—a potentially devastating blow for the automotive industry. I assure the Secretary of State that we will support the Government when they do sensible things to reverse the impact on our already fragile economy. In that vein, I am glad that the Government have recommitted to negotiating a better deal with our closest ally and largest single-country trading partner, and I sincerely hope that they are successful in their negotiations.

However, on the substance of the right hon. Lady's statement, I cannot share her enthusiasm for the rest of Labour's plans. The reality is that today, Labour is simply trying to clear up the uncertainty that it has contributed to. When the previous Conservative Government reacted to sluggish automotive trade figures by making the pragmatic decision to delay the ban on new diesel and petrol cars from 2030 to 2035, aligning the UK with major global economies such as France, Germany, Sweden and Canada, Labour accused us of undermining the automotive industry. This morning, the Secretary of State criticised the previous Government for chopping and changing, and a consultation put out by Labour claimed that our policies caused "great harm" to the UK's reputation as a leading nation in the EV transition by moving the goalposts. However, that is precisely what Labour did upon taking office by ideologically reversing the 2035 deadline. The plans announced over the weekend do not place the automotive sector in a better position than it was when we left office, despite some minor adjustments to the zero emission vehicle mandate.

What is more, this announcement will not undo the damage that this Labour Government have already caused. Their introduction of a £25 billion national insurance jobs tax in their first Budget was a major blow to businesses; we have warned for months that this tax will harm industries, and the automotive sector is no exception. The Secretary of State will know that US tariffs on UK car exports are set to cost the automotive sector £1.9 billion. Combined with the Government's jobs tax—which is predicted by the Office for Budget Responsibility to put 50,000 jobs at risk, and is likely to cost the automotive sector an additional £200 million—that double whammy is going to be very difficult for the sector to absorb.

Indeed, despite today's announcements, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders has stated that zero emission vehicle mandate targets remain "incredibly challenging". In its words:

"ZEV Mandate targets are incredibly challenging, especially with a paucity of consumer demand and geopolitical upheaval. Growing EV demand to the levels needed still requires equally bold fiscal incentives...to give motorists full confidence to switch",

[Gareth Bacon]

but that is not what the Government are offering. Instead of the “bold changes” that the Prime Minister boasted of at the weekend, what we have is mere tinkering at the edges. Allowing producers of luxury vehicles, such as Aston Martin and McLaren, to be exempt from the 2030 ban on the sale on new internal combustion engine vehicles is welcome, as is the news that all forms of hybrid cars will be available until 2035. However, this does not go anything like far enough. The Government are still proposing to increase the level of tax liability on the value of hybrid company cars by as much as 16%, which could potentially cost individual drivers thousands of pounds each. The reduction in fines for missing EV sales targets from £15,000 to £12,000 per vehicle is nothing to be celebrated—it is like drowning at the depth of 100 metres instead of 120 metres.

Over the past few months, we have heard from numerous businesses that they simply cannot cope with the ZEV mandate. In October, the chief executive officer of Jaguar Land Rover warned that the mandate was causing severe disruption to the new car market. Not long after, Vauxhall announced the closure of its Luton factory, citing the ZEV mandate as a key factor in making that plant economically unviable. More recently, uncertainty has surrounded Plant Oxford, the home of the Mini since 1959. Last year, excluding fleet sales, the fact is that only 10% of private purchases of new vehicles were electric. Far from doing retailers a favour, the Government’s offer to fine them a small amount less for failing to sell a product that consumers demonstrably do not want is a kick in the teeth to the automotive industry.

I must therefore ask the Secretary of State the following questions. With just one in 10 private buyers purchasing an electric vehicle in 2024, why are the Government still trying to force people to buy something for which there is limited consumer demand at present? Is she really pretending that any of the measures announced today were not already in train before the tariffs were announced? Will she commit to reversing the hike in the hybrid company car tax? Does she really think that reducing the fine for each car that fails to comply with EV quotas will be enough to mitigate the impact of tariffs? Does she not believe that, rather than chasing an arbitrary timeline, now is the time for a more gradual transition to electric vehicles, one that would allow the sector to mitigate many of the challenges it is currently facing? Finally, does she recognise that the combined impact of the ZEV mandate, the jobs tax and external tariffs is a perfect storm for the automotive sector, which is facing significant and exacerbated challenges because of the choices her party has made over the past nine months?

**Heidi Alexander:** I also extend my birthday wishes to the shadow Secretary of State. I hope he is grateful for the two birthday presents I have given him: not only a statement but a general debate, so that we can face each other across the Dispatch Box not once but twice today.

It is rich for the shadow Secretary of State to blame uncertainty in the automotive sector on this Government. I can only think that he has some sort of selective amnesia going on, because it was his Government who introduced this policy. They then delayed the phase-out date, tanking EV demand by 15% almost overnight. We had the spectacle of the previous Prime Minister, the

right hon. Member for Richmond and Northallerton (Rishi Sunak) standing up to make a speech pushing that date back out to 2035. Almost overnight, we saw those sales tank. The shadow Secretary of State should be explaining to Britain’s car manufacturers why his party fuffed about so much, costing them millions and arguably leaving the sector less resilient to the global economic headwinds it now faces.

The shadow Secretary of State claims that this is a moment when we are tinkering at the edges, but nothing could be further from the truth. This is a significant moment for industry. He quotes the SMMT, and I just gently say to him that Mike Hawes, its chief executive, said this morning:

“The government has rightly listened to industry, responded quickly to global dynamics and recognised the intense pressure manufacturers are under.”

The shadow Secretary of State is also right to raise Jaguar Land Rover, which is affected by the imposition of the global tariffs that President Trump announced recently. I point out to the hon. Gentleman that Adrian Mardell, CEO at JLR said:

“We welcomed our announcement of the increased flexibilities in the zero emission vehicle mandate, and the clear commitment from Government to incentivise electric vehicle uptake and invest in infrastructure.”

The shadow Secretary of State also said that consumers do not want to buy electric vehicles. He needs to do his homework; the UK is the third largest market for electric vehicles in the world, after the US and China. It is the largest market in Europe. Last year—[*Interruption.*] He can chunter as much as he wants. Last year, 382,000 EVs were sold. We have had record figures in February and March this year, where we have seen demand for EVs go up by more than 40% compared with the same month in the previous year.

The shadow Secretary of State claims that we were going to make this announcement anyway. Well, he is right that we have been talking to industry for a number of months, and we were always going to have to do something to clear up the dog’s breakfast of a policy left by his Government. Clearly, the announcement last week about US tariffs on the car industry has made it all the more important that we act with pace and urgency. It is completely right that we have provided the certainty and clarity for which the sector has been calling for years.

The shadow Secretary of State claims we are not going far enough. We are investing £2 billion in an automotive transformation fund, which will ensure we can build the battery gigafactories of the future, support the EV supply chain and ensure that those high-skilled jobs of the future are available in communities across the country. Between now and 2030, we are spending £200 million supporting the roll-out of charge points, backed by £6 billion of private investment. We are spending £120 million on plug-in vehicle grants, giving people who want to purchase a new van up to £2,500 and those wanting to purchase a larger van up to £5,000.

I say to the shadow Secretary of State that this Government are acting where his Government failed. We are giving certainty to businesses, protecting jobs in a critical industry, cutting carbon and fostering a competitive market to benefit consumers.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): Today's news on support for our automotive industry in the move towards electric vehicles will be welcomed by my constituents, including those who work for the nearby Toyota plant at Burnaston. Will the Secretary of State continue this encouraging level of engagement and responsiveness to industry concerns? Will she confirm that, to make sure that the transition is a success, this Government's wider industrial strategy will further back British auto manufacturers?

**Heidi Alexander:** I know that the Under-Secretary responsible for the future of roads, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), has visited the Burnaston plant in my hon. Friend's constituency, and I understand what a critical employer it is locally. Toyota will benefit from many of the changes that we have announced today. We are allowing the sale of both full hybrids such as the Toyota Prius and plug-in hybrids after 2030, and Toyota will also benefit from the extension and expansion of the CO<sub>2</sub> transfer caps. Moreover, if it is ever in a position in which it needs to pay fines, it will pay them at a lower level—and we would, of course, reinvest that money in supporting the sector. I can give my hon. Friend the assurance that she and her constituents want: we will continue to support this vital sector.

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

**Mr Paul Kohler** (Wimbledon) (LD): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement, and for advance sight of it. Let me also congratulate the shadow Secretary of State on his birthday, and note that he is much younger than the Liberal Democrat spokesperson.

It is clear that the Government must take urgent steps to help the car industry make the switch to electric vehicles. Although increasing flexibility in the mandate is welcome, voices across the industry have made it clear that we also need to bolster demand by lowering the barriers for individuals and businesses to purchase electric vehicles. As the Secretary of State knows, the recent surge in demand to which she referred was a result of significant discounting to promote sales. It is crucial that, as well as improving the charging network, we end the inequality between public and private charging by bringing the VAT rate for public charging into line with that for home charging, at 5% rather than 20%. Not only is the present system damaging demand, but it is wrong to penalise those who have no access to private charging. Ministers should also postpone the increase in vehicle tax on electric cars, and explore the possibility of reintroducing the plug-in car grant.

As the Secretary of State made clear on the media round this morning, the spectre of Trump's tariffs also looms large over the industry. If the Government are serious about protecting car manufacturing in the UK, the Prime Minister must continue to work with our allies in Europe and around the world on a co-ordinated response. The only way to tackle Trump is to negotiate from a position of strength, and to show that the UK is not alone and will not be bullied.

May I ask the Secretary of State three questions? First, what conversations has she had with the Chancellor about lowering the public charging rate to 5%, and what

other measures are the Government considering to strengthen EV demand? Secondly, can she confirm that the measures announced today are a response to the ZEV consultation that ended in February, and tell us what, if any, additional measures are being considered in respect of the tariffs that have since been announced? Thirdly, will the Government start negotiations with the EU about the formation of a UK-EU custom union, to cut red tape not only for vehicle manufacturers but for all UK industries?

**Heidi Alexander:** I assure the hon. Gentleman that the Government keep the VAT variation between public and private charging under review. The 20% standard rate to which public charge points are subject applies to most goods and services, with very few exemptions. We are trying to give people low-cost and affordable options for public charging by investing £380 million to roll out overnight chargers, which are cheaper and will be installed to help those without a driveway. Today, Brighton & Hove City Council confirmed that it had signed the contracts to deliver 6,000 of those chargers, and in February Midlands Connect announced that it was rolling out more than 16,000 across the midlands, helping drivers to charge their vehicles for less.

The hon. Gentleman asked me whether today's announcement was a response to the consultation that we launched at the end of December, which closed in February. It is indeed a Government response to that consultation. As for the discussions that we will have with European colleagues, we will continue those discussions. Although the hon. Gentleman tried to tempt me into giving him a commitment to rejoin an EU customs union, I am afraid that that is not a commitment I can give.

**Bill Esterson** (Sefton Central) (Lab): On behalf of those of my constituents who work at JLR Halewood, I thank my right hon. Friend for the stability and confidence that she has given to our automotive industry; it will be enormously reassuring to them. The last Government confirmed through Mark Harper, the then Secretary of State, that it was already cheaper for drivers to switch to electric vehicles—he did so from the Dispatch Box this time last year. For those of us who are able to plug in at home, it is cheaper by up to £1,000 per family, as she said in her statement. May I encourage her to work with the Energy Secretary on reducing the cost of electricity more widely to benefit those of us who cannot plug in at home, and to improve consumer demand, which is so crucial to supporting our manufacturers?

**Heidi Alexander:** I can assure my hon. Friend that I will continue to work across Government with colleagues in the Department for Energy Security and Net Zero, and in the Department for Business and Trade, in order to make the take-up of EVs as affordable as possible for individuals who want to make the transition. He is entirely right to point out that, compared with a petrol car, drivers can save up to £1,000 a year if they mostly charge at home, and that an EV can be run for as little as 2p per mile if charged at home. Half of all used electric cars are now sold for under £20,000, and there are 29 brand-new electric cars on the market for under £30,000.

**Mr Richard Holden** (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): I am proud to have Ford's UK technical headquarters, which employs thousands of fantastic workers in high-quality R&D jobs, at Dunton in my Basildon and Billericay constituency, and elements of what the Secretary of State has announced today will certainly be very welcome. On the flip side, local businesses that rely on the Ford HQ—and, in fact, the entire automotive sector—saw a £200 million-a-year increase in national insurance kick in yesterday. Today, small businesses in my constituency, many of which work in London, face charges on the Blackwall tunnel for the first time ever and charges on the Silvertown tunnel, which means that many will face charges of £35 a day, just to operate in London. Will the Secretary of State raise those issues with her colleague the Mayor of London and the Chancellor of the Exchequer? Could she also tell us how long the plug-in van grant will be extended? We know it will be there in 2026, but for how much longer?

**Heidi Alexander:** I was struggling to decipher a question in the speech that was forthcoming from the other side of the Chamber. The right hon. Gentleman asks me to comment on the opening of the Silvertown tunnel in east London. I suspect that a number of his constituents—regardless of whether they are driving for work or to try to reach friends and family—have been stuck in absolutely atrocious traffic north and south of the Blackwall tunnel. For the first time ever, London's double-deck red buses will now be able to cross the Thames east of Tower Bridge. I hope that he might join me in congratulating both the Mayor of London and Transport for London on getting a new river crossing open, which is much needed.

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): The news over the weekend that Jaguar Land Rover was pausing shipments to the United States was worrying for many of my constituents. JLR employs 9,000 people at its factory in nearby Solihull, and supports thousands of jobs in the wider supply chain. After the flip-flopping of previous Governments, this Government have acted decisively to give British car makers certainty and support in the transition to electric vehicles. Can the Minister confirm whether she is planning to build flexibilities into the mandate targets?

**Heidi Alexander:** That is precisely what we have done. I reassure my hon. Friend that I have been in touch directly with Jaguar Land Rover over the last couple of days, and I am pleased that we have been able to provide the company and other car manufacturers with certainty at this very difficult time. We have been able to do that this week, and I hope it will provide some comfort to her constituents who are employed at that local facility.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): As someone who has never bought a new motor vehicle, apart from a motorcycle, may I probe the Secretary of State further on what she said about the second-hand EV market? For families that will never be able to afford a new vehicle, does she anticipate a time when the second-hand EV market will be comparable in price to the second-hand market for conventional vehicles?

**Heidi Alexander:** I thank the right hon. Gentleman for that question. He is right to mention the second-hand market: 80% of car purchases in any given year are in

the second-hand market. I am told that, at the moment, some of the most popular products on AutoTrader are second-hand EVs. They are selling very well, and he is completely right that these vehicles need to be affordable to everyone and an option for everyone, so I am made hopeful by the green shoots we are seeing in the second-hand market at the moment.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. Members with lengthy questions are just preventing their colleagues from getting in, so please keep your questions short.

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and the leadership she is showing in delivering our manifesto commitments in partnership with industry. The contrast is clear with the Opposition, who are bringing along uncoded ideas for grants, subsidies and tax cuts. I welcome the reaffirmation of the plan to roll out EV charging, but is she sure that that will be able to meet EV demand, and are there any plans for a battery health check to help reassure people buying used vehicles in the second-hand market?

**Heidi Alexander:** I thank my hon. Friend for that question. We are working with the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe on the battery health check issue that he raises. I assure him that we are working closely with the private sector on the roll-out of charge point infrastructure. As I said in my statement, a new EV charger is currently installed every 29 minutes, or at a rate of 50 a day. Only a couple of weeks ago, I visited the new InstaVolt charging super-hub in Winchester, which, when one sees it, really is a glimpse into the future. It is imperative that the Government continue to work with the private sector to make sure that the charging infrastructure is there for everyone in the places where they need it when they need it.

**Alison Bennett** (Mid Sussex) (LD): UK businesses in the automotive supply chain, both across the country and in my constituency, need more support. Indeed, the Society of Motor Manufacturers and Traders agrees that a package of measures is needed for the supply chain. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to supporting the needs of the supply chain specifically? Given that she is not inclined to be tempted by my hon. Friend the Member for Wimbledon (Mr Kohler) imploring her that we should join an EU-UK customs union, what assessment has the Department made of the cost of not doing so?

**Heidi Alexander:** The hon. Member will be aware that the Cabinet Office leads on the EU reset negotiations, so she might most appropriately put that question to my colleagues in the Cabinet Office. On her wider question about support for the EV supply chain, we have announced the automotive transformation fund to a value of £2 billion, part of which is specifically for supporting the EV supply chain.

**Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): Many of my North Durham constituents proudly work at Nissan in the constituency of my neighbour my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Gateshead South (Mrs Hodgson). Nissan Sunderland's 6,000 staff make



excellent cars, including hybrid and electric vehicles. My right hon. Friend deserves credit for putting together at pace a package that has been welcomed by industry, but she is right to suggest that this is only one piece of the puzzle. What more will she and Ministers be doing to support the sector in the coming months?

**Heidi Alexander:** We will continue to roll out the electric charging infrastructure, which is really important to give consumers confidence. The time to switch to EVs is now. We will continue to have the plug-in vehicle grants for individuals who are thinking about purchasing a new van. We will also continue to keep under review what else can be done to stimulate demand and make sure we maintain the momentum that we are seeing in the market in the first few months of this year.

**Sir Jeremy Wright** (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I welcome what I think the Secretary of State has announced about smaller luxury vehicle manufacturers such as Aston Martin, which is based in my constituency. I say “I think” because her statement says that “small...manufacturers will be exempt from these new measures.”

I would be grateful if she clarified whether that refers to the existing mandate of measures, because she knows that that is what the smaller manufacturers in question have been lobbying to be exempted from, rather than the loosening she has announced today. If she can confirm that, and she is relying on an argument that we can treat smaller luxury manufacturers differently from everyone else, would she commend that argument to her colleague the Trade Secretary in the discussions on tariffs with the United States?

**Heidi Alexander:** I can confirm to the right hon. and learned Gentleman that smaller and micro manufacturers are exempt from the ZEV mandate, but they will need to comply with the 2035 complete phase-out date, as per all other manufacturers.

**Mr Toby Perkins** (Chesterfield) (Lab): I hope the rest of the shadow Secretary of State’s birthday is rather better than the last half hour; I do not think his contribution today will age very well at all. The measures the Government are proposing are a sensible compromise. The industry did need certainty. There were real concerns about that, as my hon. Friend the Member for Derby North (Catherine Atkinson) and other Derbyshire MPs heard on a recent visit to Toyota, so the measures absolutely strike the right balance. What can the Secretary of State say to my constituents who live in either council flats or terraced properties, which makes home charging more difficult, about what more we can do to ensure they are not faced with a huge price disparity in comparison to those who are able to have charging infrastructure at home?

**Heidi Alexander:** We issued guidance to local authorities before Christmas on cross-pavement solutions, and we are offering a grant of up to £350 for households with on-street parking. I hope those two things together will offer some comfort to my hon. Friend’s constituents who are in the situations he describes.

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Pace is needed, understandably, but I do have some

concerns in that due process needs to be followed with the devolved Administrations. Can she assure the House that sufficient time is being allowed for the devolved Administrations, including the Scottish Government, to be fully involved and engaged in a consultation on policy development, and the Scottish Parliament for any legislative changes that may be required? Secondly, what assessment has been made of the potential for those changes to impact negatively on carbon emissions in the UK and Scotland, and our respective Governments’ ability to meet statutory climate change targets? Will she publish any such assessments?

**Heidi Alexander:** I would like to put on record my thanks to the Scottish Government for their assistance in working at pace over the past couple of days. I committed to the hon. Gentleman’s colleagues in the Scottish Government to work closely with them and that is exactly what I have done. With regard to carbon assessments, we have conducted a carbon assessment. I can assure him that today’s proposed changes make a negligible change to the carbon emissions that were predicted to be saved as a result of the ZEV mandate.

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): I welcome the Secretary of State’s statement, given the uncertainty and turmoil caused by US tariffs on British-made vehicles. Will she outline how she is responding to major employers such as Jaguar Land Rover, to ensure they can remain competitive and safeguard jobs in our local communities, as shared by Members from across the House?

**Heidi Alexander:** As I may have said to other colleagues, JLR will stand to benefit from the flexibilities we have announced today: the increased borrowing flexibility; the extension and the expansion of the carbon dioxide transfer cap; and the changes we talked about on the way we measure CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from plug-in hybrids, which will make it easier for them to use the CO<sub>2</sub> transfer flexibility. I think all those things we have announced today will be welcomed by JLR and, hopefully, by her constituents employed at the factory.

**Sir Bernard Jenkin** (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): If the Government’s top priority really is growth, a policy that sets artificial targets to ban products that people want to buy, which are not subsidised, to force them to buy cheap Chinese products that they do not really want, which are subsidised, does not sound like a policy for growth. Incidentally, they also suffer from very high insurance costs and high depreciation costs, and may lead to the closing down of capacity to produce in the United Kingdom the products that people do want to buy. The Secretary of State may have priorities, but growth is not one of them.

**Heidi Alexander:** I suggest that the hon. Gentleman speak to his constituents, who are buying EVs in numbers. There has been a 40% increase—

**Sir Bernard Jenkin:** I’ve got one!

**Heidi Alexander:** The hon. Gentleman is telling me that he has one, which is fantastic—he is clearly leading the way. This is a massive industrial opportunity for this country and we need to give certainty and confidence to

[Heidi Alexander]

both businesses and consumers, which is precisely what this Government are doing. If the hon. Gentleman wishes to become the poster boy for the EV industry, I would be very happy to have a conversation with him about that.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. Colleagues and the Secretary of State must be much swifter—we have another statement and two further debates. Anneliese Dodds, show us how it is done.

**Anneliese Dodds (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op):** Workers at BMW Cowley have made clear to me their determination to play their part in a jobs-rich transition to net zero. Can my right hon. Friend explain how these changes will benefit BMW Cowley specifically, given its significance for my constituency and for UK manufacturing as a whole?

**Heidi Alexander:** We are confirming today that we will maintain the existing CO2 scores for plug-in hybrids instead of using the revised scores that are now being used in the EU. That will be of particular benefit to BMW and the Mini Cowley plant.

**Mr Will Forster (Woking) (LD):** The car industry will be hardest hit by Trump's tariffs, as my constituency knows better than most; our single largest employer, McLaren, sells 42% of its product to the US. Will the Minister consider retaliatory tariffs, particularly against Tesla, to protect British jobs and show that tariffs have consequences?

**Heidi Alexander:** McLaren will, of course, benefit from the exemption we have announced today for small and micro manufacturers. We are considering our position regarding the imposition of tariffs, and the Business Secretary is consulting industry on future steps. I would say, however, that an escalating trade war is not in anyone's best interests.

**Chris Vince (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op):** I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. Harlow is a new town, and it has a number of properties that do not have off-street parking. I ask her to drill down on the guidance she has given to local councillors on what they can do to provide more off-street charging facilities.

**Heidi Alexander:** My hon. Friend is totally right. This is a critical issue. The guidance that we published before Christmas is vital, as is the grant we are giving to households.

**Nick Timothy (West Suffolk) (Con):** It is not just the absurdity of fining firms for making the wrong cars, and insisting that is good for growth; it is that the national grid and local distribution networks do not have the capacity to cope with growing demand now, let alone if and when cars and central heating are electrified, as the Government promise, and all those data centres are built. Can the Secretary of State confirm that the connections queue stands at 756 GW and that only 0.54 GW was delivered in the past month, while the queue grew by 21.8 GW?

**Heidi Alexander:** I can assure the hon. Gentleman that I am in regular contact with the Energy Secretary to ensure that we have the grid connections and capability for the EV charging infrastructure that we need.

**Sarah Coombes (West Bromwich) (Lab):** Jaguar Land Rover and its wider supply chain employ huge numbers of people in my constituency, so I am very glad to see the Prime Minister and the Transport Secretary backing our automotive industry so strongly today. This commitment makes clear our strong climate commitments, but also our support for the transition in the industry. Will the Secretary of State say more about how we will support demand-side change to get EV charge points across towns such as Oldbury and West Brom in my constituency?

**Heidi Alexander:** Of course, the Prime Minister is at JLR in the midlands today. We are spending £200 million of public money to support the roll-out of EV infrastructure, which sits alongside £6 billion of private investment to ensure that charge points are where people need them, when they need them.

**Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP):** I thank the Secretary of State for her statement and answers. Over time, UK Governments have committed hundreds of millions of pounds to perfecting electric vehicle charging infrastructure in England, but back home in Northern Ireland, the ratio of charging points to electric vehicles is not sufficient. It is nowhere near the level on the mainland, and we are a much more rural community. Will the Minister ensure that through the Barnett consequentials, additional attention is paid to giving the devolved institutions the funding necessary to make sure that electric vehicle charging infrastructure can meet the demand of the electric vehicles on the road?

**Heidi Alexander:** The hon. Gentleman raises a fair point about the availability of charge point infrastructure in all places in the UK. It is a matter I look forward to discussing with my counterparts in Northern Ireland when I next have the opportunity to meet them.

**Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab):** I thank the Secretary of State on behalf of my constituents, many of whom work for Jaguar Land Rover and Aston Martin. This update is very welcome news, especially the changes for small and micro manufacturers and for hybrid, too, particularly in the light of Washington's tariffs last week. Electrification and hydrogen are the future. I look at China with its market of 12 million electric cars—38% to 50% of its vehicles are now electric. Can I urge the Government to look once again at support for manufacturers, which are subsidised in the sale of electric vehicles?

**Heidi Alexander:** The automotive transformation fund that I mentioned earlier is a sizeable investment that the Government committed to at the last Budget. I look forward to hearing my hon. Friend's ideas about how it might best be utilised.

**Ben Obese-Jecty (Huntingdon) (Con):** One of the major issues holding back wider EV ownership is the complete lack of EV charging infrastructure in towns such as Huntingdon and St Ives in my constituency.

What assessment have the Government made of the grid capacity required to facilitate a significant uplift in EV charging infrastructure, and how much will the upgrade cost? At what point will current grid capacity be unable to provide adequate charging? Separately, what is the plan for a significant increase in EV battery disposal and to address the prohibitive cost of new batteries for older electric vehicles?

**Heidi Alexander:** Those are matters that the Department constantly reviews. Regarding grid capacity, I refer the hon. Gentleman to my earlier answer to the hon. Member for West Suffolk (Nick Timothy).

**Sally Jameson** (Doncaster Central) (Lab/Co-op): To make sure the transition is a success, can the Secretary of State confirm that the Government's wider industrial strategy will back British auto manufacturers and British supply chains further and ensure that this is a place-based growth agenda for all our communities?

**Heidi Alexander:** I can confirm that for my hon. Friend, and we will be publishing the industrial strategy soon. This is about creating the jobs of the future in high-skilled industries and the right conditions for growth, and that is completely what the Government are committed to doing.

**Richard Tice** (Boston and Skegness) (Reform): The Transport Secretary omitted to mention that UK car production last year was at its lowest level for 70 years, aside from the pandemic; that UK car production this year is down a further 11%; and that total registrations of electric and hybrid cars this year are down another 2%. Will the Minister agree that the best thing to do to ensure growth and increase production is to scrap all these ridiculous zero emission targets forthwith?

**Heidi Alexander:** No, I do not agree with the hon. Gentleman. The number of new cars sold in the UK last year was 1.9 million, and the market grew by 2.6% on 2023. The number of new EVs sold last year was 382,000, which was nearly 20% of the market and represents a 21% growth on 2023.

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): I commend the Secretary of State for standing up for cheaper and cleaner British cars in the face of the global chaos being forced on our economy—particularly in the light of the Conservatives' botched Brexit deal, which wrecked Britain's car industry and lost this country a decade of golden British manufacturing. My constituents in Bournemouth East are crying out for charging infrastructure. The Secretary of State said that nobody would be left behind. Can she outline how she will invest in charging infrastructure to make sure that everybody who wants to can be part of the electric vehicle revolution?

**Heidi Alexander:** This is a partnership between public investment and the private sector. I assure my hon. Friend that we will be paying attention to Bournemouth, as we will to all other parts of the country.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): I rise to speak as a very satisfied second-hand EV driver. I visited Ohme's head office last month to learn about how home charging of EVs can revolutionise the energy

market and help EVs become a way of managing our grid, as well as a way to drive. What consideration has the Secretary of State given to accelerating work on flexible generation of storage to help to drive demand for businesses and homes and to make Britain the starting place of this revolution?

**Heidi Alexander:** Officials in my Department are looking at this issue very closely. I would be interested in learning more from the hon. Member about the visit she made to the business in her constituency.

**Ben Goldsborough** (South Norfolk) (Lab): South Norfolk is proudly home to Lotus Cars. This morning, I had a conversation with the management team, who welcomed the announcement. In our long-term plan for the car manufacturing industry, what action will the Government be taking for UK-based original equipment manufacturers to ensure that we have a good plan for the EV transition so that we are competitive in future markets?

**Heidi Alexander:** Everything that the Government are doing, and everything in the announcement, is about ensuring that our British businesses are competitive. I am pleased to hear that Lotus is pleased with what we have announced. I understand that other British brands such as McLaren, Bentley and Caterham are also pleased with the announcement, which is all about the Government's commitment to driving growth and opportunity.

**Siân Berry** (Brighton Pavilion) (Green): I am concerned about public health. We all know that diesel and petrol hybrids are not zero emission, we know that the 2035 extension is not about tariffs—it applies only to UK sales—and we know that the move was already on the cards since Labour ripped clean air out of its manifesto completely. Has the Secretary of State assessed the impact of the announcement on the achievement of clean air target commitments? Is this the last we will hear of any clean air Act from this Government?

**Heidi Alexander:** I assure the hon. Lady that an analysis of environmental impacts has been done, and that relates to both carbon emissions and air pollution.

**Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): The Secretary of State is correct to say that demand for electric vehicles is strong, but in my rural Norfolk constituency the lack of charging infrastructure over the last 14 years has left many not wanting to make that switch. Will she confirm that rural areas such as Norfolk will be prioritised for such charging infrastructure in the future?

**Heidi Alexander:** We increased the installation of EV charging infrastructure in rural areas by 45% in the last year. I hope that my hon. Friend and his constituents will start to see the fruits of that soon.

**Wera Hobhouse** (Bath) (LD): Autonomous vehicles are the next step into the future. What discussions has the Secretary of State had with UK manufacturers to ensure that they can take full advantage of the next revolution in how we use cars?

**Heidi Alexander:** We regularly talk to manufacturers and other organisations that are interested in the move to connected and autonomous vehicles, and we are

[Heidi Alexander]

open to exploring how that might work in the UK. We need to do it in a safe way, but I am interested in how we might expedite trials in the UK. That is a subject that we are working on at the moment.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): I do not know which businesses the shadow Secretary of State or indeed the hon. Member for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice) have been listening to, but I have spoken to businesses including Honda, whose European headquarters are just outside my constituency, and they have said that they are committed to decarbonisation but had concerns about the inflexibility of the scheme that we inherited from the Conservative party. Does the Secretary of State agree that the statement shows that Labour is the party on the side of the British car industry, and of the industry across the world?

**Heidi Alexander:** My hon. Friend is entirely right. We are backing British business and supporting our domestic car manufacturing industry. I am pleased to hear that the companies based in his constituency will be welcoming the announcement.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Previous Labour and Conservative Governments did little when Welsh livelihoods were swept away by global market forces at places such as the Ford plant in Bridgend and the steelworks in Port Talbot. Wales's car sector is facing 25% tariffs thanks to President Trump. That threatens an industry that employs 30,000 people. The Welsh Automotive Forum has said that the Government's commitments are not enough; it is calling for direct support. Recycled fines are hardly direct support. Are the Government prepared to step up and provide that?

**Heidi Alexander:** We have a £2 billion automotive transformation fund, and we are investing hundreds of millions of pounds in other forms of support. I work closely with the Welsh Government on these issues. We will leave no stone unturned in our attempts to protect the car manufacturing industry and preserve high-skilled jobs in communities in Wales and across the rest of the country.

**Mark Swards** (Leeds South West and Morley) (Lab): My constituency needs charging infrastructure, so I am grateful for the Secretary of State's statement and her answers to colleagues across the House. In Leeds South West and Morley, many residents live in terraced houses without driveways. Some of them have contacted me asking what they need to do to get the charging infrastructure required for an electric vehicle. I promised one such resident that I would raise that with the Secretary of State. What update can she give on our commitment to charging infrastructure across the UK?

**Heidi Alexander:** I congratulate my hon. Friend on fulfilling his promise to his constituent. We are working closely with local authorities through the local electric vehicle infrastructure—LEVI—scheme to roll out charging infrastructure, and we have issued the guidance that I mentioned earlier to local authorities on improving cross-pavement charging solutions. There are also grants available for householders who do not have a driveway but who wish to install a charge point.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Saving the best till last, I call Sammy Wilson.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): The statement today is further evidence of the economically damaging and market-distorting impact of the unrealistic net zero policies. The only reason that the Minister is having to impose fines on producers is that demand does not meet the targets that she has set for the production of electric vehicles. Does she not accept that the response from producers will be either to cut back production, reducing jobs, or to reduce the price of EVs, reducing profits and investment in the UK? Are car workers going to be the next group of workers to be sacrificed on the altar of net zero?

**Heidi Alexander:** It is right that we retain the threat of fines, but I gently point out to the right hon. Gentleman that we do not believe that any manufacturers will have to pay fines in the first year of the operation of the ZEV mandate. The trading window for credits is yet to close—it will close later this year—but our initial analysis suggests that no manufacturers will have to pay fines this year.

## Israel: Refusal of Entry for UK Parliamentarians

5.16 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Affairs (Mr Hamish Falconer):** Over the weekend, two Members of this House—my hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed)—on a parliamentary delegation to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories were detained and refused entry by the authorities. They had both been granted entry clearance in advance of travelling to Israel. On arrival in Tel Aviv at 2.30 pm local time, the two hon. Members were held in immigration for six hours. When I spoke to them at 8.30 pm, they believed they were to be detained overnight without their mobile phones.

While the situation was ongoing on Saturday night, the Foreign Secretary spoke to his counterpart, the Israeli Foreign Minister, and I spoke with the Deputy Foreign Minister and the Israeli ambassador. Following that intervention, both hon. Members were released from detention, but their entry was still denied. Foreign Office officials supported the two MPs and their staff at the airport as soon as they were alerted to the situation. After a public statement at 10 pm from the Israeli immigration authority, they were then flown back in the early hours of Sunday morning.

It is my understanding that this is the first time a British MP has been barred from entering Israel. That decision appears to have been taken on the basis of comments made in this Chamber. As the Foreign Secretary has made clear, and as I am sure almost every Member of this House will agree, their treatment is unacceptable and deeply concerning. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] It is no way to treat democratically elected representatives of a close partner nation. We have made this clear at the highest levels in Israel. I pay tribute to the contributions that both Members have made to this place since they were elected. I know that they both believe in a two-state solution. They have our support and solidarity.

The Foreign Secretary and I spoke to both MPs while they were in Israel, and I met with them earlier today. They have behaved with great dignity. They were part of a delegation visiting humanitarian projects amid the appalling situation in Gaza and a dangerous and deteriorating situation in the occupied west bank. They were going to see for themselves what is taking place in the occupied territories and to meet those directly affected by the shocking rise in settler violence.

Such visits are commonplace for MPs from across this House and from all parties. Indeed, I am told that more than 161 Members of Parliament have conducted such visits. They enrich our knowledge and experience as legislators and representatives. They create connections with countries, political counterparts and civil society. Indeed, I note that both Medical Aid for Palestinians and the Council for Arab-British Understanding have supported visits involving Members from all the main political parties, including those on the Benches opposite. All Members should therefore be worried by what this decision means and the precedent it sets.

So our message to the Israeli Government is not just that this is wrong, but that it is counterproductive. We have warned them that actions like this only damage the image of the Israeli Government in the eyes of hon. Members across the House.

Amid this unnecessary and unwelcome decision, the bloodshed continues in Gaza. The hostages are still held by Hamas, essential aid is still blocked by Israel, and yet more innocent Palestinians are suffering. The killing of 15 paramedics and rescue workers in Rafah on 23 March was one of the deadliest attacks on humanitarian staff since the war began. These deaths are an outrage, and we must see this incident investigated transparently and those responsible held to account. Our thoughts remain with the victims and their families.

We will not go quiet in our calls for the violence to stop or in our demands for humanitarian workers and civilians to be protected. We urge all parties to return to ceasefire negotiations. It is clear that this conflict can be won not by bombs and bullets, but by diplomacy. A ceasefire is the only way we will bring the conflict to an end and return to negotiations for a lasting peace in the region. This is the only way we can end the needless loss of humanitarian workers striving to alleviate suffering, and it is the only pathway toward the two-state solution that we all want to see, where Israelis and Palestinians can live in peace and security. I know that hon. Members across this House will continue to work towards that goal. I commend this statement to the House.

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

5.22 pm

**Wendy Morton (Aldridge-Brownhills) (Con):** I am grateful to the Minister for advance sight of his statement. It is important that we put this all within the context of Britain's relationship with Israel. Israel is a key security and defence partner for the United Kingdom, and it is the only democracy in the middle east. Its security matters and helps to keep us safe, including by dealing with threats that undermine our interests.

When the Conservatives were in government, we were able to have candid and honest conversations with the Government of Israel on all issues, because of the mutual trust and respect in our relations. It is only by maintaining that trust and respect that Britain can bring influence to bear on issues that really matter for peace and security in the middle east and, indeed, for us too, including on the course of this terrible conflict and, ultimately, on finding a sustainable end to the conflict, which is what we all want to see. That is more relevant than ever because of the current situation with the 59 hostages who are still being held. It is not in Britain's interests, nor is it in the interests of peace in the region, if there are tense and difficult relations with Israel that would undermine our influence.

The Minister will be aware of his own Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office advice on entry to Israel, but for the benefit of the House it states:

“The Israeli authorities decide if you can enter Israel... Some visitors may face longer searches and questioning, including those ...who are considered to have publicly criticised the state of Israel”.

Does the Minister accept that British nationals visiting Israel—a country that is at war—should be aware of those requirements and consider them carefully before making decisions to travel, and that they therefore travel to Israel at their own risk?

I think it would also be helpful today to understand what the Minister considers to count as an official trip, and whether the FCDO was aware in advance of this trip.

[Wendy Morton]

As MPs—[*Interruption.*] As Members of Parliament, we do not have diplomatic immunity, so what would the FCDO do—this is really important—if MPs were allowed entry and then arrested? [*Interruption.*] Moreover, who were the aides who accompanied the delegation and also returned to the UK? [*Interruption.*]

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. We have to be able to hear the shadow Minister. I understand that emotions are high. We have to make sure that we temper the debate.

**Wendy Morton:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is important and right that we ask some questions. Will the Minister update the House on the UK Government's latest engagement with key interlocutors on efforts to find a way through the current, extremely difficult moment in the conflict? [*Interruption.*] There is chuntering from the Government Benches, but they will have the opportunity, I am sure, to ask the Minister questions themselves.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** Order. That is for the Chair to decide. Please continue.

**Wendy Morton:** As I have said before, Britain needs to be a proactive player and help to drive things to a better destination with practical solutions. Is any progress being made, including on the central issue of the hostages, who have been held in such cruel captivity by Iranian-backed Hamas terrorists since the atrocities of 7 October? The return of the hostages to their loved ones by Hamas remains the key to a sustainable end to this awful conflict, and we have in our thoughts today, and every day, the brave families of the hostages, for whom this is an unimaginably painful time.

On the deaths of the 15 emergency workers last month, has the Minister or the Foreign Secretary had official discussions with Israeli counterparts in recent days on their investigations, and what does the Minister make of Israel's latest assessment? Clearly, it is important in all conflicts that there is the most effective deconfliction possible. As I say, we want to see a sustainable end to this conflict. On aid to Gaza, has the Minister sought to address Israeli concerns about diversion, which may help to unblock the current situation on access? Finally, we are yet to have a clear answer from the Government, despite repeated questioning, on how they envisage what remains of Hamas can be removed from power in Gaza, and what the UK's diplomatic contribution will be to bringing that about.

**Hon. Members:** Shame!

**Mr Falconer:** I had hoped that the right hon. Lady might come to the Dispatch Box to withdraw the comments of the Leader of the Opposition—comments that the shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury was not prepared to support. I remain none the wiser from the comments of shadow Minister what the position of the Conservative party is on the detention of British MPs overnight, despite having clearance to enter, and their return.

Many Conservative Members have been on such delegations; I can see one of them in the Chamber. I am sure that the Conservative party would have the full support of this House were the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse), my neighbour

the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), or indeed the hon. Member for Brigg and Immingham (Martin Vickers), who is also from Lincolnshire—all of whom have been on such delegations—to be treated in this way. The whole House would support them.

These are not difficult questions, and I am truly surprised by the answers. The right hon. Lady asked me further questions, but the Leader of the Opposition did not take the opportunity to ask questions before her Sunday round—not of the two MPs concerned, and not of the Foreign Office. She characterised their comments in this House as “Hamas propaganda.” She can make whatever political characterisation she likes of Back-Bench MPs, but she seemed to imply that the reason for their removal was that they were not going to comply with Israeli laws. [*Interruption.*] Would you like me to read out her comments?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. The word “you” is not appropriate.

**Mr Falconer:** Forgive me, Madam Deputy Speaker.

The Leader of the Opposition said on Sunday:

“If you look at the reasons the Israeli Government has given for why they're not letting them in—they don't believe they're going to comply with their laws.”

The reason for the denial, which the Israeli Government gave to the two MPs in writing, was for the prevention of illegal immigration considerations. The Leader of the Opposition should apologise.

**Abtissam Mohamed (Sheffield Central) (Lab):** I would like to start by thanking the Foreign Secretary, the Minister for the Middle East, the British embassy in Tel Aviv and the British consulate for their continued support.

It has been a challenging few days. What happened to me and my hon. Friend the Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) is unprecedented: we were denied entry based on our legitimate political opinions, which are firmly aligned with international law. We are not the only ones speaking about the atrocities, we are not the only ones calling for change, and we are not the only ones saying that the current actions of the Israeli Government must change. Indeed, many Israeli people and charities in Israel have also called for the Israeli Government's actions to change.

There is no direct route into the west bank, so we had to go through Israel. This act was not just a diplomatic affront. Neither was it about security; it was about control and censorship. No state, however powerful, should be beyond criticism. I desperately want to see a two-state solution; I desperately want to see peace. I hope that the Minister will be able to work with his counterparts in Israel to prevent this denial of entry from happening again, so that we can continue to act in good faith to shed light on what is happening.

**Mr Falconer:** I pay tribute to the dignity of my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Central and for Earley and Woodley.

I can assure my hon. Friend that we will continue to work with the Israeli Government, and all our partners across the region, towards a two-state solution. I welcome the strength of support from her and many other colleagues in this House.

To be clear on the position of the Israeli Government: they do have the right to decide who enters their country, as indeed do we. On this occasion, the two Members of Parliament were given clearance to enter, so it was known to the Israeli Government before they arrived at the airport that they would be travelling. It was therefore with some surprise that I received the call on Saturday evening.

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

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): I thank the Minister for providing advance sight of his statement. The Liberal Democrats wholeheartedly support his rebuke of the Israeli Government for detaining two hon. Members of this House and denying their entry into the state of Israel. I am disappointed, however, that this House has not been able to speak with one voice on this matter.

I was shocked by the leader of the Conservative party's comments yesterday morning, and I am deeply disappointed by the shadow Minister's comments today. The Liberal Democrats believe that Members should be free to advocate without fear or favour on issues of national and global importance. We believe it is vital for parliamentarians to be able to see for themselves the realities of the situations we discuss in this Chamber.

Israel's actions are inconsistent with the behaviour we would expect from an ally and from a democracy, and it is regrettable that the leader of the Conservative party and the party spokesperson do not agree. Transparency in the middle east is vital for securing a long-lasting political settlement, which must be based on openness and trust. Has the Foreign Secretary since made clear to his counterpart in the Israeli Government that such treatment of parliamentarians is unacceptable, and that no further parliamentarians will be treated in that way or denied entry into Israel?

Will the Foreign Secretary also raise with his counterpart this morning's deeply disturbing reports of Palestinian detainees being subjected to torture, and this weekend's report that the initial IDF account of the deaths of 15 aid workers at the hands of Israeli forces has been contradicted by video footage from a victim's mobile phone?

**Mr Falconer:** I confirm to the hon. Member that the Israeli Government are in no doubt about our views on this incident, and that discussions continue. She references a number of concerning reports that have emerged in recent days. I was in this House last Wednesday to discuss some of those in detail, as well as the wider position in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and I am sure we will continue to have such discussions about what remains a deeply concerning situation.

**Yuan Yang** (Earley and Woodley) (Lab): I join my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) in her thanks to the Minister and the Foreign Office. Since arriving home yesterday I have been inundated with support from MPs, hundreds of whom have written to me personally to express their solidarity. That outpouring of support has come from all parts of the House, and it has united us as British parliamentarians who stand together against this unprecedented treatment of our fellow MPs.

Since I came to this place, the war in Gaza and the violence on the west bank has remained one of the top issues that my constituents write to me about. Residents have shared with me their longing for peace, and it was on their behalf that I joined the delegation. As a former journalist, I understand deeply the significance of bearing witness, and I also understand the risks that that entails. Many Palestinian journalists have paid that price with their lives. Before going to the west bank I understood the risks of travelling to a region where violence is all too common. I did not, however, anticipate the risks of detention and deportation from a British ally. Now, as an MP, it is the honour of my life to bear witness on behalf of my constituents. My only regret is that I was not able to do so on this trip.

So far in this Parliament the conflict in Gaza has been referenced more than 1,000 times by British MPs, and I have made five of those references in this Chamber. If my experience has proved anything, it is that what we say in this Chamber matters, and I encourage other MPs to continue speaking on this issue. People around the world are listening to us. Our voice is powerful, and we must continue to use it without fear or favour. What can the Minister do to ensure that future delegations going to the west bank, including those who are about to depart this weekend, can do so without having to censor their remarks in Parliament?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend is a dignified and doughty tribune in this place. I know that all Members of this House will continue to speak without fear or favour from these Benches, and I would encourage them to do so. The right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton) referenced our travel advice, which sets out some of the risks, and I encourage Members of Parliament who are considering visits and wish to discuss that with the Foreign Office to do so.

**Kit Malthouse** (North West Hampshire) (Con): This is obviously a deeply alarming development, coming as it does off the back of proposed financial penalties for foreign non-governmental organisations that are operational in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, which also bear witness to what is going on there. Will the Minister enlighten us about two things? First, it would be helpful for parliamentarians if, in his discussions with the Israeli Government, he could ask them for a comprehensive list of MPs who will not be permitted to travel to Israel from here on in, so that we get a sense of the scale of their objection to what we say in this House. Secondly, will the Government still be entertaining high-level military delegations from Israel on their premises?

**Mr Falconer:** On the right hon. Gentleman's second point, we will keep such matters under review on a case-by-case basis. On the question of which MPs are now welcome to travel to Israel, I will have to revert to this House. To our knowledge, this is the first ever such incident. Colleagues from across the House with a whole range of views on the conflict in Israel and Gaza have travelled there, so we were dismayed to see the weekend's events.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I call the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee.

**Emily Thornberry** (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): As I look around the Chamber, I am proud to see so many Members from all parties who have come here to support our sister parliamentarians, but I am disappointed not to be able to include Members of the Front Bench of His Majesty's Opposition in that. Our fury at this insult to our Parliament and to our country is tempered only by the fact that we must not forget why these young women went to Israel: they wanted to bear witness to what is going on in east Jerusalem and on the west bank. They were going to meet generations of a family who are living in a supposedly temporary refugee camp, but who have been there for decades and are still waiting on the promise of a Palestinian state. They were there to see aid workers and charities whose organisations are at threat of 80% tax, threatening their very existence and lifesaving work. They might even have met, as I did, a man who had been looked in the eye by Antony Blinken and told that his home was safe, yet we were standing in its rubble. What steps will my hon. Friend the Minister take on behalf of the Government to protect the right of MPs not just to see the tragic reality of the west bank and east Jerusalem, but to call that out without reprisal?

**Mr Falconer:** I will update the House once we have had further discussions with the Israeli Government on the question of MPs' travel, as I said in response to the right hon. Member for North West Hampshire (Kit Malthouse). I encourage all Members of the House, whether they support the Government's position or not, to continue to speak in the House with the frankness and integrity that Members would expect.

**Bob Blackman** (Harrow East) (Con): My sympathies are with my two colleagues, the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), for what they experienced over the weekend. However, we must remember that Israel is in a state of war against a terrorist enemy and it is—*[Interruption.]* At different times, this country has refused to admit elected politicians—they have wanted to come to this country, but they have been refused entry. It is Israel's right to refuse entry to people who choose to call for boycotts or other elements against the state of Israel. Therefore, if colleagues wish to visit Israel, they need to be clear about the Foreign Office advice. By the way, the travel insurance advice is that if people do not follow that Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice, they are not insured.

**Mr Falconer:** I reiterate that nobody in the British Government is disputing the Israeli's Government's right to decide who enters Israel—that is clearly their right to discharge as they see fit. What was particularly surprising about this incident was not just its novelty—it is the first time of which we are aware that MPs have been stopped—but that they had entry clearance already and they were permitted to travel to the airport.

**Uma Kumaran** (Stratford and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. If this is how the Israeli Government treat the UK's elected representatives, we can only imagine how they are treating the Palestinian people. Parliamentary delegations are how we in this House better understand the world and the issues that we debate. I returned from my recent visit to the region as a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee more

committed than ever to working towards a lasting peace. Travelling to the west bank shows at first hand the fear and violence experienced by the Palestinians. Meeting with the Israeli hostages, walking through Hostages Square and meeting their families brings home their trauma and suffering. Does the Minister agree with me about the importance of parliamentary delegations, and that actions like such as this by the Israeli Government undermine long-term efforts for a lasting peace?

**Mr Falconer:** Many Members of this House have benefited from parliamentary delegations across the world. I agree with my hon. Friend, who has taken the effort to travel to many countries that the Foreign Affairs Committee considers in its deliberations. They are very important, and I would like to see them continue.

**Mr Alistair Carmichael** (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): I remind the House of my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests. This delegation was organised by the Council for Arab-British Understanding, and it is my enormous privilege to serve as the chair of that organisation. CABU has organised dozens of delegations of this sort over the years, and with the support of the Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, if it is necessary, we hope to continue to do so in the future. The attack on the hon. Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) is an attack on us all. I regret to say that that is why the position of the Opposition Front Benchers is so utterly regrettable. We know that Israel has closed off Gaza in recent years; if the treatment of the hon. Members is anything to go by, it now looks like it will do the same thing for the west bank. What will the Minister do to ensure that it is not allowed to do that?

**Mr Falconer:** I hope to see parliamentary delegations from CABU and others continue. The Opposition spokesperson, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), also asked me about delegations. I take this opportunity to clarify that while my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield Central is a member of the Foreign Affairs Committee, this was not a Foreign Affairs Committee delegation—no one on it has travelled recently—nor was it a delegation from an all-party parliamentary group. However, it was a delegation—in line with many such delegations that have been supported by CABU and many other organisations to ensure that parliamentarians can travel and see things for themselves—and I hope that they continue.

**Paul Waugh** (Rochdale) (Lab/Co-op): This whole House was and remains united in its condemnation of the horrific attacks by Hamas on Israel on 7 October and their disgusting treatment of the hostages ever since, but many in this House have also been appalled by the indiscriminate killing of tens of thousands of men, women and children from the state of Palestine. Ever since 7 October, their forced displacement and the blockade of aid on them has surely upset many Members of this House. Does the Minister agree that the treatment and the smearing of my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang)—they are honourable, and I am proud to call them my friends—is part of a wider attempt to stop others, such as journalists, parliamentarians and the Israeli people themselves, from seeing what is really going on in the occupied territories?



**Mr Falconer:** I agree with how my hon. Friend described my hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley and for Sheffield Central. They are my friends too. They were a bureau chief for the *Financial Times* and a lawyer before coming to this place. They are distinguished members of their communities and distinguished Members of this House.

**Sir Desmond Swayne** (New Forest West) (Con): Israel has forgone the opportunity to engage with two of its trenchant critics. Is this not a case of more fool it?

**Mr Falconer:** I agree.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** I agree with that length of question as well.

**Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): This is an unprecedented situation, and I pay tribute to both my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for the manner in which they have conducted themselves. I have visited Israel on many occasions, and I have had the opportunity to live there. While Members of this House may have disagreements with the current Israeli Government, does the Minister agree it is essential that we enable delegations to visit the region? That is the only way that we listen, learn and are exposed to a wide range of views and perspectives.

**Mr Falconer:** I agree. There are many friends of Israel in this House, many of whom are disappointed by the events of the weekend.

**Graham Leadbitter** (Moray West, Nairn and Strathspey) (SNP): I express my own solidarity and the solidarity of my party with the hon. Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang), who were detained at the weekend. That was a completely unacceptable set of circumstances. While there can be no doubt about the fact that our colleagues were denied entry into Israel because the Israeli Government were terrified of what they would witness, in the last week Israel has intentionally targeted 15 UN medical workers, burying them in a mass grave, and confirmed the indefinite expansion of illegal settlements in the occupied west bank. Last week, the Minister told this House that the Government take action when there is “a risk” that Israel is breaching international law. Does he consider that the targeting of UN aid workers and the confirmation that settlements in the west bank will be expanded demonstrates a risk that international law is being violated by Israel, and will the Government end Israeli impunity by condemning its indiscriminate attacks and suspending all arms exports?

**Mr Falconer:** We went through many of these issues in some detail last Wednesday, and I am sure that I will return to this House to do so again. My position remains as it was on Wednesday.

**Anneliese Dodds** (Oxford East) (Lab/Co-op): I have stood opposite the spokesperson for the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Aldridge-Brownhills (Wendy Morton), many times and engaged in the rough and tumble of political debate. It is not part of the rough and tumble of political debate to seek to justify the

detention and deportation of fellow Members of this House. Does my hon. Friend the Minister agree that the position taken by Opposition Front Benchers poses a risk to all of us as parliamentarians?

**Mr Falconer:** My right hon. Friend speaks with force, and I condemn the position taken by Opposition Front Benchers. We have just heard from a fairly trenchant advocate for free speech; I thought that was the position of the Conservative party.

**Dr Andrew Murrison** (South West Wiltshire) (Con): Like many colleagues, I have visited Israel, the west bank and Gaza, facilitated by the Israeli Government and the Palestinian Authority. I benefited greatly from those visits, and I hope that both the Palestinian Authority and the Israeli Government will facilitate future visits by parliamentarians. However, does the Minister think it was wise for the Foreign Secretary, in his remarks on X/Twitter, to try to conflate China and Israel?

**Mr Falconer:** The shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury, the hon. Member for North Bedfordshire (Richard Fuller), made an almost identical comparison shortly thereafter, so the right hon. Member may want to talk to his own party about that comparison.

**Luke Akehurst** (North Durham) (Lab): For 13 years before my election, I worked as director of an organisation called We Believe in Israel, and I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Part of my job was to lead study tours for British politicians to visit Israel—incidentally, every single trip I led also visited the west bank to hear Palestinian perspectives on the conflict. I commend my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) for wanting to visit the region and see the situation for themselves. We probably disagree on aspects of the conflict, but they are moderate voices who support a two-state solution, and it is outrageous that they were detained and not allowed entry. Does the Minister agree that it is vital for hon. Members to visit Israel and the west bank and see the situation at first hand; that doing so helps people to arrive at an informed, nuanced and balanced view; and that anything that hinders this is to be deplored?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend is well known for his friendship to Israel, and his remarks have real force. I agree with them.

**Edward Morello** (West Dorset) (LD): It is my honour and privilege to serve on the Foreign Affairs Committee with the hon. Member for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed), and I put on record my support for her and my outrage at her treatment. Given that this is how the current Israeli Government act towards their allies, disregarding democratic and diplomatic norms, what steps will the Government take to help ensure that Israel enters into negotiations with its enemies towards a lasting peace and a two-state solution?

**Mr Falconer:** We will continue to work with the Israeli Government and all parties in the region to try to ensure that there is a return to substantive talks, and a return to the ceasefire that will lead to the release of hostages and an end to this terrible conflict in the region.

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): I listened to the Minister's statement in detail, but what specific actions will this Government take against the Israeli Government for doing what they did to two of our colleagues? Secondly, Madam Deputy Speaker, back in 2021, Mr Speaker banned the Chinese ambassador for banning Members of the British Parliament from going to China. Is the same going to happen to the Israeli ambassador until these sanctions are lifted?

**Mr Falconer:** We consider the actions of the Israeli Government to be not just regrettable but counterproductive, for the reasons that Members on the Opposition Benches have stated. It is so important—as many on the Labour Benches have said—that parliamentarians are able to visit, to engage, and ultimately to seek to persuade others. The actions of the Israeli Government are deeply regrettable and unacceptable, and we have made that clear to them at the very highest level.

**Jeremy Corbyn** (Islington North) (Ind): I take this opportunity to thank the Minister for supporting the hon. Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed), as well as any other Member attempting to make the same journey in order to acquaint themselves with the situation. Could he bring us up to date on what is happening regarding the supply of arms and weapons to Israel? Can he assure the House that the Government will suspend the sale of parts that make up the F-35 jets that are being used to bomb and strafe Gaza, kill so many people, and destroy schools and hospitals by targeting them? Will he also tell us exactly what RAF Akrotiri is being used for, and why there are so many flights from that base into Israel? Is it delivering weapons?

**Mr Falconer:** I have covered this ground recently, and it remains as it was. We took a principled position in relation to the suspension of certain arms licences in September, and that remains our position. We have discussed the position in relation to F-35 parts and the role of RAF Akrotiri on a number of other occasions. However, I am glad for the opportunity to correct something: when last the right hon. asked me a question, I referred to him simply as an hon. Member. No offence was intended, and it was a mistake on my part.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Ms Nusrat Ghani):** Order. A large number of colleagues wish to contribute, so can questions please be short? I ask the Minister to ensure that his responses are just as short.

**Sarah Owen** (Luton North) (Lab): It is regrettable that the Israeli Government are now acting with impunity—they seem to be accountable to no international law. Enabled by the US President, they continue to bomb hospitals and schools, killing aid workers and thousands of Palestinian civilians. Today, Breaking the Silence reported further executions, as well as the destruction of homes by the Israel Defence Forces, and now this: banning Members of our Parliament from entering. I put on record that I wholeheartedly disagree with what has been said by Opposition Front Benchers and the accusations made by them. My hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Sheffield

Central (Abtisam Mohamed) are our friends and our colleagues, and they have more dignity and strength in their little fingers than has been shown by Opposition Front Benchers.

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend speaks with real force, and I agree with her condemnation of the Leader of the Opposition's comments.

**John Cooper** (Dumfries and Galloway) (Con): There is no question but that the hon. Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed)—who are sadly no longer in their places—had a difficult experience in Israel, and that is to be regretted. However, we are hearing today that that somehow makes criticism of Israel impossible in this place, but as we have heard time and again, that is simply not the case. We can speak out in Parliament, and we can continue to do so.

**Mr Falconer:** I do not think that anything I said indicated that I expected this House to be less critical in its position, so I am not sure that I accept the hon. Gentleman's question.

**Dawn Butler** (Brent East) (Lab): It is our job in this House to speak out against what Hamas did, but also to speak out against Israel and what it is doing. Denying Members entry is a disgrace, and I am embarrassed by His Majesty's official Opposition and the position they have taken—they should be ashamed, and should reflect on what they have done. Krishnan Guru-Murthy's interview with the Israeli ambassador on "Channel 4 News" clearly showed that she was lying. Does the Minister agree that the way in which our friends have been treated is a snub to the UK?

**Mr Falconer:** I stick by the characterisation in my statement.

**Ellie Chowns** (North Herefordshire) (Green): In solidarity, Green party MPs share in the condemnation—which should be fully cross-party—of the Israeli Government's shameful detention and deportation of our two Labour MP colleagues. In the context of the widespread evidence of war crimes, does the Minister agree that this demonstrates that international scrutiny of what is happening in Israel and Palestine is ever more important? Noting that the Foreign Secretary and the Minister have condemned the actions of the Israeli Government, may I ask him which of the many actions that I have previously challenged him to take, will he now take, to show that actions speak louder than words? How will he make our disapproval really clear?

**Mr Falconer:** Conscious of time, I will not relitigate the many points that the hon. Member has raised with me in the past. I will simply say that I stand by the remarks in the statement, and we have made our displeasure known.

**Kim Johnson** (Liverpool Riverside) (Lab): The detention and the deportation raise some serious questions. What is Israel trying to hide? If Israel has not already crossed a red line, what more does it need to do for this Government to take some action? The alleged execution of the 15 humanitarian aid workers was bad enough. What are this Government going to do? Actions do speak louder than words.

**Mr Falconer:** This Government have taken action. We have taken action since the day we formed the Government. I would be happy to rehearse those things, whether it is the arms suspensions, the restoration of funding to UNRWA or the numerous other actions we have taken, but conscious of time, I think I will save that for another day.

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): I think we have seen a good example of faux outrage in this House today, as Members have condemned the Israeli Government. Would the Minister accept that, first of all, the Israeli Government have every right to decide to whom they give entry and to whom they refuse entry? Will he remind some of his colleagues that it was not so long ago that they were campaigning to get the President of the United States excluded from this country?

**Mr Falconer:** I am not sure how many more times I need to say the position about Israel's right to control who enters its border, but I am happy to reiterate it one more time.

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): I have debated for many years with members of the Conservative party, and I have often disagreed with them, but I have never before been ashamed of them. Considering that Israel has for a long time now not been allowing journalists into Palestine and the west bank, and now seems determined not to allow parliamentarians to go to that country to build links and to see for themselves what is going on, is this the point where we need to consider what action we take going forward? Should that action be about talking to Israel, or does it need to be something slightly stronger?

**Mr Falconer:** As I said in answer to a previous question, we have taken action since we became the Government. We will continue to talk to the Israeli Government. They are, as many Members have said, a partner and an ally, and we are surprised and distressed, and we oppose the treatment of our MPs this weekend.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): For 15 years, I have found it impossible to say anything on the subject of Israel and Palestine without it being completely unsatisfactory to either side of the debate, but I have to say, having got to know the hon. Member for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) pretty well on the Treasury Committee, that I was profoundly concerned by the decision of the Israeli Government to do what they did, although I respect the right that they have to do so. However, it is so counterproductive, because it is only when we fully express our views on all sides of this debate that we can find some edification.

**Mr Falconer:** That is a decent and honourable contribution, and I thank the right hon. Member for it.

**Ms Stella Creasy** (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Colleagues who were elected after 2024 may not know that in 2022, 287 of us parliamentarians were banned from entering Russia over our views about the Ukrainian crisis, including not just the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis) and me, but the right hon. Member for North West Essex (Mrs Badenoch), the Leader of the Opposition. At that time, the House

stood as one standing up to that intimidation. Today, from the Opposition, we get a dog whistle so loud—about our colleagues, who did nothing wrong apart from wanting to go and see for themselves what was going on—that it could be heard on the moon. What a disgrace. Does the Minister agree that this Government will always defend free speech and that defending free speech means defending the ability of people to go and talk about things that others may not want to talk about?

**Mr Falconer:** As I have said, these parliamentary delegations are very valuable, and I want to see them continue.

**Vikki Slade** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (LD): Many of us have raised serious concerns about the actions of the Israeli Government, and replies have rarely gone as far as most of us would want. I am deeply concerned that the state of Israel may be using this tactic to curtail Ministers from condemning Israel more strongly. What assurance can we have from the Minister that he will not be cowed by what has happened to his colleagues?

**Mr Falconer:** I will not be cowed by what has happened to my colleagues.

**Andy Slaughter** (Hammersmith and Chiswick) (Lab): I have visited the Occupied Palestinian Territories a number of times, including Gaza, in years gone by. One of the purposes is to bear witness to what is happening on the ground. That is particularly important when aid workers, medics, journalists and civilians are being killed in large numbers. While I appreciate the Minister's support for our colleagues, what will the Government do to ensure that in future Members of this House can visit with impunity?

**Mr Falconer:** It is the right of the Israeli Government to decide who visits. They can exercise that right as they see fit. I am sure they will hear from right across the whole House Members' desire to continue to visit, which continues to provide a valuable function. Israel and Britain have a long relationship, whether Parliament to Parliament, society to society or people to people, and I want that to continue.

**Iqbal Mohamed** (Dewsbury and Batley) (Ind): I thank the Minister for his statement, and I put on record my and my colleagues' solidarity with our friends, the hon. Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang). What are the UK Government's precise red lines that, when crossed by Israel, will trigger a full arms embargo and comprehensive economic sanctions against Israel? Furthermore, when will the Government publicly articulate and enforce those red lines to ensure accountability and to uphold international law?

**Mr Falconer:** I have talked about the importance of international humanitarian law, as has the Foreign Secretary and many other Ministers of this Government, at this Dispatch Box, at some length. Conscious of time, I refer the hon. Member to my answers last Wednesday.

**Dr Zubir Ahmed** (Glasgow South West) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for all the help he gave to my hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed)

[*Dr Zubir Ahmed*]

over the weekend. The British Jewish organisation Yachad has suggested that this occurrence of detention is symptomatic of an attempt to silence criticism within Israel and outside. Is my hon. Friend sympathetic to that view and, if he is, is a business-as-usual diplomatic relationship with this current Israeli Government still possible?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend, who is so committed to these issues, has been discussing them with me and others for many years. He is right to highlight the important work of Yachad, which has also provided delegations to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I refer him to my previous response in the statement.

**Mr Will Forster** (Woking) (LD): I was on one of those delegations that the Minister has just spoken about, and unlike my friends on the Government Benches, we were able to visit the area without a problem from the Israeli Government. However, we did have an incident with Israeli settlers. Is the Minister concerned, and what will he do about this sliding from what is supposed to be a democratic country, undermining the rule of law and stopping British politicians from seeing what is happening in the occupied territories?

**Mr Falconer:** I know that my neighbour, the Father of the House, the right hon. Member for Gainsborough (Sir Edward Leigh), has also been on such a delegation. Like the hon. Member, he reported an incident with settlers. I refer the House to my previous statements about the expansion of settler violence and illegal settlements in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

**Joe Powell** (Kensington and Bayswater) (Lab): The power of bearing witness, as my hon. Friends were attempting to do, was shown at its most extreme in recent days by the paramedic Refat Radwan, who filmed the recent attack on 15 aid workers by the IDF before losing his own life. Does the Minister agree that in this case there must be accountability and not a cover-up?

**Mr Falconer:** I do believe that wherever there are incidents against humanitarian workers, including the one that my hon. Friend mentions, there must be full accountability.

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): I welcome the Minister's statement. These discussions are sometimes very polarised, but let me say now that this is not just an affront to the House and every Member in it and not just an affront to the Government, but an affront to the British public who put us here. Thousands of British citizens travel to Israel to make their way to the third holy site, Masjid Al-Aqsa, and hundreds have been refused entry on arrival. What reassurance can the Minister give them when our own MPs seem not to be able to get there?

**Mr Falconer:** The Foreign Office and the embassy in Tel Aviv, and the consulates in Jerusalem, will give support to all British nationals seeking to travel. They supported our colleagues on Saturday night, and in recent weeks they have supported British pilgrims in an incident similar to the one that the hon. Gentleman has described. They will continue to provide that support.

**Florence Eshalomi** (Vauxhall and Camberwell Green) (Lab/Co-op): I know that the Leader of the Opposition is not here, but I would say to her gently that she should agree with the whole House and recognise that her comments may inflame the situation, and that they are not just wrong but counterproductive in respect of the work that the Government are doing.

I commend Opposition Members who have spoken truth to power, and I express my solidarity with our two colleagues as well. Their treatment was very concerning, and the fact is that this a worrying trend: we have seen aid workers being denied access, and we have seen vital journalists being denied access. We know that atrocities are often committed in darkness, when people have something to hide. Does the Minister agree that the Israeli Government must stop shutting themselves off from the eyes of the world?

**Mr Falconer:** I have already spoken about the importance of parliamentary delegations, and I hope that they continue. I hope, too, that the free press of Israel—and, indeed, the whole international press—are able to operate within the Occupied Palestinian Territories. I have been deeply saddened and concerned to see that so many journalists have been killed in Gaza. As for the comments of the Leader of the Opposition, I should say to the House that I did inform her office that I intended to make some observations, so I am disappointed not to see her today to answer for them.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Minister for his statement. As a general principle parliamentarians should be entitled to travel, but there is an understanding that sovereign nations across the globe have the right to decide who can enter. I personally am barred from China and Russia, as are other Members, but I have not heard anyone speak about that. Does the Minister not agree that sovereign nations have a right to prevent entry if they believe that it would have an adverse impact, and that we, as our own nation, should support the right of other nations to make their own rules for what they believe to be for their benefit? Each nation should have that sovereign right.

**Mr Falconer:** I do indeed accept, as do the British Government, that every Government have the right to control who comes in. More fool Russia and Belarus for taking the position that they have taken in relation to the hon. Member.

**Mark Ferguson** (Gateshead Central and Wickham) (Lab): Does the Minister agree that the counterproductive and concerning actions of the Israeli Government in this regard, and the contemptible response from the Opposition Front Bench, have one thing in common, namely that neither will command the support of the British people?

**Mr Falconer:** I do agree. The public expect that their MPs will go and see for themselves. This was an important delegation, and I am sure that the constituents of my two colleagues would have welcomed the fact that they were taking the time and making the effort to try to ensure that they had the best possible understanding of a situation about which I know so many constituents feel so strongly.

**Helen Hayes** (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): I have had the privilege of visiting the Occupied Palestinian Territories with two delegations, one with the Council for Arab-British Understanding and Medical Aid for Palestinians and the other with Yachad. During those visits we met people working in schools, hospitals and clinics, we saw the operation of the Israeli military courts, we met Palestinians whose villages had recently been destroyed by settlers, and, during the last visit, we met Israelis who had lost loved ones on 7 October. Such visits enrich our understanding. They ensure that our debate in this place is informed not only by what we think we know, but by lived experience—by having looked in the eye people whose day-to-day reality consists of the issues that we discuss in this place. Can the Minister assure the House that he will continue to seek a commitment from the Israeli Government that such delegations will not be prevented in the future?

**Mr Falconer:** I hope that such delegations will continue in the future, and I will talk to the Israeli Government to that effect.

**Yasmin Qureshi** (Bolton South and Walkden) (Lab): May I put on record my thanks to the Minister and the Foreign Secretary for their support for our two colleagues, who, since their election, have spoken so bravely about many issues, including what is happening in Palestine? May I also remind the House that Israel is an occupying power, occupying Gaza as well as the west bank? Over the past year the Israelis have consistently not allowed people into Gaza, and we know now what they have been doing to it and to the west bank. It seems that what Israel really wants to do is hide its atrocities.

**Mr Falconer:** The British Government do consider the west bank and the Gaza strip to be Occupied Palestinian Territories.

**Josh Fenton-Glynn** (Calder Valley) (Lab): The Israeli Government's justification for this action seems to have been the statements that my hon. Friends made in the House against their policies. On that basis, they detained, denied entry to and expelled two elected Members of the Parliament of their democratic ally on legitimate parliamentary business. Let me repeat the question that I asked my hon. Friend on 20 March. I know that these matters are complex, but can he tell me at what point we change our posture towards the Israeli Government?

**Mr Falconer:** I am sure that we will have an opportunity to discuss events in Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories in further detail. I thank my hon. Friend for his dedication and commitment to these issues, and I do not doubt that we will have further discussions in the Chamber in due course.

**Chi Onwurah** (Newcastle upon Tyne Central and West) (Lab): My hon. Friends the Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) have borne their detention and repatriation with great fortitude, courage, dignity and, indeed, grace, which makes the attack on them from the Opposition Front Bench all the more disgraceful. It is an attack on all of us. Their detention occurred at the same time as it came to light that Israel's version of the terrible killing of 15 aid workers was not true. Does the Minister agree that lying about actions in occupied territory,

preventing the entry of humanitarian aid and journalists and barring British parliamentarians undermine Israel's claim to be an open and transparent democracy?

**Mr Falconer:** I agree with my hon. Friend's characterisation of the grace and dignity with which the two Members have comported themselves over what has been a trying 24 hours, and I am sure we will discuss the other matters that she has raised in due course.

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): Israel is supposed to be an ally of ours. Does the Minister agree that its treatment of our hon. Friends is not only an affront but a further indication of the Israeli Government's desire to show no transparency in respect of their actions, and not to respect human rights?

**Mr Falconer:** Israel remains an open society with a vibrant press, who were reporting on this incident as it happened. I hope that this proves to be an aberration, and that Members of this House will be able to go back to travelling to Israel with no thought of detention or being returned.

**Bell Ribeiro-Addy** (Clapham and Brixton Hill) (Lab): For me, the most important aspect of our country is not our flags or even our institutions, but our people, and our people—the elected representatives of thousands of British people—have been treated with contempt. My understanding was that we are Britain and you do not do this to us. There is, at least, consensus on this side of the House that this is not how we should expect to be treated by our allies.

While I welcome the Minister's statement, I still cannot understand where our red lines were when thousands were slaughtered, when aid was prevented from entering Gaza, or when international law or the ceasefire was broken. Can he explain where those red lines are, and how, when Britain and Parliament have been insulted, we can continue to sell arms to Israel?

**Mr Falconer:** I have talked about the position relating to arms sales, and I will not rehearse the arguments that were heard in the Chamber so recently. I agree with my hon. Friend that we all represent communities across the United Kingdom. I believe that in travelling to Israel those two hon. Members were trying to reflect the earnest concerns of their constituents, and I encourage all hon. Members, whenever they are able to do so, to travel to the places where their constituents cannot.

**Darren Paffey** (Southampton Itchen) (Lab): I thank the Minister for his statement. I join him and most fellow Members—sadly, not all of them—in fully supporting my two hon. Friends over the shocking treatment that they have faced. Does the Minister agree that such an utterly disproportionate and counterproductive decision by the Israeli authorities, at a time when the situation in the middle east is already deteriorating so badly, can only do damage to the Israeli Government's reputation here and in the wider world?

**Mr Falconer:** As I have said, I think the decision was counterproductive.

**Oliver Ryan** (Burnley) (Ind): I rise in solidarity with the hon. Members for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) and for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed)—two sisters of this House—and I am disgusted by their

[*Oliver Ryan*]

treatment at the hands of the state of Israel. However, all too many of my constituents have suffered similar treatment when they have tried to visit Al-Aqsa in Jerusalem and other holy sites around the country. Mr Tassadaq Hussain and Suhan Hoque have recently been denied entry. What will the Minister do to make sure that British passport-carrying citizens are not denied entry to Israel?

**Mr Falconer:** It is for Israel to decide whom it grants entry to, but any British national travelling overseas, regardless of their faith, can expect consular assistance from the Foreign Office.

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the Minister for his statement. I applaud the dignity with which my hon. Friends have responded, and the solidarity from many Members of different parties. I commend the statement made by my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes), who spoke so powerfully about the importance and impact of parliamentary delegations. Does the Minister agree that democracy is weakened if parliamentarians cannot undertake such visits and duties at a time when the need for scrutiny has never been greater?

**Mr Falconer:** I agree that parliamentary delegations are important.

**Melanie Ward** (Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy) (Lab): The detention and deportation of my hon. Friends the Members for Sheffield Central (Abtisam Mohamed) and for Earley and Woodley (Yuan Yang) by the state of Israel is disgraceful, and it smacks of racism—we cannot ignore the fact that they are women of colour. They were visiting not Israel, but the Occupied Palestinian Territories. Let us remind ourselves that the International Court of Justice recently found that Israel's treatment of Palestinians constitutes "systemic discrimination" on the basis of "race, religion or ethnic origin."

The fact is that white hon. Members on recent delegations who have made similar comments about the conflict are not treated this way. Will the Minister summon the Israeli ambassador over this issue, and over what it now seems was the execution of 15 PRCS paramedics and those who went to rescue them in Gaza?

**Mr Falconer:** I have told the House the stated basis that my two hon. Friends were given for their refusal, and I will not pass further comment on what might or might not be behind that. As I say, the written reason was the prevention of illegal immigration considerations, as unlikely as that may seem to those in this Chamber.

On the deeply concerning reports about further deaths of humanitarian workers, this Government have expressed on a number of occasions our condemnation of the lack of a deconfliction mechanism to ensure the safety of humanitarian workers who conduct essential work.

**Sarah Smith** (Hyndburn) (Lab): I echo the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Cowdenbeath and Kirkcaldy (Melanie Ward), and I find it deeply troubling that the only Members who were detained and deported

at the weekend are not white. Will the Minister express in the strongest terms his concerns about these events in any future Government discussions on peace and trade?

**Mr Falconer:** I am conscious of the time. We have expressed our concerns about this incident in the way that I described, and I expect to have further discussions with members of the Israeli Government to that effect.

**Laura Kyrke-Smith** (Aylesbury) (Lab): I travelled to the west bank in November, and I heard from UN agencies and non-governmental organisations about their international staff being denied entry, restricting their aid efforts. That was alarming enough, but the appalling treatment of our brilliant colleagues is a new low, as it seems that it is not just the support to Palestinians that is being denied, but the right to scrutinise whether that support is getting through. Does the Minister agree that future access to the Occupied Palestinian Territories for aid and scrutiny must be protected?

**Mr Falconer:** I have spoken already about the importance of the free press, safe travel for journalists and, indeed, parliamentary delegations.

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for his strong statement in defence of parliamentary democracy. Does he agree that transparency and accessibility are key to parliamentary democracy, and that obstructing the visit of two elected representatives of an allied nation can only raise troubling questions about the current health of Israeli democracy?

**Mr Falconer:** As I have said, one of the appealing elements of Israeli democracy is its free press and vibrant debate, and I know that many Members of this House have benefited from vibrant exchanges with their counterparts in Israel, as they have said already. I regret that that has not been the case this weekend.

**James Asser** (West Ham and Beckton) (Lab): The response of this House to what happened to our colleagues at the weekend should be united, because it affects us all. Does the Minister agree that any equivocation from Members of this House risks sending a green light to other countries that wish to interfere in our activities and parliamentary delegations? Perhaps the Leader of the Opposition and those on the Opposition Front Bench could give that long and hard consideration.

**Mr Falconer:** As I have said, the Opposition should give this issue long and hard consideration. It should not be a complex question for this House, given the circumstances of events this weekend.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Had this been the right hon. Member for Salisbury (John Glen) or for New Forest East (Sir Julian Lewis), I would have stood in support of them, as I am sure many colleagues would have done too, because this issue affects us all. I therefore find the Leader of the Opposition's comments extraordinary. We must not forget that my two hon. Friends were granted visas to enter the country by an ally. Does my hon. Friend agree that this was a showcase event that was designed to intimidate, threaten and silence this place?

**Mr Falconer:** To be clear, they were granted entry clearance, rather than a visa. The distinction may seem academic to this House, given that both would have permitted my hon. Friends to travel to the airport. Clearly, it was not a surprise to the Israeli authorities that they arrived.

**Jas Athwal** (Ilford South) (Lab): I share the anger of most Members of this House. It is completely unacceptable that two Members of this House were denied entry to the occupied territories in the west bank by the Israeli authorities. Does the Minister agree that more than ever, now is the time to be united and show solidarity across the House with our parliamentarians, whose only mistake was to do their jobs by representing their constituents without fear or favour in this House and holding Israel accountable for its actions?

**Mr Falconer:** I can confirm that I would like to see unity across the House on such matters, and that any parliamentarian, of any political party, would enjoy the support of the Foreign Office under such circumstances.

**Harpreet Uppal** (Huddersfield) (Lab): I pay tribute to my hon. Friends, who are currently not in their places. They are the kindest and most thoughtful people I know, and the fact that the Leader of the Opposition has tried to damage their reputation is disgraceful. I urge the Minister to continue to have conversations with the Israeli ambassador to the UK. What additional dialogue is he having with international partners to ensure that there is access to aid for Palestine?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend speaks about our colleagues with real warmth, which I know is felt right across the House. That has been referred to not just by those on the Government Benches, but by those on the Opposition Benches, and I am grateful. I can assure my hon. Friend that I will continue those discussions.

**Joe Morris** (Hexham) (Lab): I associate myself with the comments made about my hon. Friends. Does the Minister share my horror, outrage and anger at the killing of 15 paramedics in Gaza, and can he assure me that we are doing everything we possibly can to demand that all those responsible are held to account?

**Mr Falconer:** Accountability is vital, and I am indeed outraged by the reports.

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): The detainment of two hon. Members of this House is shocking, and the killing of 15 Palestinian paramedics in Gaza by the IDF is deeply distressing. At a time like this, it feels as though peace is further away than ever, so can the Minister set out what more we can do to make sure we get back in place the ceasefire we so badly need?

**Mr Falconer:** We will continue to work with the Israeli Government and all relevant partners in the region to see the ceasefire restored, which is vital not simply to the Palestinians and the Israelis, but to all in the region.

**Chris Murray** (Edinburgh East and Musselburgh) (Lab): What has happened to our two amazing colleagues—my hon. Friends—is appalling, but it is part of a pattern of behaviour from Israel of disdain for diplomatic relations with allies, disdain for democratic norms and disdain for human life. Does my hon. Friend agree that this pattern is worrying, and will he correspondingly toughen the UK's diplomatic posture so that my constituents feel secure that our Government are standing up for their values?

**Mr Falconer:** I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and for his commitment to these issues even before he was a Member of this place. This incident over the weekend was novel. It is the first time we are aware of that MPs have been refused entry in this way. We are making clear our views about that to the Israeli Government in the way that I have set out. On the other issues, I hope that my hon. Friend can reassure his constituents that we have taken action since becoming the Government, whether with the suspension of arms, in multilateral forums or with the restoration of aid to Gaza.

**Andrew Pakes** (Peterborough) (Lab): Can I put on the record my comments about our two hon. Friends, alongside those of everyone else in the House, apart from the Conservative Front-Bencher, who I do not think said any words about them in her commentary?

We are rightly talking about our two hon. Friends, but this incident shines a much wider light not just on our rights as parliamentarians, but on the rights of journalists, charity workers and others to enter Israel and the west bank. We have talked a lot about their being refused entry to Israel, but this is actually about their entry in order to gain access to the west bank through their only entry point into it. What more can the Minister do to ensure that the learning, the sharing and the visits to the west bank will continue if the Israeli Government are embarking on a system of shutting people out?

Does the Minister agree that this whole debacle—the whole sham we have seen in the last few days—has been a distraction from and made much harder the real job we need to do, which is to take on the crimes of Hamas, get the hostages out, get a ceasefire done and speak up for the innocent Palestinians who are suffering day by day because of the actions not being taken by the Israeli Government?

**Mr Falconer:** My hon. Friend speaks forcefully about the importance of focusing on the hostages, the restrictions on aid and the death of innocent civilians on both sides of this conflict. As I have said a number of times this afternoon, I do want parliamentary delegations to continue to Israel and the Occupied Palestinian Territories, including the west bank, and I hope this incident will prove to be an aberration.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I thank the Minister for his statement.

## Points of Order

6.33 pm

**Emma Lewell** (South Shields) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. At Prime Minister's questions last week, the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) raised the difficult ongoing issue, which my constituents and I have been involved in for a number of years, of Northumbrian Water dumping sewage into the North sea at Whitburn. Please can you offer me some advice, as I believed it was still a convention and courtesy of this House that the right hon. Member should at least have informed me he was going to wade into this matter?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes)**: I am grateful to the hon. Member for giving notice of her point of order. Can she confirm that she has notified the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Ed Davey) of her intention to raise this matter in the House?

**Emma Lewell** *indicated assent.*

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: While Members should certainly inform colleagues when they intend to table a question about a matter relating to a colleague's constituency, the same rule does not apply to supplementary questions at PMQs. The leader of the Liberal Democrats was making a broader point about the ownership of Thames Water. None the less, the hon. Member has put the matter on the record, including her own campaigning on sewage dumping at Whitburn.

**Tahir Ali** (Birmingham Hall Green and Moseley) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. On 28 March, I shared on social media the work that I and colleagues from across the two Houses have been doing to urge the Government of Pakistan to build an international airport at Mirpur. This is an important issue for over 1 million British Kashmiris, who overwhelmingly come from there, and who face delay and danger while travelling from Islamabad to Mirpur. The reactions to that post, including from some Members of the House, have resulted in our being subjected to Islamophobic, racist attacks and harassment. The hon. Members for Great Yarmouth (Rupert Lowe), for Harborough, Oadby and Wigston (Neil O'Brien), for Orpington (Gareth Bacon) and for Boston and Skegness (Richard Tice), all of whom—

**Madam Deputy Speaker**: Order. The hon. Member should not be criticising other Members for their social media posts in that way. I thank him for giving notice of his point of order, which may have gone slightly further than the notice he gave, but he has eloquently put his concerns on record.

## Road Maintenance

6.35 pm

**The Secretary of State for Transport (Heidi Alexander)**: I beg to move,

That this House has considered road maintenance.

For too long, Britain has been plagued by potholes. Too many people in too many parts of the country have had their everyday journeys turned into frustrating obstacle courses by our pockmarked roads. It is worse than that, however, because cratered roads can be dangerous, can make our trips longer and more stressful, and can consume the hard-earned cash of ordinary families. With the average vehicle repair costing a staggering £600, it is little wonder that the AA tells us that this issue is a priority for 96% of drivers. It is not just motorists who are suffering; damaged roads cause problems for cyclists, motorcyclists and pedestrians, and dodgy pavements are infuriating for those pushing a pram or using a wheelchair.

**Chris Vince** (Harlow) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend reminds me of the road on which I live, where drivers trying to avoid a pothole in the road went on to the pavement, which led to the pavement being damaged. Does she agree that fixing potholes quickly will save pavements as well?

**Heidi Alexander**: My hon. Friend describes a win-win situation.

**Melanie Onn** (Great Grimsby and Cleethorpes) (Lab): At my constituency surgery on Friday, my constituent Helen came to see me because she has had a terrible fall on a badly maintained pavement, and she has really been struggling to find out who is responsible for maintaining the pavement. Does anything in the funding brought forward by this Government enable quick and easy repairs to pavements, so that people like Helen do not have terrible accidents?

**Heidi Alexander**: Local authorities are free to use the money as they see fit, as long as they are using it in a way that represents value for money for the taxpayer. The money can be used for work on roads, pavements or structures. On the issue of responsibility raised by my hon. Friend's constituent, that will be for the local highways authority.

**Sir Julian Lewis** (New Forest East) (Con): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. I thought I would get in before she gets back into her stride. Can she throw some light on an issue that has puzzled me for some time in my New Forest East constituency? A stretch of road—Southampton Road—is often used as a short cut by very heavy goods vehicles, rather than using the appropriate section of the M27 motorway. These are often very large petrol bowsters, tankers—you name it—and surprise, surprise, the roadway is constantly getting broken up and potholes appear, with all the consequences she describes. Whenever we have raised this with any of the companies to which these heavy vehicles belong, they say, "Well, it's a public highway, and we're entitled to drive these vehicles where we want." Is there any obligation on companies not to do that?



**Heidi Alexander:** I do not know whether the right hon. Gentleman has raised the matter with the local highways authority. I believe there may be the ability to apply a weight restriction on roads or to curtail the movement of large heavy goods vehicles. That might be something he wishes to raise with the appropriate authority.

I was describing the frustrating state of our roads and pavements. Most importantly, the country's broken roads have become, sadly, a symbol of the national decline presided over by the previous Government. Our roads have compounded the feeling that nothing works in this country. They tell a story of a country left in a woeful state of disrepair after 14 long years of the previous Government. Roads are the backbone of our transport system; they are the concrete arteries of our local and regional economies. Yet too often they fall way short of the standards we should expect in the 21st century. That is why this Government are taking decisive action to deliver the renewal of our roads.

**Matt Western** (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): Madam Deputy Speaker, you might not be aware that there is such a thing as the RAC pothole index. It shows that something like four out of 10 incidents of damage to cars happen as a result of potholes. The owners of vehicles are paying road tax and fuel duty, but they do not have the road infrastructure to support them. I welcome the Government's support for filling potholes, but can we ensure that the motorist is looked after under this Government?

**Heidi Alexander:** I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. That is why we have ploughed a record £1.6 billion into roads maintenance, including a £500 million uplift on last year. That is on top of the £200 million or so we are putting in the hands of local leaders in the big city regions, empowering mayoral combined authorities to mend the roads in their communities.

**Warinder Juss** (Wolverhampton West) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I want to raise a question that I am often asked. We have spoken about quick fixes. The problem is that we fix a few potholes, but the disrepair reappears. Does she agree that we should focus on resurfacing our roads?

**Heidi Alexander:** My hon. Friend is completely right. In some cases, preventive comprehensive road resurfacing will be the appropriate action to take.

In total, we are investing around £1.8 billion in fixing our local roads this year.

**Helena Dollimore** (Hastings and Rye) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way and for the record investment of this Labour Government in fixing potholes. I particularly welcome the £21 million for East Sussex to fix our roads. Does she share my frustration at the fact that Conservative-run East Sussex county council has told me that it will have a lower highways budget this year than last year, even with that record injection from the Labour Government? We need to track how it is spending that money. I welcome the Government's commitment to making councils publish reports on how the extra pothole money is spent. I hope it will include a geographical breakdown, so I can make sure that Hastings, Rye and the villages are getting their fair share.

**Heidi Alexander:** We are asking local authorities to publish a report on their websites by June this year. We are tipping more money into highways maintenance and it is absolutely right that people should see visible results on their roads. And it is right that my hon. Friend is holding her local Conservative council to account.

Our investment in highways maintenance is not a sticking-plaster solution; it is a vital investment that could see councils fixing an extra 7 million potholes next year. That is just the beginning. As I said, for the first time we have asked councils to prove that they are using their funding wisely. By June, they will be asked—as I have just said—to report on how many potholes they have filled and provide an update on the condition of their roads. If we are not satisfied that they are delivering value for money, councils risk losing up to a quarter of their funding uplift.

**Monica Harding** (Esher and Walton) (LD): Surrey has 70,000 potholes—5% of all the nation's potholes and the most in the country—so I welcome the extra money for potholes, but given the recklessness of the Conservatives in Surrey, how will that help my constituents?

**Heidi Alexander:** The wider transparency and accountability measures we have announced, whereby we are withholding a quarter of the funding uplift until such time as the local authority has demonstrated how it is using that money, will hopefully be of assistance to both the hon. Lady and her constituents.

It is only right that taxpayers can see how their money is being spent. This new era of accountability and transparency will see their cash being put to good use, and road users will see the results.

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): Will the Secretary of State give way?

**Heidi Alexander:** I will just make a little bit of progress. I will give way to the hon. Gentleman later.

The Government will end decades of decay on our roads. We will lift the lid on how taxpayers' money gets spent. We think that is a crucial part of the solution. I am pleased that this move has been positively received, with the RAC, National Highways, Logistics UK and so many more coming out in support. In fact, Edmund King, president of the AA, described it as "a...concerted attack on the plague of potholes".

Madam Deputy Speaker, I could not have put it better myself. It is great to see councils broadly welcoming our approach, too. As Councillor Adam Hug, transport spokesperson for the Local Government Association, put it:

"it's in everyone's interests to ensure that public money is well spent."

**Adam Jogee** (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): From one Adam to another. When I was a child, my late grandmother used to say that you could always tell a drunk person in Harare, because they drove in a straight line. One of my constituents said to me recently that, "In the United Kingdom, we are meant to drive on the left-hand side of the road, but in Newcastle-under-Lyme many people drive on what's left of the road." [Laughter.] They are very wise people in north Staffordshire, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Secretary of State is making an

[Adam Jogee]

excellent speech. What would her two messages be, first to the good people of Newcastle-under-Lyme as we approach Thursday 1 May, and secondly, to the current Conservative leadership of Staffordshire county council?

**Heidi Alexander:** First, I congratulate my hon. Friend's constituents on an excellent sense of humour and perceptiveness in describing the state of the roads in their community. I would say simply to his local authority that it has no excuse. It has the money—get on and fix it.

As much as we want to see councils go full steam ahead on road repairs, I also know that roadworks can be disruptive. We have all felt the frustration of being stuck at temporary traffic lights or by the sound of a pneumatic drill on a Sunday morning. That is why we are clamping down on companies that fail to comply with the rules by doubling a range of fixed-penalty notices, with the worst offences now facing £1,000 fines. Plus, we are extending charges for street works that run into the weekend.

This is not about patching up the problem, either. We want to see repairs that are made to last, so we do not see the same bits of road being dug up over and over again. That means getting it right first time around, championing the best materials and techniques, ensuring contractors are properly managed, and embracing the innovation and new technology that will help us to get the job done while getting proper bang for our buck.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): It would be churlish of anybody in this Chamber not to welcome all the money the right hon. Lady says she will spend on roads. It is welcome. I understand there is new technology for a better and more modern way of fixing potholes. I understand it does the job better and is cheaper. If that is the case, I met a manager in my constituency last Friday who told me he would be very interested in that scheme but he does not know about it. Will the Secretary of State share this new way of fixing potholes? If so, everybody in the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland could benefit from it.

**Heidi Alexander:** We are running a number of Live Labs projects to look at how we can best make use of AI and new technology to ensure we get good value for money in delivering roads maintenance. Over the next year, we will be working with the UK Roads Leadership Group to update the code of practice on well-maintained highways. I would be happy to speak to the hon. Gentleman further about what has been learnt.

The important work that we are doing will help to set clear expectations for local authorities up and down the country, meaning cleaner, greener and better roads delivered with the needs of local people in mind.

**Alan Gemmell** (Central Ayrshire) (Lab): Laurence, Eileen and the residents of St Quivox have been campaigning for 10 years to cut the speed on the B743 in my constituency. At this weekend's public meeting, 45 people were delighted to hear that Sergeant Slaven of Police Scotland and South Ayrshire council's director Kevin Braidwood support their campaign to cut the speed on this dangerous road, which has seen almost

30 accidents in the past decade. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Ayrshire Roads Alliance and South Ayrshire council need to urgently reduce the speed limit on this road and work with residents to introduce other traffic calming measures?

**Heidi Alexander:** Decisions on the appropriate speed limits on their roads are decisions for local highways authorities. I will not pretend to know the detail of what my hon. Friend is talking about, but I will say that safety is an absolute priority for this Government, and that any local highway authority should be taking appropriate decisions to limit the number of people being injured on our roads and, ideally, to eradicate death and serious injury.

This Government's ambition for road users stretches far beyond local roads. Just last week, we announced £4.8 billion for National Highways to deliver critical road schemes alongside maintaining motorways and major A roads. With this bold investment, which is higher than the average annual funding from the last multi-year settlement, we can get on with vital schemes in construction, such as the A57 Greater Manchester link road, the A428 Black Cat scheme in Cambridgeshire, the A47 Thicket scheme near Norwich, unlocking 3,000 new homes—

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): Hear, hear.

**Heidi Alexander:** I hear appreciation from the hon. Gentleman on the Opposition Front Bench.

Those works will also include the M3 junction 9 scheme in Hampshire, which will support 2,000 more homes. By raising living standards, creating high-quality jobs and kick-starting economic growth, these projects will drive this Government's plan for change.

We are committed to delivering the road infrastructure that this country needs today, tomorrow and far into the future, and we are already working on the next multi-year road investment strategy to do just that. This is part of our mission to secure the future of Britain's infrastructure. We are building better roads, creating safer streets and unlocking more efficient transport systems to help businesses to thrive and make life easier for all.

**John Glen** (Salisbury) (Con): When the right hon. Lady leaves South Swindon and goes into Wiltshire, she will be pleased to note that the £20.7 million the Government have given to Wiltshire has been added to with £22 million put aside by Wiltshire council to maximise the impact. Could she say something about the connectivity between Bristol and Southampton? I was grateful for the meeting with her colleague, the Minister for Future of Roads, but does the Secretary of State recognise that now the A303 scheme is not happening, we need greater investment on north-south connectivity in Wiltshire?

**Heidi Alexander:** I am aware that the right hon. Gentleman met with my hon. Friend, the Minister for Future of Roads, and I understand that as a follow-up to that meeting, National Highways is looking into the very issue that he describes.

**David Smith** (North Northumberland) (Lab): On the point of road safety, after the previous Conservative Government singularly failed to dual the A1 in my constituency, attention must now turn to the safety of that road. Will the Secretary of State and the Roads Minister join me in my constituency to hear the conversations I have been having with National Highways about how we can improve the A1?

**Heidi Alexander:** I know that the Minister for Future of Roads would be very happy to visit my hon. Friend in his constituency. While we cannot reopen the decision on dualling the A1, we are happy to look at whether smaller-scale schemes could address specific issues around safety and congestion on that very important road.

The public are tired of seeing roads left to deteriorate with no accountability for how maintenance money is spent. This Government are laying the foundations for change, and this is just the beginning. There is so much more to do as we restore our transport system so that people across the country can fulfil their potential in a Britain where everyday journeys are smoother and safer, families are not shelling out for expensive and unexpected repairs, and hard-working people have more money in their pockets—a Britain not defined by disrepair and disarray, but where improved infrastructure becomes a symbol of our national renewal.

Improving connectivity will unlock jobs, growth and opportunities across the country. By fixing our roads, building better infrastructure and ensuring that transport works for all, this Government are securing Britain's future.

6.55 pm

**Jerome Mayhew** (Broadland and Fakenham) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the Secretary of State.

Each year, the Liberal Democrats and their friends travel about 800 billion km, while those of us on the Conservative Benches travel about 500 billion miles, and 90% of that is by road. Roads are the backbone of our transport network; they deliver goods, services and, importantly, people. They deliver economic growth and human flourishing—workers to their jobs, students to their schools, patients to their hospitals—and bring families together. It is absolutely right, therefore, that good roads deliver a stronger economy and a stronger society—I think we can all unite around that.

The roads network is divided between the national infrastructure and local roads. Since local roads make up 97.3% of the network as a whole—nearly 204,000 miles—I think it is best that I start there, because local roads are at the heart of the problem of potholes. Legal responsibility for maintenance of those roads lies with the local authorities, but it is too easy for us to blame local authorities and move on, because their funding comes from central Government. The previous Government felt a degree of frustration, which I know is now shared by this Government, that while some local authorities are better than others at clearing up potholes, it is the Government—of whatever colour—who tend to get the blame.

The Prime Minister has taken a view on this issue—he seems to be frustrated as well. Last month, we had the announcement that local authorities are required to publish reports on how many potholes they have repaired. That is not a novel undertaking; they were, as I recall,

required to do exactly that back in 2013 or 2014. The risk now is that if they have not repaired a sufficient number of potholes, local authorities risk losing 25% of their increased grant.

**Charlie Maynard** (Witney) (LD): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that adopting a policy of managed decline, as the Conservatives did in Oxfordshire in 2014, is a disaster, and is really not the appropriate way to fix the problems we have in front of us?

**Jerome Mayhew:** I would absolutely agree that managed decline is not the right way to fix these problems, but I refute the accusation that the Conservative Government managed decline—[*Interruption.*] Well, let us look at the data.

The hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western) made reference to the RAC pothole index, which is a very useful piece of information that tracks how much more likely a driver is to suffer a breakdown as a result of a pothole. This data goes back to 2006, when Labour was in power. You may not be wholly surprised, Madam Deputy Speaker, to learn that under the previous Labour Government, a driver was more than twice as likely to suffer a breakdown as a result of a pothole than under the subsequent Conservative Government, corrected for seasonal weather effects and improving longer-term vehicle reliability. Those on the Government Benches say that the Conservative Government managed decline, but, in fact, exactly the opposite is true. Breakdowns caused by potholes peaked under Labour in 2009, and have more than halved as a result of the investment of the coalition and Conservative Governments.

**Ayoub Khan** (Birmingham Perry Barr) (Ind): Birmingham city council, which is the largest council in Europe, covers some of the vast number of roads and arterial routes coming in and out of the city with Spaghetti junction. Labour has controlled the council for around a decade, and roads are simply going from bad to worse. Part of the problem is the desensitisation of the residents, who feel there is just no point complaining about a pothole—officers come out but do not repair them. What mechanisms need to be put in place so that we can address the potholes that exist and are getting worse?

**Jerome Mayhew:** The best mechanism would be to vote for a Conservative local authority on 1 May. If we look at the data rather than the slogans, 68 miles of roads on average are repaired each year under Conservative councils, while just 14 miles are repaired under Labour councils. I say it again: if people want potholes fixed, they should vote Conservative on 1 May.

**Adam Jogee:** I am grateful to the shadow Minister for giving way. I get on with him relatively well—[*Interruption.*] Very well, I should say, though we will get on even better if he agrees with my point. He has just said that people should vote Conservative because of the successes to which he has just referred. What would he say to my constituents in Newcastle-under-Lyme who have a Tory borough council and county council—and have done for several years—who describe our roads as “deeply sunken” and “physically uncomfortable to drive over”, and say that they have “crumbling surfaces”, “failed resurfacing work” and “repairs that don't last” and “worsening conditions despite recent repairs”.

[Adam Jogee]

Several constituents have noted that “only a few potholes” were ever patched and “hazardous conditions from multiple directions”—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** Order. Interventions are getting far too long. There is a very long list of speakers wishing to contribute to this evening’s debate, so interventions should be short and pithy.

**Jerome Mayhew:** I had hoped the hon. Gentleman and I got on better than that, but I am grateful for the question. Everyone in this Chamber can point at potholes and say that more needs to be done, and we would all be correct. We have far too many potholes, and we need to build, repair and improve our network over time. I accept that it will not just be by voting Conservative that we reduce potholes overall.

There is a question of prioritisation of funding, and that applies under both Labour and the Conservatives. How funding is provided is also important. The overall amount of funding for the repair of potholes is obviously crucial, but how it is provided in the long term is essential for local authorities to schedule their repairs. Long-term funding would increase their efficiency; it would not be the stop-start feast or famine that we hear so much about at the moment.

Local authorities could also increase the number of potholes being repaired for the amount of money spent. It was for exactly this reason that the last Conservative Government committed to a 10-year £8.3 billion investment for the repair of potholes. That long-term approach made an enormous difference. The RAC welcomed the news and said that the plans would “give councils certainty of funding”, allowing them to “plan proper long-term maintenance”.

The Asphalt Industry Alliance—I am sure you read about them often, Madam Deputy Speaker—said that there is a consensus among local authorities that “guaranteed long-term funding helps increase efficiency and provide a more resilient road network”.

It said that

“security of funding helps authorities to plan with more confidence and drive greater cost and environmental efficiencies through the promotion of proactive asset management techniques.”

The point is that long-term, predictable funding increases the number of repairs undertaken and reduces the cost we have to pay for it.

**Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind):** The hon. Member has mentioned a couple of figures, including one from 2006, when I was nine. To quote a more recent figure from the annual local authority road maintenance 2025 report, when the Conservatives left office they left us with a backlog of £16.8 billion-worth of pothole repairs. What does he say to the people who are still driving over those potholes?

**Jerome Mayhew:** The hon. Member may have misunderstood me; the figure I was referring to was from 2009-10—the very last year of the Labour Government. Since then, although there have been variations because of winter and summer, the number of potholes leading to breakdowns has more than halved, according to the RAC, which is of course independent. I know there are lots of examples of people driving into potholes, including

me and everyone here who drives, but the overall data demonstrates beyond doubt that people are better off under the Conservatives than Labour if they want to avoid potholes that cause breakdowns.

Long-term predictable funding leads to an increased number of repairs at a reduced cost, but Labour has cancelled that long-term approach, so predictability of funding for local authorities has gone. The efficiencies associated with that predictability of funding are gone, as are the cost savings. Instead, we have had an announcement of £1.6 billion until 2026, which is very welcome; I have constructive opposition to this issue, so when more funding comes for the repair of potholes, I welcome it.

However, if we look beneath the bonnet, we see that the Labour Government have at the same time increased costs to local authorities through their national insurance contributions hike of £1.1 billion. They give £1.6 billion with one hand, but they take away £1.1 billion with the other. It does not stop there. Their hike on vehicle excise duty over the course of this Parliament means another £1.7 billion being taken from motorists. They take £1.7 billion from motorists, and they give £400 million net back for road improvements.

What happens after 2026? Do we know? Does the Secretary of State herself know what happens with the funding after that? The Government have been entirely silent, leading local authorities to be deeply concerned about their ability to plan long-term repairs, not just to potholes but to road infrastructure as a whole. It is an unfortunate example of this Government chasing headlines over responsible government.

Let us move from local roads to the major road network. Labour’s first act on coming into Government was not to back our road infrastructure or improve repairs but to cancel five vital road improvement schemes. Those were the A5036 Princess Way, the A358 Taunton to Southfields, the M27 Southampton junction 8, which was obliquely referred to earlier, the A47 roundabout at Great Yarmouth—the other end of the Thicketthorn roundabout, which the Secretary of State is continuing the previous Government’s improvement of—and the A1 Morpeth to Ellingham.

Labour is not prioritising roads or road users, despite taking another £1.7 billion out of vehicle excise duty. It is dipping its hands yet further into the pockets of motorists while cancelling major road improvements. That contrasts with the Conservative record of 2015 to 2025, where we invested £40 billion into England’s strategic road network. Short-term headlines over long-term planning—that is Labour.

What is to come with Labour’s road maintenance plans? I hope this debate will shed light on it and clarify the future of funding for road maintenance. Perhaps the Secretary of State can whisper into the ear of the Minister for the Future of Roads before she winds up so she can tell us what happens after 2026, because local authorities deserve better than to be marched up a hill with road repairs and then left in a hole.

**Madam Deputy Speaker:** I call Alex Mayer.

7.7 pm

**Alex Mayer (Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard) (Lab):** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.  
“It’s like driving over the surface of the moon.”

is what Karen from Houghton Regis told me. Marion and Brian explained how they had had two tyres ruined, costing them over £200. A plumber from Dunstable sent me multiple photos of craters in his road. Councillor Matt Brennan showed me more when we visited Aldbanks in Dunstable, and a constituent in Leighton Buzzard told me that Mile Tree Road has become increasingly hazardous because of the number of potholes.

After 14 years of Conservative rule and the increasing effects of climate change, too many of our roads are in a sorry state. Figures from the RAC show that drivers encounter, on average, six potholes per mile in England and Wales. That is bad news for not only car drivers but cyclists, bus users and coaches.

I welcome the Government's investment in improving our road conditions. This Labour Government have increased the funding to Central Bedfordshire council to nearly £9.7 million this year, which represents a 39.7% increase. That sounds like really good news, and one would think that more potholes would get filled in, so I was really concerned to see that the council budget showed only a 5% increase in highways spending. I appreciate that Central Bedfordshire council also contributes capital to the highways budget along with the Government, but I was hugely disappointed by a statement made at the council's joint budget scrutiny taskforce committee:

"When the Government announced that we would receive more funding, the decision was made to spend less of our own money rather than increase the programme."

I have warned that that attitude could jeopardise the full uplift of Government funding. I would be grateful for the Minister's thoughts on that.

In the light of that, I particularly welcome the Government's plan, as we have heard, for councils to publish reports on their websites by the end of June detailing what they are doing to improve the state of local roads. I was especially pleased to hear that the reports will be short and in plain English—all reports should be, really. Particularly important is that the template means that councils must show how many holes they filled in during the previous five years. Residents expect, and indeed deserve, to see the number of potholes being filled in increasing. We are all watching this space.

Councils will also be required to show how they are spending more on long-term preventive maintenance programmes, which is incredibly important. As I have said, we are living in a time of climate emergency, and the wetter winters and extremes of hot and cold are making potholes worse by increasing the number of freeze-and-thaw cycles. However, some emerging technologies may help. Apparently, artificial intelligence can identify cracks and spot potholes before they appear. There are also graphene-reinforced asphalt, which is self-healing, as well as bacteria-infused cement and systems to regulate road temperatures. Tech is clearly moving apace. Given all those innovations, is the Minister considering updating the Department's guidance on preventing potholes during the winter?

While we are on climate change, well-maintained and smoother roads reduce fuel consumption and cut emissions. Data show that smoother roads can reduce vehicle emissions by more than 5%. The opposite is true for bad roads: the Centre for Economics and Business Research found that poor road conditions have an impact on driver behaviour, as I think we know as we try to swerve around potholes. It has calculated that

that changed driver behaviour from speeding up and slowing down means that CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are about 0.5 tonnes higher.

It is also crucial to minimise the disruption caused by utility companies' street works—I know that Ministers have repeatedly stated that—because we know that when a road is opened up with a trench, that can reduce its structural life by an average of 17%. I therefore draw all hon. Members' attention to the street works inquiry currently being carried out by the Transport Committee, which I and other hon. Members in the Chamber are members of. Members can tune in to any of the evidence sessions, and the final report will be available very soon in all good Vote Offices.

We are all familiar with instances where the same stretch of road or pavement seems to be repeatedly opened up by different companies over a short period, particularly in new developments. A constituent wrote to me about Bedford Road in Houghton Regis to say that, over roughly a month, five different companies had dug up the road, one after another. When I queried that with the council's street works team, I was informed that

"no collaboration opportunities were identified to reduce the number of road closures".

Residents think the situation is ridiculous.

Let me turn to cost. In April 2024, the Centre for Economics and Business Research reported that poor road conditions were costing £14.4 billion a year in economic damage to England—or 60% of a Tory Government black hole, as I like to think of it. But there is hope, because the Department for Transport's economic appraisal tells us that for every pound invested in local road maintenance, there is a minimum return of £2.20, and typical returns identified of up to £9.10 at a national level.

Finally, let me turn to buses and coaches. Unlike car motorists, cyclists and pedestrians who can often take different routes when there is a particularly bad potholed road or a road is closed because of potholes, buses have an obligation to stick to their routes wherever possible. The Confederation of Passenger Transport highlights a 13% increase in bus operators' costs per kilometre since 2019, with much of that attributed to delays, diversions and disruption, including those caused by the poor state of roads. First Bus told me that it spends more than £1 million each year repairing bus suspension components. That cost inevitably gets passed on to passengers through higher fares and reduced service levels.

I welcome the Labour Government's investment in road maintenance and sincerely hope that all local councils will rise to the challenge. For my constituent who thinks it is like driving on the moon, this really is not rocket science, but nor is it just a matter of inconvenience. Filling in these potholes is crucial for safety, for the environment and for economic growth.

7.15 pm

**Robbie Moore** (Keighley and Ilkley) (Con): I receive countless emails and letters from local people across the constituency about the shocking state of our roads. People are rightly frustrated about potholes, and about the little and long waits for repairs forced on them by Bradford council. This is perhaps one of the most important issues that all of us, as MPs, get correspondence about. Why? Because it impacts us each and every day,

[Robbie Moore]

whether we are commuting to work or simply getting out and about in the car to go and do things. We all care about the state of our roads right outside our door.

I want to take you through my constituency, Madam Deputy Speaker, referencing a few roads and highlighting the level of concern that constituents rightly raise with me. Take Elliott Street, which runs through the centre of in Silsden in my constituency. I was first contacted by residents on this major road years ago, and the situation was poor then. Over the last few years, it has only got worse, to the extent that people on social media described the state in which Labour-run Bradford council had left the road as a mere joke. Despite having consistently raised the matter with Bradford council, it took years for the council to finally get on with it. I am pleased that in just the last two weeks, the resurfacing works have now finished. The works are welcome—of course they are—but residents on Elliott Street and across the wider Silsden area should not have had to wait years for such a busy and important road to be repaired.

Elliott Street is just one example. There are similar stories in Keighley, on Westburn Avenue, on Oakworth Road, on Halifax Road and on North Street—the list goes on. In Ilkley, we have a difficult junction at the top of the Cowpasture Road, north of Ilkley grammar school. Local Conservative councillors David Nunns and Andrew Loy have consistently lobbied Bradford Council to look at this dangerous junction.

In the Worth valley, the sides of Hill House Edge Lane are crumbling, with cars getting stuck in the ditches as they pass one another. Again, local Conservative councillors Rebecca Poulson, Chris Herd and Russell Brown have consistently lobbied Labour-run Bradford council to sort the issue out, but no repairs have been undertaken.

**Oliver Ryan:** I do not want to make this too political, but I think it should be noted—although I am not a Bradford Member—that £350 million of revenue funding has been cut from Bradford council since 2010. The council is doing an awful lot under difficult circumstances brought about by 14 years of the hon. Member's Tory Government.

**Robbie Moore:** I am pleased that the hon. Member brought that up. Just in 2021, Bradford council, through its statutory responsibility to provide feedback to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—it was the Department for Levelling Up, Housing and Communities at the time—reported that it was in sound financial health. That was the year in which it applied to be city of culture. This year, residents across the Keighley and Ilkley constituency face a 10% increase in council tax, despite our roads being in such a poor state.

That leads me on to a freedom of information request that I put to Bradford council. I was astounded by what I found out. I welcome the Secretary of State's announcement today that there will be more transparency in our local councils, because through that FOI request I learned that between 2017 and 2022, just 4% of Bradford council's identified spending for highways was allocated to my constituency of Keighley and Ilkley. For reference, Labour-run Bradford council was able to find and allocate £13.1 million for the Bradford South constituency, £19.2 million for the Bradford East

constituency and £17.4 million for the Bradford West constituency, but only £4.1 million was spent across the Keighley and Ilkley constituency on highways over that six-year period.

This is despite many concerns quite rightly being raised from residents across Keighley, Ilkley, the Worth valley, Silsden and Steeton. Wherever they may be in my constituency, they are rightly complaining about repairs to roads not being undertaken, pavement problems not being addressed and potholes not being looked at, so it is no wonder that my constituents are losing trust in our local Labour-run authority. The list goes on, and it includes concerns that are being raised by local Conservative councillors trying to hold Labour-run Bradford council to account, but unfortunately we seem not to be getting anywhere and we are not being listened to.

When Bradford council does spend money on roads in my patch, the question is: does it actually spend that money on what people want it to be spent on? Of course it does not. When Bradford council spent more than £100,000—with an £87,500 contribution from Ilkley town council—on roads in Ilkley, we got speed humps and a blanket 20 mph zone, rather than getting our potholes addressed. In a parish council referendum on this very issue, 98.3% of people in Ilkley opposed the roll-out of way over 100 speed bumps in the centre of Ilkley. If you asked anyone in Ilkley what they would like from a good proportion of the 200 grand being spent on our roads, they would say, quite rightly: "Fix the potholes and sort out that junction at the top of Cowpasture Road." But Bradford council would not listen. It went against a public referendum on this issue and instead spent the money on more speed humps, contrary to what the people in Ilkley rightly advocated through a vote on the issue at the ballot box.

So, what are the Government going to do to ensure that my constituents get a fair deal on their roads from Bradford council? The Secretary of State promising greater investment into roads is absolutely vital and to be welcomed, but it is no good making these promises when the funds do not get past the dictatorial local council, which does not allocate the money to my constituency. In Keighley and Ilkley we deserve our fair share, but Bradford council is unfortunately more than happy to allocate our council tax and any central Government funds that come into the Bradford district not to the roads in Keighley and Ilkley, Silsden or the Worth valley, but instead to Bradford city itself. It is about time we had our fair share of highway spending across our constituency of Keighley and Ilkley.

7.23 pm

**Oliver Ryan (Burnley) (Ind):** As many Members of this House will recognise, road maintenance is something that deeply resonates with all our constituents; it is a basic need. People across my constituency leave their homes every day in cars that they pay tax on, to drive on roads whose upkeep they pay tax for but that are just not up to standard. In Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield, we have had 14 years of underfunding and a Tory county council that my residents tell me could not care less about roads in our area because it is not an area that typically votes for them. This is just not good enough.

When I was out and about on the doorsteps during the election, this issue came up over and over again. Potholes and crumbling roads became totemic; they became

a metaphor for crumbling council services. Cash for our area was stripped back year after year, not just for roads but for development and growth, while the council announced game show-style cheques and told us we were being levelled up. It felt like a PR exercise, and it was a PR exercise. From Burnley to Padiham and down the streets of Brierfield, the people I represent shared their frustration with me, and I share that frustration too.

For too long, our local roads have been left to deteriorate while the previous Government failed to take action. It was a failure not just of investment, but of attention—attention to the everyday concerns of people simply trying to get to work, to take their kids to school or to visit loved ones. When roads crumble, it is not just a nuisance; it becomes a safety hazard. It damages vehicles and it erodes public confidence in the Government to do the bare minimum. Constituents ask me how something so basic, so essential to daily life, can be left to crumble in this way. As the Secretary of State said, we cannot claim to be serious about economic growth and opportunities if we cannot even assure people that they will not have to drive on surfaces that are similar to the dirt roads of the Aussie outback.

But I stand here today encouraged because I am proud to support a Government that are now doing things differently, making meaningful and measurable investment, getting things done and delivering. The Minister has made a clear commitment to reversing the decline in local road conditions and we are about to see the results, with £1.6 billion for roads this year, which is enough to fill 21 million potholes. Lancashire is receiving a total funding package of £46.825 million for the 2025-26 financial year. That is a 40% uplift on what was allocated in the previous financial year, and it takes the full road repair fund to £65 million. This investment is not just a number on a spreadsheet, although they are certainly welcome; it is real, meaningful progress. It sends a message that we are prioritising roads so that many of our constituents can use them every day.

This is a historic funding package for our roads, but I am disappointed that Tory-run Lancashire county council has seen fit to resurface only three roads in the whole of Burnley and Padiham this year, as declared so far: Queen Victoria Road, Brunshaw Avenue and Bank Parade. That is all very welcome, but for the amount of money we are putting in, we need to see more. The resurfacing of roads in Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield is about more than asphalt. It is about improving road safety, reducing vehicle repair costs and boosting accessibility for everyone. It is about making our towns easier, safer and more pleasant to live and move around in.

While we are making progress, it would be remiss of me, as a member of the Public Accounts Committee, not to mention the Committee's recent report: "Condition and maintenance of Local Roads in England". We in the Committee found that the Department for Transport's data in this area was not sufficient, and that accountability in road maintenance was still far too fragmented. We cannot afford to play pass the parcel between local and national authorities when our roads are falling apart beneath our feet. The Committee said that the DFT should take greater ownership by improving data collection, by clearly defining responsibilities and by ensuring that local councils have the resources and the oversight to deliver quality, timely maintenance and move away from short-term fixes to longer financial planning of

our roads. A long time ago I was an executive member for finance at a metropolitan borough authority. Too often, over the years I was in that role, we were picking the bones of our reserves and capital plans to find one-off pots and short fixes to fund that year's road programme. That cannot be reasonable in 21st-century Britain.

I am quite pleased, therefore, to see the Prime Minister's recent announcement that councils will have to publish data on how many road repairs they have completed and the money that they have been granted. I remain optimistic for our roads and council services because, despite global economic uncertainty and the tightening of public finances across many countries, this Government have made a conscious decision to invest in services that matter, to increase day-to-day spending for my council across the term of the Parliament and to get more done for my residents.

In Burnley, Padiham and Brierfield, we are beginning to see the results of the decisions made around the Budget. Cash—real cash—is going into our roads. The deal is this: you pay your tax, and you get decent services. But for many hard working people, that just has not been the case. The basics were cut while we had to be grateful for the crumbs of levelling up. We were left with an empty tank and a busted engine, but given a new radio to improve the experience. We were on the road to nowhere. That is not the end of my car-related language. While I welcome this money—new money—I will continue to work closely with Lancashire county council and the Department for Transport to make sure that this wheelie good funding for my area does not stall, and is not parked for a later date, and that we get into gear, buckle in, hit the gas and deliver on this at speed. Madam Deputy Speaker, I think I have driven the point home.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes):** I call the Lib Dem spokesperson.

7.29 pm

**Mr Paul Kohler (Wimbledon) (LD):** I thank the Government for holding this debate, and I assure the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), that us Lib Dems are wonderfully bilingual and can travel in both kilometres and miles.

As a Liberal Democrat, this issue is of course close to my heart. Pothole photos are a staple of Lib Dem literature across the country. Although other parties may dismiss our focus on pothole politics, we understand that for millions, the state of our roads is no laughing matter. So I welcome this debate; it is vital that we bring renewed focus to an issue that was desperately neglected by the Conservatives for years.

This is not just a matter for drivers. Whether someone commutes by car, relies on public transport or cycles, their journey begins on local roads. The condition of those roads directly impacts the daily lives of countless individuals, and the truth is that we are facing a crisis. Despite the previous Government's rhetoric about standing up for motorists, their actions fell woefully short.

The road condition index reveals that almost 25,000 miles—one in 10 miles of the road network in England and Wales—require urgent maintenance within the next year, while less than half our roads are reported to be in good structural condition. These are not abstract figures; they represent tangible burdens on everyday lives.

[Mr Paul Kohler]

Data from the RAC shows that for anything more than a tyre puncture, drivers can expect to pay almost £500 for a pothole-related car repair. The number of pothole-related breakdowns attended by RAC patrols rose by nearly a fifth in the last three months of 2024, compared with the previous quarter.

While the debate about roads often centres on potholes, as the most visible symptom of neglect, the real issue is the underlying condition of our road network. Instead of talking about fixing potholes here and there, we must shift our focus to prevention, and not merely focus on reactive repairs. Although the Government's recent injection of funds is a welcome acknowledgment of the problem, it fails to address the fact that our current road maintenance funding mechanism is simply not fit for purpose, and the backlog of repairs is simply too long to be fixed by short-term injections of cash. If the Government are serious about tackling this crisis, they must urgently reform the system and give councils the support they need to get on top of the crisis.

Local councils are responsible for managing 98% of our national road network and bear the brunt of the challenge. However, they are underfunded and face huge financial pressures. Analysis from the Local Government Association has confirmed that due to continuing inflation and wage pressures, English councils face a £6.2 billion shortfall in funding across the next two years. Given the challenges that councils face, from ballooning social care costs to the special educational needs and disabilities crisis, highway maintenance is often seen as something that can be postponed until finances improve, as we heard from the hon. Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan).

Roads require resurfacing roughly every 15 years. However, years of chronic underfunding have forced councils to defer that crucial maintenance, leading to the current pothole plague. That has led to a situation where the average frequency of resurfacing for all classes of road is now an appalling 93 years. When I recently spoke to a council's highway lead, he put it aptly:

"Roads are like trousers. You can fix a hole here and there with a patch, but it reaches a point where this just simply won't work. Roads in this country are at such a point where we don't just need new trousers—we need a whole new wardrobe."

Although local councils are responsible for most of their roads, much of the funding for road maintenance comes from central Government. However, the Department for Transport has acknowledged that the current funding model is inefficient and does not deliver good value for money. The annual funding cycle forces councils into reactive, short-term fixes, hindering long-term planning. A longer-term funding settlement would allow councils to plan ahead and move away from that reactive model.

Furthermore, the current funding formula, based solely on each local authority's total road mileage, is woefully inadequate. It fails to account for the diverse needs and road usage in different regions, which demands a more nuanced approach. For example, Department for Transport data indicates that Merton, in which most of my constituency lies, has the second worst uncatagorised and B and C roads in the country. Merton, however, received less funding than other areas with more, but better roads.

In a recent meeting with the Secretary of State, it was suggested by officials that Merton's poor standing may be due to a data error in the figures submitted by

the council. Regardless of the cause, that paints a troubling picture. Either Merton is failing to maintain our roads, or it is failing to accurately report their condition, neither of which is acceptable. Will the Minister write to me to clarify the situation?

The current formula also neglects active travel infrastructure. Although the Government have increased active travel funding, there is no provision for the maintenance of new cycle lanes. Similarly, on the doorstep in Wimbledon, I regularly hear complaints about the quality of pavements, which particularly affects those with mobility issues. If we are serious about promoting cycling and walking, we must ensure that cycle paths and pavements are properly maintained. Without dedicated funding, however, they will deteriorate, discouraging their use and the willingness of councils to provide more such infrastructure.

**Josh Babarinde** (Eastbourne) (LD): Does my hon. Friend agree with me and the Eastbourne seniors forum that the state of the pavement outside the Halifax—which is like the moon, causing lots of trips and falls—is a disgrace, and that East Sussex county council needs to get on top of that straightaway to give people confidence in using roads and pavements again?

**Mr Kohler:** How could I disagree with the Eastbourne seniors forum? Indeed, Eastbourne, Wimbledon and many other constituencies have the same problem with pavements; they are in a shocking condition.

Despite lofty talk about fixing the issues, the Government have cut the highways maintenance budget by 5% for the forthcoming year. The Government claim that that is a temporary measure, as it is a one-year funding settlement to cover National Highways until its next five-year funding period commences in 2026. Can the Minister please confirm today that the Government will make up for the shortfall in the funding settlement next year? Our motorways are key to keeping our country and economy moving. We cannot afford to cut costs on such a critical aspect of our infrastructure.

The Conservatives have led us down the fast lane to decay. There is no doubt that our roads are crumbling, and motorists, cyclists and bus passengers are paying the price. It is now up to the new Government to face up to the challenge. With more short-term injections of cash and a cut to the National Highways budget, their current approach is akin to pulling into a service station for a brief respite. It may delay the journey for a bit, but we remain en route to continuing deterioration.

If Labour are serious about fixing our roads, they must sort out the backlog in work that is needed to allow them to be proactively, not just reactively, managed. That requires the Government to relieve the pressure on local councils by sorting out social care and the SEND crisis, as well as implementing a long-term, needs-based funding model for road maintenance. Without meaningful action to support local councils properly, we will continue on our journey of managed decline.

7.38 pm

**Dr Allison Gardner** (Stoke-on-Trent South) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for introducing this important debate. Improving our roads and highways is a critical mission for this Labour Government and will help to deliver real economic growth for my constituency.



In Stoke-on-Trent South, our roads experienced years of decay under the previous Government and are riddled with potholes. With crater-like potholes damaging cars and congestion delaying commutes to work, that costs my constituents. But this debate is about more than just bumps and burst tyres, as important as they are; improving our local road network will greatly boost investment in our city, rural areas and neighbouring regions. That is why I warmly welcome the uplift in highways funding, of which more than £9 million has been allocated to Stoke-on-Trent and £19 million to Staffordshire to fix our potholes.

Labour-run Stoke-on-Trent city council has done excellent work on this issue already, working with midlands manufacturer, JCB, to develop and use the Pothole Pro—a cutting-edge solution to fixing potholes, which can complete 18 years of traditional work in just over two years. Using the Pothole Pro, the highways direct services team in the city council has delivered real improvements to the city's roads. In the last few years, it has repaired 16,255 potholes, which is a 772% improvement. The city council has also been using AI to map out the condition of the entire highway network—potholes, cracks and depressions—with a complete inventory of the street signs. The council hopes to deploy the technology further on to our bin wagons, which of course go everywhere, which highlights the innovative work being done locally to improve our road network.

Our road network is strategically critical to the city's—and north Staffordshire's—prosperity and economic development. The A50 and A500 roads are a key connector between Crewe, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Stoke-on-Trent, Uttoxeter and Derby. Along this corridor are advanced manufacturing companies like JCB, Michelin, Toyota and Bentley, and of course within Stoke-on-Trent we have excellent ceramics companies like Duchess China and Wedgwood. Stoke-on-Trent is also a specialist in advanced ceramics—precisely the kinds of businesses that are looking for investment from this Labour Government and precisely the kind of advanced manufacturing companies that can offer real wages and skilled employment to workers in our city and north Staffordshire, and that need good road transport.

Unfortunately, my constituents and companies face significant challenges in getting to their workplaces and for freight transport, particularly on the A50, where pinch-point roundabouts are causing huge delays. A report by Midlands Connect found that commuters are delayed by 37 minutes per day on average due to delays at those roundabouts. In August, I had a crash on one of them, and it hurt. These delays really reduce the distance that my constituents can travel for work. Midlands Connect has estimated that improving these roads, along with building more houses and investing in our advanced manufacturing corridor, will generate over £12 billion in gross value added.

Our roads are really important, but as passionate as I am about road improvements, I am even more passionate about road safety. Improvements go beyond economic growth and filling potholes; they make a real difference to road safety for pedestrians in communities across Stoke-on-Trent South, particularly within the rural areas of my constituency, which are under the purview of Conservative-run Staffordshire county council.

Our communities deserve roads where people feel safe, not roads dominated by speeding traffic. High-speed roads cut straight through villages like Tittensor and

Draycott in the Moors, making it incredibly unsafe for children and elderly residents to cross the road to catch buses, walk to school or go to doctors' surgeries. Implementing traffic-calming measures and pedestrian crossings and introducing lower speed limits are essential steps in making these villages safer and accessible for everyone. I thank Josie Windsor, who has organised a petition in Tittensor to get a pedestrian crossing across the A34, to ensure that the elderly, children and working people can access shops and public transport. I particularly thank Bassetts for its recent letter of support.

I also thank residents of Draycott in the Moors—another village cut in two, this time by the Uttoxeter Road, which is often used as a rat run when the A50 is congested. There are no pedestrian crossings along the road. As in Tittensor, that means that people risk their lives crossing the road to reach the other side of the village. It is hugely worrying. There are even proposals for a huge housing development, which will add to the problem. Residents desperately want a roundabout and pedestrian crossings to ease congestion and improve safety, but their pleas are falling on deaf ears at the county council.

There have been successes. In Weston Coyney, my constituent Craig Royce has campaigned successfully to get a pedestrian crossing—a huge win for the local community in Stoke-on-Trent—after his friend tragically lost his life due to a dangerous driver and the lack of a crossing. I am delighted to have helped Craig in his campaign by helping him to liaise with relevant professionals at the city council. On Hilderstone level, along the B5066, I thank Penny Meakin for leading the Hilderstone Road speed campaign for speed controls on Hilderstone Road, and I thank campaigners in Beech, who also want slower traffic.

These communities in my constituency are being failed by our current road maintenance system, which has low consideration for road safety, moves too slowly and does not value the impact on communities, whether in local villages or wider regions, who know their areas better than we do in Westminster and, indeed, better than Staffordshire county council. My right hon. and learned Friend the Prime Minister has said:

“There's no monopoly on good ideas”,

so let us work with our communities and our fantastic parish councils to deliver the changes that our roads desperately need, and build connected and safe communities.

7.44 pm

**John Lamont** (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): Roads are crucial to life in the Scottish Borders. They are a lifeline. My constituency stretches from Cockburnspath in the north all the way down to Newcastleton, just north of Carlisle. It takes the best part of two and a half hours to drive from one end of it to the other. Excluding trunk roads, in the Scottish Borders there are 1,857 miles of local roads that the council are responsible for. In addition, there are many more miles of trunk roads, which the Scottish Government's Transport Scotland is responsible for. Looking around the Chamber, I ask whether any other Member present can challenge that figure of 1,857 miles of local roads that the council is responsible for; it is a uniquely high figure.

Roads are essential for people in the Borders to get around, see friends, go to school, get to work and go to hospital appointments. It is crucial that we have good-quality roads to just exist, never mind enjoy any of the

[John Lamont]

luxuries in life. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that I receive so much casework from constituents expressing concern about the quality of some of the roads and the lack of investment, which I will come on to. Also, when I do surveys and knock on doors each week, doing my residents doorstep surgeries, consistently potholes will be the No. 1 issue that local residents raise with me.

I do not think any other Member has yet paid tribute to the hard-working council employees who do a very good job of fixing the roads under very difficult circumstances. They might not have the resources or all the equipment that they need, but they are doing the best they can in very challenging circumstances to make the roads as good as they can be. They often go above and beyond what is their job to ensure that the roads, which are often in the communities that they live in themselves, are maintained to the best possible standard.

Very often, what makes such employees' life even more difficult is the fact that electricity, gas or broadband companies come into their communities and dig up the roads. The council employees might come and fix a road one week, then discover that a few days or weeks later, a utility company will come through and dig up the road again. Much more needs to be done, both by the UK Government and the Scottish Government, who are responsible for this policy area in Scotland, to ensure that these types of utility companies are under a much tougher obligation to restore roads to the standard that they were in prior to the work being carried out, or indeed bring them up to an even better standard. If they choose to do the work, they need to invest in the road so that it is brought up to a good standard once they have completed it.

My council, Scottish Borders council, has invested in the JCB Pothole Pro equipment, which the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) mentioned. Amid growing concerns about the state of the roads in the Borders, the council felt that it was a good investment. They bought one, and have now hired a second. This machine carried out 1,889 road repairs between April and the end of December last year, which resulted in a significant improvement in the local road network. There is still a huge backlog of road repairs, thanks largely to the lack of investment by the SNP Government; I will come to that shortly. Scottish Borders council has also set up a new interactive map on its website of the whole council area. People can identify roads and provide evidence of potholes that need to be fixed.

As a consequence of that investment, a recent freedom of information request to all United Kingdom councils showed that Scottish Borders council has spent millions of pounds on fixing potholes across the Borders. In 2020-21, it invested £2.5 million; in 2021-22, it invested £3.2 million; and in 2022-23, it invested £3.8 million, totalling over £9.6 million over three years. I commend my Conservative-controlled council for making this level of investment. But on the other side of the equation, it has had to pay out more than £17 million in compensation to road users and car drivers because of damage caused by potholes. Although the council has achieved a lot, there is much work still to do. I pay tribute to my Conservative colleagues on Scottish Borders council for what they have done.

Like many other councils in Scotland, Scottish Borders council is under severe financial pressure because the Scottish nationalist Government in Edinburgh are not investing in local councils, particularly rural councils like mine in the borders. The Scottish Government often ignore the needs of rural communities across Scotland and invest instead in the central belt.

Indeed, the cuts that the Scottish Government have imposed on local authorities, including my own, were recently described as “brutal” and “savage” cuts on local authorities, resulting in many, if not all, councils across Scotland having to make very difficult choices between investment and supporting vital local services.

Although a few Labour Members representing Scottish constituencies are present for this debate on road maintenance, it is telling that SNP colleagues representing rural constituencies like my own are not here to talk about the very challenging road networks in their constituencies. The fact they are not here to defend the Scottish Government's decision to cut road investment—their Benches are empty—says a lot.

**Robbie Moore:** Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just north of the border that these cuts are being made? South of the border, we have seen this new Labour Government cut the local service delivery grant by over £100 million. The grant is specifically allocated to assist rural councils in providing much-needed services, such as pothole maintenance, where the cost of delivery is much higher in rural areas. Does he agree that was the wrong decision for this Labour Government to make?

**John Lamont:** I do agree, and I will develop that point. My concern is that policymakers, whether here in Westminster or in Edinburgh, have an urban outlook to transport. They assume that people have access to buses and trains, but those of us living in rural communities do not, so roads and cars become much more important.

**Dr Scott Arthur (Edinburgh South West) (Lab):** I have to point out that Edinburgh is Scotland's lowest funded local authority, looking at the block grant allocation. In preparing for this debate, I checked what the Scottish Government have been saying about the pothole crisis in Scotland, and I found that they have said absolutely nothing. Has the hon. Gentleman been able to find anything from them on this issue?

**John Lamont:** The hon. Gentleman makes a valid point. Scottish Borders council would be very grateful to receive the level of funding that Edinburgh council receives. Notwithstanding that, it is a problem that the Scottish Government do not invest in roads in the way we would expect.

The hon. Member will be fully aware of the scandal surrounding the A9, which does not affect my constituency or, indeed, his, but the delays and the broken promises that the SNP has made to upgrade that vital road linking the north of Scotland with the rest of Scotland—and the rest of the UK, for that matter—have caused huge frustrations to the rural communities it serves.

My criticism is not only directed at the SNP Government. As Labour Members will realise, the Labour Government are not immune from criticism either. The previous Conservative Government promised to invest in upgrading the A1 between Morpeth and Ellingham, and this

Government's decision to cancel that upgrade has caused great upset not just in my constituency but in Northumberland.

The A1 is a vital road for the local economy in the Scottish Borders, and it is also a vital road in Northumberland. It is unfortunate that the hon. Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) is no longer in his place, but that road supports local jobs and the local economy. Savagely cutting that funding and scrapping the investment to improve that road will undoubtedly cause economic hardship for the communities that rely on that road.

**Robbie Moore:** Does my hon. Friend agree that this causes inconvenience not only to the many commuters who use the A1, who want better connectivity north of the border, but to the landowners who have been moved around in the negotiations for years? This Labour Government's decision to scrap the funding allocated for the A1 upgrade not only affects local businesses in Alnwick and the safety of the crossings in Felton and Ellingham, and the like, but affects people who own land either side of the A1 who have been put through huge uncertainty.

**John Lamont:** My hon. Friend makes an excellent point, and the local press in Northumberland is full of stories of people who are effectively trapped.

**Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab):** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**John Lamont:** I will come to the hon. Gentleman—patience. The local press is full of stories of people who are trapped as a consequence of this Labour Government's choice not to invest in the A1.

I will now happily give way to the hon. Member for Hexham (Joe Morris), who will perhaps explain why he supports the cancelling of the A1 upgrade.

**Joe Morris:** I remind the hon. Members for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) and for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore) that Northumberland now has four Labour MPs as a result of the neglect and contempt in which the county was held by the last Conservative Government. I also remind them that the Government in which they served were very much responsible for misleading the people of Northumberland by promising the A1 dualling without providing any money for it. Is that contempt not at the heart of why they lost Northumberland in such spectacular fashion?

**John Lamont:** The hon. Member for North Northumberland is no longer in his place, but he made an intervention earlier. He was very clear in his election leaflets that he was absolutely committed to upgrading and dualling the A1—a promise that has now been ripped up. I suspect the people of Northumberland will remember that when the next election day comes.

That A1 is crucial to North Northumberland and to my constituents. Its road safety is terrible. Forget the economic arguments; the safety arguments make it all the more important. [*Interruption.*] Labour Members can shake their heads all they want, but it is a choice that this Labour Government made, that Labour Members made, having told the electorate the complete opposite before the election.

My concern is that this Government and the SNP Government in Edinburgh sadly assume that everybody lives in a big city or a big town. They assume that people have access to buses or trains. For those of us living in Coldstream in my constituency, it is 14 miles to the nearest station, and the regular bus—the busy bus—comes every two or three hours. Unless we have access to a car and a good-quality road network, we are stuck.

It is regrettable that this Government are not prioritising the A1, which supports my constituency to a certain extent. More importantly from my perspective, it is regrettable that the SNP Scottish Government are not investing in the roads of the Scottish Borders in the way they should—and I remind the House that SNP Members are not in the Chamber today to stand up for their communities who want investment in their roads.

7.58 pm

**Josh Newbury (Cannock Chase) (Lab):** Staffordshire has the worst roads in the country. I do not have definitive proof of that, but it is something that my constituents in Cannock Chase tell me every time I am out knocking on doors—and I agree with them.

As we have heard many times already this evening, the British people are sick and tired of broken roads, which are costing them thousands of pounds when they hit potholes and making their everyday journeys far more dangerous. Fixing the basic infrastructure on which this country relies is central to national renewal and to improving living standards.

I commend the Government for their work to ensure that 14 years of pothole-covered roads are coming to an end. The local authority is set to share in the Government's record £1.6 billion of highway maintenance funding, which is enough to fill 7 million potholes a year.

However, my constituents continue to share their concerns with me about dozens and dozens of cratered roads, such as Betty's Lane and Red Lion Lane in my home village of Norton Canes. Here, short-term fix after short-term fix rapidly fails, meaning that residents have to continue waiting for lasting solutions, ultimately leading to higher costs and greater disruption in the long run.

I was a district councillor in my constituency for six years, and although highways were not part of my remit, I spent a huge chunk of my time on the issue, especially as successive Conservative county councillors were all too often missing in action when it came to my community.

In addition to potholes, blocked drains have been a recurring problem, causing localised flooding and subsequently further damage to the roads and—you guessed it—more potholes. Staffordshire county council, which has been Conservative run for the last 16 years, has cut back its highways budget drastically, except of course in one year in the run-up to an election, and for most roads, routine drain clearance is done only once every three years. Even completely compacted drains that are not absorbing a single drop of rain are frequently ignored as the outsourced highways contractor, who I will come to in a minute, says that they are not a priority and will be cleared sometime in the next three years. In reality, that short-sighted approach often leads to localised flooding and further deterioration of the roads—again, a complete false economy.

[Josh Newbury]

A common complaint from my constituents is about the highways contractor, Amey, the epitome of profit-driven, service-limiting outsourcing if ever I saw one. It frequently pitches up having travelled miles from its depot, only to sort out one pothole or drain at a time and leaving others nearby completely ignored, even though addressing multiple issues at once would be far more efficient. I am sure other hon. Members can relate to the frustration that my constituents feel, particularly given that in the face of that dire and costly service, the Conservatives at County Buildings in Stafford have not sought to scrap that contract. Indeed, they have repeatedly rewarded Amey with extensions. Other councils have switched to a more preventive approach and have had success, but in Staffordshire we are still on an endless cycle of patch jobs on those potholes deemed the most dangerous. It is a bit like patching up a leaking pipe while ignoring the rest of the plumbing, and we need a proper fix for the whole system.

I commend the Government's action to ensure that councils are accountable for road maintenance and improvement. I particularly welcome the news that from 30 June this year, councils such as Staffordshire county council will be required to publish detailed reports on how they are spending the £39 million that they are getting from the Government, how many potholes have been filled, and how they are minimising disruption, alongside gathering input on what works and what does not work—something that has not happened in my county for a very long time.

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

**Josh Newbury**: I am happy to give way to my Staffordshire colleague.

**David Williams**: It is telling that in today's debate we have five or six Staffordshire MPs debating this matter, and I wonder whether my hon. Friend would agree that that speaks to how let down residents and staff have been for far too long, and what happens under a Conservative-led local council.

**Josh Newbury**: I thank my hon. Friend. I think it is no coincidence that in Staffordshire we went from having no Labour MPs before the election to having nine out of 12, and that so many of us are here today to speak up for our constituents about areas of frustration, and about the failings of our county council and our hope for change in the near future.

Roads are critical national infrastructure, and this Government must and will undo the neglected state that the previous Government left them in. I welcome the record funding announced, but I say to my constituents that we must ensure that that record investment has the maximum benefit for our towns and villages. On 1 May we will go to the polls with a clear choice: carry on with a cosy relationship between the county council and an incompetent highways contractor with the Conservatives; deep cuts to budgets through an Elon Musk-style "efficiency" drive with Reform; or common-sense, good value highways services with Labour. I know the choice I will be making, and I hope my constituents will join me in electing dedicated Labour county councillors who will work with this Labour Government to get the potholes fixed.

**Several hon. Members** rose—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Caroline Nokes)**: Order. After the next speaker I will impose a five-minute time limit.

8.3 pm

**Manuela Perteghella** (Stratford-on-Avon) (LD): For residents in Stratford-on-Avon and across the country, road maintenance is one of the most visible signs of how well, or how poorly, their local area is being looked after. The Local Government Association recently pointed out that the funding allocated for road repairs is falling short of what is needed. In fact, councils are now spending twice as much on repairing local roads as they receive in Government funding. That shortfall is felt on every street in my constituency, where dangerous potholes keep reappearing, road surfaces crack again just a few months after being patched up, and pavements are on a waiting list for many years to be repaired, especially in our rural villages.

In Stratford-on-Avon, we are also seeing the consequences of poor long-term planning by Conservative-run Warwickshire county council, which is the local highway authority. Take the Birmingham Road in Stratford-upon-Avon, which is one of our major arteries in and out of town. Residents and businesses have faced seemingly endless roadworks which, incidentally, do not improve active travel and safety for pedestrians, cyclists, and other road users. The delays and disruption were exacerbated by emergency and non-emergency road closures by utility companies, resulting in gridlock, children and young people not able to arrive at school on time, teachers having to act as traffic wardens, and residents arriving late for work.

Lib-Dem local district councillor, Lorraine Grocott, has sought answers from the county council about why the Birmingham Road works have taken so long, and why they were not co-ordinated more effectively in the first place. I recently hosted meetings with utility companies to address those serious issues, and I was disappointed that the Conservative portfolio holder for transport and planning did not come. This is not just about inconvenience; it is about the impact on small businesses, which lose footfall and money, especially when our town is gridlocked and there are road closures. It is also about the impact on the daily life of residents, on carers trying to get to appointments, and on families getting children to school. Most frustrating is that it is avoidable. Yes, we need local authorities to be properly resourced and funded, but we also need them to plan better, to co-ordinate roadworks more effectively, and to ensure that contractors do the job well and are more responsive to the communities they serve. Let us give our communities the roads but also the local leadership that they deserve.

8.6 pm

**Terry Jermy** (South West Norfolk) (Lab): I am pleased to speak in this important debate. As I travelled down this morning, I took a moment to appreciate the headline of my local newspaper, the *Eastern Daily Press*, which also happens to be the local newspaper of the Conservative spokesperson, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew). It stated:

"Norfolk council starts work to resurface 320 miles of roads"

It is almost as if the editor had been reading today's Order Paper. That is significant, because today marks the start of the £12 million of investment into improving roads in Norfolk. I am sure it will be a well-read article because Norfolk is a large rural county, and as such we have an extensive road network, although sadly far too many roads are in a bad state of repair.

That resurfacing of 320 miles this financial year is a welcome increase on the 280 miles completed last year—an increase because of the funding that was awarded to Norfolk county council by this Labour Government, who I am very proud of. It is a joy to see the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham here, and I am sure that in his earlier speech he just omitted to thank the Labour Government for that significant sum of money, because Norfolk received one of the largest sums of money in the entire country for road resurfacing.

For the past decade I have been a Norfolk county councillor. I was elected in 2013, with continuous service until I resigned in March this year. During that time I led for the Labour group on roads, transport and the environment. When I was first elected back in 2013, our highways maintenance backlog sat at around £40 million annually. The most recent figure from a few weeks ago when I resigned had increased to £70 million—worrying and disappointing, but inevitable given the extensive cuts to local council funding during the past 14 years of Conservative government. Inflation, particularly construction-related inflation, is also a significant contributory factor, and in the last year alone, the repairs backlog in Norfolk has gone up by 20%.

It is particularly difficult in Norfolk. As I said, we are a large rural county and we have more than 6,000 miles of road. It is especially difficult in my South West Norfolk constituency, given our routine flooding issues and our soil make-up—frankly, we are either too sandy or very wet, and that inevitably impacts road integrity. Damage and injury due to potholes in Norfolk have resulted in the county council paying out almost £120,000 in compensation in the 2023-24 financial year, with a total of 228 successful claims. There were 150 claims and a total bill of £66,000 the year before, so that is further evidence of the worsening problem.

I am sure that all hon. Members routinely receive correspondence or comments on the doorstep about potholes. That is why I was delighted that the Government have pledged £1.6 billion for potholes, which I am sure will go a long way towards addressing the potholes in our roads that have been left for too long. I note the comments that have been made about Staffordshire. In 2024, the RAC showed that Stoke-on-Trent was the area where people had to wait the longest average time for individual potholes to be fixed, followed by Westminster. Norfolk was in third place—on average it took 482 days to fix a pothole in my county.

Connectivity is essential for my constituents, so I was supportive when the Transport Secretary unveiled £4.8 billion in funding for National Highways to deliver crucial road schemes and to maintain motorways and major A roads, and we were pleased to welcome the Roads Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham South (Lilian Greenwood), recently. The cash will mean progress on pivotal schemes, such as improvements to the A47 around Norwich, which I hope that some of my South West Norfolk constituents will benefit from.

The Government's growth agenda is reliant not just on building but on repairing and fixing the basic infrastructure on which this country relies. It is central to delivering a national decade of renewal that will lead to improved living standards, furthering productivity and securing Britain's economic future through delivering our plan for change. We inherited a mess but we are getting on with fixing Britain's roads across the country, including in my home county of Norfolk.

8.11 pm

**Patricia Ferguson** (Glasgow West) (Lab): Glasgow's longest and straightest road is Great Western Road, or the A82, as it is also known. It begins in the city centre, and stretches through the west end and beyond the city boundary. It is the route that people are likely to take if they are travelling to the west coast of Scotland, and it has been dubbed Glasgow's coolest street, an accolade I strongly support, as a sizeable part of it is either within my constituency of Glasgow West or marks the boundary with Glasgow North.

In spite of its importance, like every other road in Glasgow, it is plagued by potholes. I defy anyone to drive, walk or cycle more than 200 yards along its length and not see a pothole. Thanks to the *Glasgow Times*, we now know that in 2023, potholes on Great Western Road were responsible for 1,451 reports to the city council, the highest in Scotland. At night and in winter the situation is worse: people sometimes cannot see the potholes or they find that they are so deep that they retain rainwater, so they look as if they are a clear stretch of road. Cars are damaged and pedestrians, cyclists and drivers are put at risk. However, Great Western Road is not unique. In fact, in the past two years in Glasgow, compensation to drivers has almost doubled, while the amount of additional money spent on repairing potholes has decreased by 20%.

As we know, this year the Scottish Government received their largest ever budget settlement in the 26 years of devolution, but unfortunately little of that was passed on to hard pressed councils. Glasgow alone has lost out on over £400 million since 2014, even though it has been SNP controlled since 2017. It is estimated that the city needs to spend £104 million repairing potholes, with the backlog for Scotland standing at a whopping £2.56 billion. As the hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont), who is no longer in his place, mentioned earlier, as a former councillor I also know how hard the staff in the Glasgow city council roads department work, but they need to be given the resources to do the job.

The hon. Gentleman also mentioned utility companies. I have a particular bugbear about utility companies: there does not seem to be any way of enforcing or even encouraging them to do a job, do it once and do it well. My own road has been dug up three times in the last two years by different utility companies. In this day and age, we could surely make that better for residents and for the utility companies, who must be literally pouring money down the holes that they dig.

I want to draw attention to the situation of the Clyde tunnel, which is partly in my constituency. As its name suggests, it is a north-south vehicular tunnel that runs underneath the River Clyde. It is a very important road because it connects most of Glasgow, one way or another, to the Queen Elizabeth university hospital, among other locations. However, the Clyde tunnel is only allocated

[Patricia Ferguson]

the same amount for repair as any other standard stretch of road, and that has resulted in an £820,000 maintenance shortfall every single year. As a result, Glasgow city council is now thinking about applying a toll to the road, and I think that would be absolutely crazy. The council is considering imposing it only on those who live outside Glasgow, but I really do not know how people will prove where they live before they go into the tunnel.

I am sure that the £500 million that this Labour Government have allocated to alleviate the problem in England and Wales will make a real difference. It is therefore to be hoped that the Scottish Government will pay close attention to this Government's actions and learn from them for the good of all Scottish road users, and to allow our tourism and our economy generally to grow as it should.

8.16 pm

**Dr Scott Arthur** (Edinburgh South West) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for opening the debate. I think it is the most interesting debate we have had since we debated buses—it is fantastic.

I am proud to call Edinburgh my home, and I love the fact that tourists come from all over the world to see the city. However, I am often ashamed of what they encounter on arrival, particularly the potholes that litter the city—especially, it feels like, in Edinburgh South West. It is not just in Edinburgh, however; Scotland's roads are in a horrendous state, with more than 400,000 potholes reported to local authorities since 2021. The state of our roads, as we heard earlier, is a great visual way of understanding local Government finances. What we see on our roads is replicated in our schools and our social care.

There are particular issues in Edinburgh. As I mentioned earlier, Edinburgh receives the lowest per capita funding of any council in Scotland. It is absolutely shameful for a capital city to be treated in that way. Since Labour took control of the city in 2022, we have made real efforts to improve our roads. I spoke to the transport convenor, Councillor Stephen Jenkinson, who happened to be my election agent last year—thanks to him—and he informed me that Edinburgh's independently assessed road condition indicator has improved by 4.5% in the past year. That is the highest ever improvement in a single year. Of course, that is just a start, and what really matters is what people see when they step out of their house.

The maintenance list for this year was published just last week—pulled together by an excellent council officer called Sean Gilchrist, if we are praising council officers this evening. Among the 500,000 square metres of roads and footpaths that have been resurfaced, I was pleased to see that many had been raised by my Edinburgh South West constituents. We have a pothole probe machine; in Edinburgh, we call it a pothole killer, and I think it tops the league table. It has filled 22,000 square metres of potholes, so it has been busy.

The UK Government have created a dedicated pothole repair fund for councils south of the border. It stands at £1.6 billion, including £500 million of new money, so tens of millions of pounds have made their way to Scotland via the Barnett consequentials to fill potholes. That money was handed to Scottish Government Ministers,

but they have set up no similar fund. Instead, they just blame councils for potholes. John Swinney, the First Minister, says that councils already have enough money to fix our roads, despite the fact that, as we heard earlier from my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson), the national backlog is somewhere between £2.5 billion and £3 billion.

It is not just about the cost of filling the potholes; Cycling UK estimates that across the UK, one cyclist dies every week because of a pothole, so the cost is immeasurable. Enough is enough. Scotland's pothole crisis cannot continue. The SNP Government must show some level of ambition—the same level of ambition as the UK Government—when it comes to potholes. I am disappointed that no SNP Members are here this evening to answer that.

Before I conclude, I will address something even more important than the state of our roads. It is not buses; it is the state of our pavements. In many cases, pavement conditions are worse than those on our roads. I was really pleased that the Secretary of State for Transport mentioned pavements, and I hope that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew), will do so in his summing up, because I did not hear him speak about them. If we are serious about creating a more active and equal nation, we must discuss pavement conditions every time we talk about road conditions. There is an easy and low-cost way in which the Government could improve our footpaths, and that is by giving local authorities the power to introduce a pavement parking ban. A complete ban in Edinburgh last year has transformed the city and will lead to better quality pavements over time. I hope that towns and cities across England will soon have the same powers.

8.20 pm

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): According to the RAC, Derbyshire is the area with the most potholes on record in England. The Conservative-run county of Derbyshire had a whopping 90,000 potholes last year, with the next-worst area having more than 20,000 fewer. Potholes are not just an issue for motorists, damaging their cars and racking up big repair costs; as the Secretary of State was absolutely right to say, they are a safety issue. For cyclists, pedestrians, people using mobility aids and those with visual impairments, poorly maintained road surfaces can make even heading to the local shops more dangerous than it needs to be.

This Government's £1.6 billion investment in potholes means £75 million for the East Midlands combined county authority, so Derby and Derbyshire will benefit hugely from this Government's funding, but we all know that it is the job of both central Government and local government to get the work done. As Derbyshire county council has been Conservative-led since 2017, fixing those potholes only scratches the surface of the work that is needed. On 1 May, residents in Derbyshire will have the opportunity to vote for a Labour-run county council that, together with this Government, can work to provide the properly maintained roads that we want.

In Derby, we are approaching the third anniversary of the closure of the bridge to Darley Abbey Mills as a result of disrepair and safety concerns. Darley Abbey Mills is a beautiful UNESCO site with a rich history

dating back to the 1700s, and it is now home to dozens of businesses, from Darley Abbey Wines to Burton's Automotive, and from the West Mill wedding venue to Reinvention Fitness. The closure of the bridge was hugely damaging for businesses and difficult for residents. Derby city council built a temporary pedestrian bridge in 2022, which is a really important mitigation. It is functional, but it is not reflective of the stunning site on the River Derwent, and it is only temporary. Local Labour councillors and I have long called for a new, permanent bridge, and we have engaged with businesses and residents about it. We have now seen a massive step forward, with our Labour Mayor of the East Midlands allocating the funding for a feasibility study for the bridge. That is a key milestone.

Replacing the bridge would make such a difference to local businesses and residents, but just a year ago, hope was running out. The election of a mayor who has listened and worked with local councillors and businesses has brought back hope to the situation. It gives hope to us all, because everyone will have road infrastructure projects in their constituencies. I hope that the elections on 1 May will bring more Labour councillors to work with Labour mayors and a Labour Government to fix our roads and deliver the road infrastructure that our communities want.

8.24 pm

**Tom Hayes** (Bournemouth East) (Lab): For 14 long years, road users in Bournemouth got a raw deal. Motorists pay their taxes, but they have got little back. Bournemouth and the south-west have been left behind and left out, but no longer. The broken roads that our Labour Government inherited are not only risking lives, but costing working families, drivers and businesses hundreds if not thousands of pounds in avoidable vehicle repairs. Fixing the basic infrastructure that this country and our town rely on is central to delivering national renewal, improving living standards and securing the future of Bournemouth and Britain.

This is also a question of trust. When I was going around knocking on doors in the two years before the election and during the general election itself, people said to me on the doorstep, "You seem like a nice guy. We want to vote for you, but how do we know that when you go to Parliament, you will not turn out like the last lot and not deliver on the promises you said you would keep?" I can now go to people's doorsteps and talk about this Labour Government's prioritisation of fixing our roads, matching words with deeds.

We have committed significant sums of money, at a time of difficult fiscal circumstances, to repair our roads. We are not only investing an additional £4.8 billion to deliver vital road schemes and maintain major roads across the country to get Britain moving as part of our plan for change, but handing councils a record £1.6 billion to repair roads and fill millions of potholes across the country. My own Bournemouth, Christchurch and Poole council has received more than £10 million from the Government to fix our roads over the next 12 months. I spoke to our council leader on 28 March to make the point that we need to use the money or lose it. She has a long list of roads that need fixing, and I am confident that they will be fixed.

The lack of investment to date is a false economy, because when we do not invest in our roads in the first instance, we just store up bigger problems and bigger

repair costs. My hope is that by investing in our roads now, we can save the taxpayer money and finally have roads that are roadworthy. Investing in roads saves local councils money. In 2023, BCP council had to dish out £16,000 in compensation because of the frailty of our roads. We also need to get our fundamentals right. We have heard in this debate about how utility companies will swan in, dig up a road that has been repaired and make it worse. We need to ensure that that does not happen.

We also need to think about our pavements. I have lost count of the number of elderly ladies with whom I have spoken on the doorstep who say that they would go into our district centres and town centres, but they are too scared of slipping on broken pavements, cracking a hip and not being able to get the hip replacement they need quickly enough, because they know that the NHS was ruined under the last Conservative Government.

I commend BCP council and the council officers for targeting the key roads in my constituency that need fixing. I am pleased that Cranleigh Road and Gainsborough Road have had major work completed, and I am pleased that treatment work has been completed on Wheaton Road, Abinger Road, Leaphill Road, Scotter Road and Roberts Road. I called for those works on constituents' behalf.

I am pleased to see plans for the resurfacing of sections of Ashley Road in Boscombe as part of the towns fund, which is a much-needed investment in that area. I am also pleased that we will see significant works on Holdenhurst Road. That is particularly important to support not only road users—households and families—but our tradespeople. When I knock on doors and talk with our small business owners and tradespeople, they constantly talk about having their tools stolen and the fact that repairing or replacing them can cost up to £2,730. The threat of crime is a constant worry, but their roads just are not being fixed, despite the fact that they pay so much money in taxes.

I will close by saying that road safety is not only about repairing the potholes on our roads; it is about making sure that we invest in pedestrian crossings. I have been working with Councillor Sharon Carr-Brown of Queen's Park and Charminster ward to introduce a zebra crossing on Queen's Park Avenue to enable schoolchildren to more easily access that busy street. Currently, the Department for Transport does not permit the use of side road zebras on the public highway. Using them would allow stretched council budgets to go further in improving the public's ability to safely cross the roads. I have been calling on the Department for Transport to support local councillors' calls, and my own calls, for better zebra crossing provision.

I am glad that we are ending the pothole plague. I commend my residents and constituents for calling for improved roads, and I will continue to work alongside them to make the case for more funding and better investment in our roads.

8.29 pm

**Peter Swallow** (Bracknell) (Lab): Under the previous Government, it too often felt like we were in the passenger seat with no one at the wheel, driving down the road with no sense of direction and hitting bump after bump along the way. That is not just a rather strained metaphor; it is a reality for too many of my constituents. I am pleased to say, however, that following Labour's success

[Peter Swallow]

in winning control of Bracknell Forest council in 2023, the new Labour administration immediately set to work to address what it felt—and what I know—to be a huge priority for local residents, setting out a plan to invest £5 million over four years. That includes an extra £1 million over the baseline in this year's budget. On top of that local investment, I am proud that the new Labour Government have provided a 35% uplift in Bracknell's potholes budget—that is £3.2 million more.

**Olivia Bailey** (Reading West and Mid Berkshire) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for giving way, and congratulate him on the excellent speech he is making. Does he agree that potholes are a costly, dangerous menace on our roads, and does he welcome the decisive action this Government are taking to fill those potholes, which includes nearly £12 million for my constituency?

**Peter Swallow:** Absolutely—I am very happy to do so. The reason why that investment is so badly needed, in Reading West and Mid Berkshire as well as in Bracknell, is the huge backlog of repairs we have inherited from the previous Government. As well as resurfacing major and residential roads that have not received the support they need for too long, this investment will allow for other upgrades, including a new toucan crossing between Halifax Road and Ranelagh Drive in Bracknell.

Bracknell Forest council is also using that investment to address the pressing need for more parking. That is a massive issue in Bracknell, which has a number of old estates—previously social housing—where there is simply not enough parking for residents. However, because we have been putting residents' priorities first, we have delivered more parking on estates through the grass verge conversion scheme. It is slow progress, and there is much more to be done, not least because it requires agreement between the local authority and the social housing providers. Although the Minister has very kindly spoken to me about this issue before, I ask her what more support she can set out.

It is clear that these investments are not “job done”; there is a huge amount more to do to address the issues of potholes and parking. That is why I welcome the scrutiny enabled by the Government through annual progress reports, so that residents can see the actions that we and the local council are taking on their behalf. From October, there will be a duty to listen to residents' priorities for what work needs to be done and where it needs to happen. I am proud to say that I believe Bracknell Forest council already does so, but extra focus is always welcome.

I also want to touch on the issue of roadworks caused by utility companies. During the general election, there were a large number of roadworks in Crowthorne in my constituency, so much so that the joke on the doorstep was, “How do you leave Crowthorne? You don't.” Crowthorne is a lovely place—I am very proud to live there—but one does occasionally have to leave. Just this weekend, I have been dealing with utility companies' roadworks down Yorktown Road in Sandhurst. That road, which is the main road through Sandhurst, has been repeatedly dug up by utility companies. One constituent commented on Facebook, “I have worked out that since the start of the year, Yorktown Road has

only been free from extremely disruptive roadworks for about 30 days”—that is 30 of the 100 or so days we have had this year. Can the Minister tell us what more we can do to make sure that those disruptive roadworks caused by utility companies do not repeatedly hit the same stretch of road, which sadly all too often leads to what was a resurfaced road only last year being left in a terrible state of repair?

In the short time I have left, I will touch on another important element of our road network: buses. I am pleased that under this Labour Government, we have seen a £1 million investment into Bracknell Forest buses. That is more than in the previous three years combined. That has seen massive improvements to our local services, including the 194 bus, which now serves Buckler's Park in Crowthorne. That has been able to leave, I am pleased to say. The X94 is now stopping at Martins Heron station, with more journeys between Heatherwood and Frimley Park hospitals, connecting our train stations and our hospitals up with our bus network. The council has also announced new companion passes for companions of disabled passengers to travel for free. More is coming with the Bus Services (No. 2) Bill, so that we can see greater local control over our bus network.

With this Government, we are back in the driver's seat, back behind the wheel and, I am proud to say, driving on resurfaced roads. There is more to do, and there are more potholes to be filled, but that is this Government's plan for change, and it is delivering.

8.35 pm

**Leigh Ingham** (Stafford) (Lab): Driving through Stafford has become an absolute nightmare. For years now, we have been in the grip of what can only be described as a plague of roadworks. It is not the odd disruption here or there, but an ongoing onslaught that has affected nearly every part of our town. To be fair, it is not the first time I have spoken to the House about how poorly residents across Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages have been treated by Staffordshire county council when it comes to roadworks and maintenance, but I am pleased that today I get to do so at length because, frankly, the people I represent deserve to have their voices heard loud and clear.

We face simultaneous disruption from a litany of roadworks across town, of which I will name just a few. On Station Road, works are about to begin. On Market Square, another set are about to start. On Tipping Street, it is the same story. There is Radford Bank, which has been of particular concern, as well as Eastgate Street, North Walls, Gaolgate Street, Malt Mill Lane and Beaconside, which is a major artery now reduced to a bottleneck. Then there is Corporation Street, where the disruption is so severe that traffic is rerouting through Co-operative Street, causing real problems for residents.

I spoke to a constituent on the doorstep only a few weeks ago who told me that they feel like they are stuck in a constant state of dangerous disruption and that their small road has become a permanent rat run, and they are not alone. I did for a moment, when I was writing this speech, consider doing a full list of all the roadworks in Stafford and giving the House the date period, a bit like the shipping forecast, but we worked out that it would take the whole debate.



While it is right that roads are repaired, I cannot condone the cavalier attitude shown towards the needs of residents and businesses through poor communication and poor engagement. The same roads are being dug up or being planned to be dug up on repeat because of a lack of strategic planning between organisations. Staffordshire county council is receiving nearly £40 million in funding next year from the local transport authority. Alongside Stoke-on-Trent, it will receive a further £11.6 million in additional cash for fixing potholes and road maintenance. That is this Labour Government putting their money where their mouth is. This Labour Government are providing funding with money that is there, rather than promises and unfunded commitments. This Labour Government are handing councils the cash and the certainty they need, and it is now up to them to get on with the job, to put that money to use and to prove they are delivering for their communities.

After years of neglect from successive Conservative Governments, it is welcome news to my constituents that there are safeguards in place for this funding. If Staffordshire county council does not show how it is improving our roads, it will risk losing 25% of the funding boost. The council must publish reports on its website by 30 June this year, detailing how much it is spending, how many more potholes it has filled, what percentage of its roads are in what condition and how it is minimising streetworks disruption.

My constituents in Stafford, Eccleshall and the villages deserve better than the last Conservative Government and the poor communication and treatment they have received from Conservative-led Staffordshire county council. I will continue to raise their concerns until we see real change in how these decisions are made, communicated and managed by Staffordshire's Conservative county council.

8.39 pm

**Joe Morris (Hexham) (Lab):** It is a pleasure to speak about road maintenance and the importance of safe, accessible roads in Northumberland and western Newcastle.

Under the last Government, the condition of the county's roads was neglected, ignored and disregarded, which damaged the basic infrastructure and social fabric of my constituency. Throughout the constituency, I am regularly confronted by roads that have been left in a state of disrepair—for instance, the B6307. I could name many more, but in Hexham, Prudhoe, Acomb, Anick, Hepscott and Haltwhistle, and even in smaller villages such as Ogle, crumbling surfaces, erosions and deep potholes are rife. When I speak to local people on the doorstep, the first thing that they generally ask me about is a fault in their local road. Quite small roads in Northumberland experience industrial traffic, and potholes can cause real damage and danger.

It is a disgrace that the safety of residents in my constituency is being jeopardised by poor road surfaces that not only put the wellbeing of residents at risk, but cause considerable damage to vehicles and inflict expensive repairs on drivers. One example is the road in Newton village, which is only wide enough to fit one car at a time, requiring drivers to pull over regularly. Because of the erosions on the sides of the road, drivers are experiencing significant damage to their vehicles and, as a result, increasing financial burdens. Because of rampant flooding

on the road, the county council's attempted patch repairs are often undone within minutes. When I visited the area with members of Newton by the Sea parish council, I saw with my own eyes the repairs being carried out and, within minutes, the potholes being flooded.

Residents driving to pick up their children from school, young people driving to access employment, people driving to the shops and those cycling to explore the wonderful landscape that makes north-east England the best place in the country to visit should not have to regularly encounter safety hazards or experience vehicle damage because of those road surfaces. This is inhibiting access to opportunities throughout the region, but the Conservative administration in the county council have taken their eyes off the road. They are failing to communicate timeframes for repairs, and failing to improve the condition of local roads. Even where basic repairs have been provided, they are slapdash. Lawrence O'Donnell, the Labour candidate for Prudhoe North and Wylam, tells me that on Wylam bridge the same pothole has been patched eight times in 12 months. It seems to me that the council is disregarding the basic welfare of residents and letting down residents across Northumberland, and on 1 May we will have the opportunity to vote it out. The community should not be neglected owing to the Conservative majority's ignorance of rural life and affairs and its contempt for the people of Northumberland.

I am pleased that this Labour Government have committed additional money to delivering vital road schemes to fix our local roads. While the Minister is here, let me echo the calls from my hon. Friend the Member for North Northumberland (David Smith) for the Government to consider the urgently needed safety work on the A1, and, this time, to ensure that any work that is done is properly funded. Let me also make my own pitch for the A69 to receive similar treatment. It is clear that ours is the only party that will prioritise local roads, and that we need a Labour-backed council in Northumberland to ensure that that happens.

There are a few more points that I hope the Minister will address when she responds to the debate. I have recently met quite a few local farmers who have told me that they want electric vehicle charging points in their farm shop car parks, but are finding it difficult to obtain grants from the Department for Transport. They are being told that these are only available for service stations, but there are not a huge number of service stations on the A69. Putting charging points in farm shop car parks would be a great way of boosting our net zero credentials and ensuring that more people throughout Northumberland access farm shops and put more money into the local rural economy.

It is easy to play a hackneyed political game in this context, but it is not just politicians who benefit from potholes being fixed. It is the public—the people doing the school run and the people driving to work, whether they are going to work at Egger or Essity, or whether they are travelling to Newcastle or to Carlisle across my vast constituency, the biggest in England.

Let me use my last 15 seconds to describe my visit to Newcastle airport, where I saw the runway being relaid with tarmac from—I was told—my constituency. It would be great to see some of that knowledge, skill and expertise put to use to fix the roads of Northumberland.

8.44 pm

**Peter Prinsley** (Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket) (Lab): People in Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket must navigate pockmarked and pimped streets—how depressing and frustrating! People are forced to accept a fear of damage or even injury as a precondition of using our roads, and they are locked in extended battles for compensation with the council and their insurers. We all know about this problem.

Only 36% of local roads in the east of England are in good structural condition. People talk about the effects of potholes on motorists, and quite rightly—they are dangerous, damaging to cars and a daily irritant for many of us. However, it is not just car owners who are affected by our roads, and many people know a horror story. It is no surprise to me, having sat in this debate, that my son, a student at Keele University in Stoke-on-Trent, was involved in a horrendous bicycle crash as he came down a steep hill and went head over heels when his front wheel landed in a pothole.

Cyclists know all about potholes. The evidence suggests that between 2017 and 2023, one person per week was killed or seriously injured while cycling, so potholes cause deaths. This is a trend that has not shown any sign of abating. Bus drivers and taxi operators cannot do their job safely when the roads underneath them simply do not work, and our emergency services cannot help us if they are expected to use crumbling roads. I have heard of paramedics whose ambulances have been damaged, to the point of being undriveable, by hitting a pothole on the way to a call-out. Better, smoother roads will support our local economies, improve transport and, most importantly, limit the number of accidents, so it is wonderful to hear that the Government are at last doing something after more than a decade in which our local roads were simply ignored under the Tories.

In Suffolk, the effect of the decline in highway spending—last year, it was down by almost 25% compared with 2015—can be easily seen, but that is already changing. Potholes are getting fixed more quickly, because our local authorities are getting a much-needed injection of cash from this Labour Government. In Suffolk, they are getting an extra £11.7 million this year for that purpose.

This Labour Government are taking this issue seriously and delivering for the people of Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket, and I am glad to see that they are not simply papering over the cracks. They will use the latest tech to ensure that public money is spent as effectively as possible on lasting repairs so that our roads do not split up again. Brilliant new pothole-filling machines and surfacing technologies will save us money, and it was great to hear about the advances in technology from my hon. Friend the Member for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner).

Ministers have taken the decisive action that the previous Government put off for too long, and I hope the rest of the House can join me in congratulating them on that.

8.47 pm

**Kirsteen Sullivan** (Bathgate and Linlithgow) (Lab/Co-op): I welcome the opportunity to speak in this debate, because the state of our roads is absolutely critical for safe travel, transportation and logistics, particularly in communities that rely on the road network.

As a former councillor, I greatly welcome the Government's provision of £1.6 billion for road maintenance in England, and I am sure that colleagues who have been councillors will agree that few topics flood local politicians' mailboxes more than potholes and the condition of our roads. Motorists, cyclists and pedestrians alike have been failed by consecutive Conservative Governments, with council budgets slashed to the bone, and their Scottish counterparts are no better off.

A report by the Local Government Benchmarking Framework found that the continued budget pressures on local councils have resulted in a 20% reduction in spending on road maintenance, and we see the budget cuts physically etched into the tarmac across our cities, towns and villages. Hon. Members have spoken about the need to resurface roads, rather than just fill in potholes. Although that is ideal in many situations, the reality is that councils have not been able to afford to do so, so they fill in potholes that break up a few months down the line.

I recently met councillors in the Bathgate and Linlithgow constituency to discuss how years of Scottish Government austerity have left our roads in a dire condition. From Bo'ness to Bathgate, we see it all over the place. Councillors are frustrated, hard-working council staff are really frustrated and local residents are frustrated and angry.

As my former council role trying to deliver road improvements highlighted, the state of the roads all comes back to local government funding. The hon. Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) borrowed a few of the adjectives I had noted down. In Scotland, we have had 18 years of savage cuts, chronic ringfencing and brutal underfunding of local services by the SNP Government.

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): I have huge sympathy with what the hon. Lady is saying about the underfunding and lack of support from the Scottish Government, but would she sympathise with me? In the London borough of Havering, we have the Mayor of London and the Greater London Authority, which take huge sums of money from my constituents, yet we do not see much of it spent in places such as Romford. Roads such as the A12 and the A127, which the Mayor of London is meant to look after through Transport for London, are often neglected. So there is a common theme about these higher authorities that take money away from our constituents, but do not spend it on the people paying the costs.

**Kirsteen Sullivan**: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention, but it will be no surprise to him that I cannot agree with him, given the years of massive underfunding that former Conservative Governments inflicted on councils across England.

We have had years and years of chronic underfunding of local services, so I know that the £1.6 billion will be appreciated by councils across England. However, it is yet to be confirmed that the resulting additional funding for Scotland will reach local government. I wrote to the Deputy First Minister earlier this year to find out when the money would be passed to councils in Scotland. In her response, she made it clear that it is for the Scottish Government to decide how that additional money will be spent, and that there was no guarantee that it will make it to councils, as my hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) has also discovered.

As so often with the SNP Scottish Government, funding is passed over from the UK Government and it is never heard of again. It is used to plug mismanaged white elephants, to fund a research unit on independence or to finance shadow embassies overseas. While receiving the largest ever Budget settlement for Scotland, the Scottish Government have not yet committed to the very basic steps of repairing our roads and delivering a safer environment for motorists, cyclists and pedestrians alike. People across England will benefit from the huge investment of this Labour Government, and the SNP Scottish Government must not stand in the way of this Labour Government delivering improved roads for the people of Scotland. Our motorists, cyclists, residents and councils deserve the same commitment and ambition to improving our roads as this Labour Government are showing in England.

8.53 pm

**Mrs Sureena Brackenridge** (Wolverhampton North East) (Lab): There is nothing more symbolic of broken Britain and the mess we inherited than the state of our pothole-riddled roads. Bumpy, crumbling and unsafe roads have become the norm rather than the exception. For far too long, our infrastructure was allowed to deteriorate, with cash-strapped councils having to prioritise vital services. The damage has built up year after year, and now it is a problem we are all facing across the country.

I was quite flabbergasted when I heard the hon. Member for Broadland and Fakenham (Jerome Mayhew) say that roads were better for motorists in 2024 than they were 15 or 20 years back. I would like to invite the shadow Minister to come and visit Wolverhampton North East, because he would be hard-pressed to find residents who share that view.

In Wolverhampton North East, I hear it on the doorstep every time I speak to residents about their priorities and their issues: they are fed up with swerving potholes; they are angry about how much money they have had to spend on repairs; and let us not forget the rising insurance premiums, a direct result of the number of claims people have to make due to damaged roads.

With this Government, things are beginning to change. I welcome the Government committing £1.6 billion to local highways maintenance across England. Of that, £500 million will go directly to fixing 7 million potholes. That is a huge step forward, but because of the dire state of the roads, it is just the beginning. For Wolverhampton, that will support £9.7 million in funding for this financial year, a significant investment. But our roads are in such poor condition that a single investment will not fix everything overnight. The problem is years in the making and it will take time to repair the damage caused by years of neglect.

There is not a quick fix here, so I welcome a strategic programme to improve roads across Wolverhampton: resurfacing, surface stressing, and preventative treatments that will last. To everyone who has reached out to me, thank you. Your frustrations are justified. We know there is more to do and we cannot fix every road overnight, but, after years of frustration, with this record investment cash-strapped councils can finally get on with the job.

8.56 pm

**Kevin Bonavia** (Stevenage) (Lab): I am glad to have this opportunity to address a problem that comes up in almost every street when I am out door-knocking in Stevenage and our villages: ever more potholes and the general disrepair of our roads.

When I made a point to someone recently about the importance of tackling potholes, they dismissed it as a trivial matter. I happen to think that it is very serious. It is very serious when I am told by a parent of a low-income family, just about getting by, that the pothole she had reported to her Conservative county councillor time and again had not been fixed and ended up causing hundreds of pounds of damage to her vehicle. It is simply not an option for her to pay for it, so the family has to take significant time out of their week to make a claim. Then there was the young teacher on her bike who hit a pothole, tumbled over and sustained serious injuries, which caused her to miss several weeks of school.

The worst thing is that this should all be preventable. Statistics from the online retailer Blackcircles.com show that Hertfordshire had the highest average payout for pothole-related claims in the UK, with an average of £367 per claim in 2023. That amount is significantly higher than the national average of £261 per claim. I can tell you why that is. Our Conservative-run county council in Hertfordshire has totally failed on road repairs, leaving our roads in Stevenage and the villages of Knebworth, Codicote, Datchworth and Aston in a state of total disrepair.

The first reason it has failed is bottom-up. Conservative councillors generally are not proactive in our community, so council officers and the highways team are not getting the quality of reporting on where the issues are and what the priorities should be from the ground up.

The second issue is top-down. Fourteen years of funding cuts from successive Conservative Governments to local councils in an era of austerity was cheer-led by Conservative county councillors in Hertfordshire, while their budgets declined and outcomes got worse. Stevenage Conservatives recently claimed that Hertfordshire was the best-run county council in the country. I gently suggest that when 14 years of austerity devastate a council's budget and local Conservatives are in charge of allocating what is left, we end up with a council ranked by *The Times* last year as the 172nd best performing in the country, with very little left for the road repairs.

There is, believe it or not, a third issue: this is the existential one. The Conservative cabinet member for highways at Hertfordshire county council, also a Stevenage councillor, does not even understand what a pothole is. In 2023, he proudly claimed that outstanding road repairs in Hertfordshire were lower than the national average, with only 4% of B and C roads requiring outstanding repairs compared with 6% nationally, which all sounds fairly positive—until it is revealed that we are not comparing like for like. Hertfordshire classifies a pothole as being at least 300 mm wide and 50 mm deep, while just next door in Essex, they only have to be 100 mm across, and, further away in Trafford, just 40 mm deep. A road user may think they have hit a pothole in Hertfordshire, but, according to the council, it must just be their imagination. All the while, the council would rather change the definition of a pothole or wait for people to claim for damages, costing the council more than it would to fix potholes for the future in the first place.

[Kevin Bonavia]

Thankfully, we are turning a corner. This new Labour Government are on the side of road users in their cars, on the buses and on their bicycles, and they take the issue of fixing potholes as seriously as residents expect them to. That is why our county has received £9.3 million for road repairs to fix as many potholes as possible—a marked change from 14 years of Tory austerity. While this extra funding is welcome, the public deserve to know how their councils will use that funding to improve their local roads, so I am pleased the Government are requiring councils to show progress or risk losing 25% of the funding boost.

The question on all my residents' lips now is: can we really trust the failing Conservative-run Hertfordshire county council and the unseen and unbothered Conservative county councillors to use this money properly? We have a new Labour Government facilitating change through these measures, but we also need effective councillors to deliver that change in every street, community, town and village across Hertfordshire and the wider country. Where councillors like those in Tory-run Hertfordshire fail to deliver that change, our residents can and should choose new ones who can.

9.1 pm

**Lee Pitcher** (Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme) (Lab): If I could walk 500 miles, Madam Deputy Speaker, and then walk 500 more, it would be a miracle, particularly after all this bobbing. [Laughter.] However, I would also have walked the full length of the road network of Doncaster. Unfortunately, due to the pothole crisis facing every authority in our country, the chances are that I would have tripped up and fallen down long before I got to anyone's door. Such is the state of the roads in Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme and the amount of potholes I have reported and had repaired over the past few years that I am also called "Pothole Pitcher" on social media.

Of course, this is no joke; it is a very real issue that affects people's lives, as the Lister family, who live in Hatfield, in my constituency, are aware. On his 18th birthday, Josh was driving down an avenue when he hit a huge pothole that ripped through the side of his tyre and shot him on to the kerb, leaving a relatively newly passed driver not only in a degree of shock but fearful of driving ever again. He had an 18th birthday he will never forget, but for all the wrong reasons. Just two months later, his mum Gemma fell over a pothole on a footpath, causing her to sustain serious injury to her arms, hands and knees, with the impact lasting many months. Potholes are not a trivial matter; they are hugely serious, and ruin lives.

Like most places, Doncaster and Axholme's roads and their networks are one of their most precious and most expensive assets. Between the more volatile weather, increased traffic and heavier vehicles, the cost of maintaining those assets has risen at the same time as the council's budget for dealing with them was cut by half by the previous Government. We now have a repair backlog sitting in the hundreds of millions in Doncaster alone, where our council is fighting tooth and nail just to keep it at that, while trying also to resolve the pothole crisis.

Thankfully, this Government have recognised the importance of tackling this crisis. They have increased funding to local authorities, with £2.3 million for North

Lincolnshire and £6.7 million for South Yorkshire. We are finally giving our mayors like Ros Jones and our councils, who know their area and know where to invest, the tools they need not only to fight to stand still but to really make improvements. This is just the beginning.

**Andrew Rosindell:** The hon. Gentleman says we are finally giving tools to mayors, but does he not agree that it is surely better to give funding directly to local councils to spend on their local communities? If we give it to a mayor, it will get spent across wider areas where the mayor has priorities, but it will not necessarily go to areas where the constituents who we represent need the money spent.

**Lee Pitcher:** I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. I referred to Mayor Ros Jones, who is leader of the council in Doncaster and knows that area specifically—in her case, she is also called a mayor. Devolved mayors also know their area very well, and they work with their area and their constituencies to ensure that the money goes to the right places at the right time.

Our councils have been crying out for help for 14 years. I am pleased to say that Westminster is finally listening. It is listening to the Lister family, who I mentioned, to our constituents and to all the local authorities that desperately need this money to invest. As such, I am almost ready to relinquish the title of "Pothole Pitcher", but I will be focusing on pavements in the future.

9.5 pm

**Emma Foody** (Cramlington and Killingworth) (Lab/Co-op): In my constituency, like in so many other constituencies we have heard about today, potholes are not just an inconvenience but a danger. They damage vehicles, put cyclists and pedestrians at risk and cost working people hundreds, if not thousands, of pounds in repairs. For carers on their rounds, parents on the school run, and small businesses making deliveries, this problem disrupts daily life and chips away at local confidence.

This situation has not happened by accident. One of the last acts of the previous Conservative administration at North Tyneside council was to outsource road maintenance to Capita back in 2013 on a 15-year contract. It was a 15-year contract of poor service and inadequate outcomes. During the election campaign last year—and every week when I am knocking doors—several people shared their frustration of potholes in our local area. Residents in Shiremoor on Angerton Avenue described how they would report a pothole, then Capita would come out and gaslight them over whether the pothole existed and tell them why it would not be repaired—"it wasn't wide enough" or "it wasn't deep enough". They often argued for long periods of time while more were appearing, like a frustrating game of whack-a-mole. That is the legacy of failure in North Tyneside from the last Conservative administration—a legacy we can never risk happening again.

When we talk about legacies of Conservative failure, we need look no further than Conservative-run Northumberland county council. I found it extraordinary the number of Conservative Members who want to associate themselves with that council, because under the Conservatives in Northumberland we have seen staggering levels of negligence. We are now the county

with the third-highest number of potholes in the entire country. Recent research has shown that 449 claims to the council for compensation due to pothole damage were successful.

One might ask whether that is on par with other councils in the area. It is not. Northumberland county council does not only come out higher than all the individual local authorities within the North East combined authority, or all of them put together, but its level of successful claims is four times that of all the councils put together. There has been more than £250,000 in payouts. That is a quarter of a million pounds of taxpayer money that could have been far better spent. That is truly staggering given that the council could have avoided all that by adequately maintaining our roads. The Conservatives had their chance to fix the situation, and they failed. The roads are broken, and so is their credibility, both locally and nationally.

The good news is that help is now coming from the Labour Government. Our plan for change is delivering real results, and from this month councils will receive their share of £1.6 billion in new funding to repair and maintain our roads. The North East combined authority, led by Labour Mayor Kim McGuinness, will receive over £21 million to tackle the issue head on. This is not about press releases or photo opportunities. It is about fixing the basics that communities rely on. That means fewer parents dreading the school run, fewer workers stuck in traffic caused by roadworks, and fewer elderly residents fearing a fall because of uneven pavements.

We are not just filling in the holes. We are laying the foundations for the future. Labour is delivering a £4.8 billion investment in major road schemes, preventive maintenance and long-term infrastructure renewal, which will mean fewer potholes, safer roads and more confidence in our transport system. That is what governing seriously looks like: fixing the basics, supporting local economies and making life better for ordinary people.

The people of Cramlington and Killingworth have waited long enough. Labour is delivering the investment, the oversight and the plan. Now it is time for councils to act and for the Conservatives to explain why they ever let things get so bad.

9.9 pm

**David Williams** (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): When constituents talk to me about what matters most in their day-to-day lives, roads come up time and again. Whether travelling to work, doing the school run or getting to vital medical appointments, the state of our roads affects people's quality of life. When those roads are full of potholes and defects, and they damage vehicles and put cyclists and bikers at risk, it sends a clear message to residents: you have been forgotten. That is exactly how too many people feel in Kidsgrove, Talke, Butt Lane, Newchapel, Harseahead and Mow Cop. Today, I want to speak up for them.

Last year, Staffordshire county council launched its highway recovery plan, but many of my constituents in Kidsgrove and the surrounding area still feel like they are waiting for it to start. Time and again, residents tell me, "We report defects and we chase them up, but nothing gets done." Roads such as Gloucester Road, Newchapel Road and Kidsgrove Bank remain in a shocking condition. Vehicles are being damaged and people are quite rightly

at their wits' end. It feels as though Kidsgrove is being treated like the poor relative, left behind while other areas move forward. Roundabouts in places like Talke Pits by the old Normid look unloved and neglected. Some older and disabled people tell me that they fear leaving their own homes because of how unsafe the pavements are. For example, on Chester Road in Talke, residents have to walk in the road as a broken pavement has been fenced off by the Conservative-led council for over four years. Let me be clear: Conservative-led Staffordshire county council is failing Kidsgrove, and that is not okay.

However, just over the border in Stoke-on-Trent, we have seen a very different story. Since Labour took control of the council two years ago, the city has delivered a marked step change in how we deal with potholes. The new administration made road repairs a clear priority, and the response speaks volumes. Back in 2023, about 7,500 defects were repaired. A year later, that figure rose to over 13,000: a 76% increase in just one year under a Labour council. When the council pledged to fix 6,000 defects in six months, it not only met the target but beat it, delivering 6,500 repairs in four months. That is the difference that a Labour council makes.

Under the leadership of Jane Ashworth, Stoke-on-Trent city council has also increased its own capital investment in highways by more than 10% this past year, despite the financial pressures facing councils up and down the country, because it knows that the people of Stoke-on-Trent deserve better than the crumbling roads we inherited from the previous Conservative Administration. The Labour Government are now stepping up to help, fixing the mess left behind from those 14 years. Stoke-on-Trent will receive more than £9 million and Staffordshire county council more than £19 million in new Government transport funding. It is vital that we see the results of that in Kidsgrove.

Let us not forget that, back in 2022, the people of Kidsgrove put their faith in Conservative county councillors, believing that they would be strong voices for our area. Sadly, those councillors appear to have gone AWOL, leaving the residents behind. Residents in Kidsgrove deserve better than that. They deserve to know that their voices are being heard and that the money is there to put things right.

I welcome the extra funding for both Staffordshire and Stoke-on-Trent, but this cannot be about money alone; it must also be about delivery. As we have seen in Stoke-on-Trent and across the country, where the Conservatives fail to deliver, Labour steps up to pick up the pieces and gets to work. I hope that the residents of Kidsgrove and the Talke and Red Street divisions will remember this as we approach the county council elections next month. I say to Ministers and the Secretary of State: keep backing innovative councils to get the basics right, including the Labour-led Stoke-on-Trent city council. Every journey matters, and Kidsgrove should never again be treated like the poor relative. As long as I am the MP for Stoke-on-Trent North and Kidsgrove, I will continue to stand up for my local residents.

9.14 pm

**Alison Hume** (Scarborough and Whitby) (Lab): In my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby, the views take your breath away. Sadly, so do the potholes when

[Alison Hume]

your car hits one—not just when it happens, but when the repair bill arrives. According to the RAC, the cost of pothole damage to vehicles is around £600 on average, with more severe repairs costing considerably more. Potholes do not just damage cars; they damage people. One constituent has told me that when his disabled father is driven to the doctors or to hospital appointments, it is almost inevitable that they hit a pothole on the way, which causes him pain. Another Scarborough constituent told me that the journey she needed to take to York hospital to attend the pain clinic was too painful because of the quality of the roads, and that she therefore stopped making it, despite being in a huge amount of pain.

The Conservative-run North Yorkshire council says that keeping our roads in the best condition for the money it has is one of the biggest challenges it faces, and that is why it is brilliant that the York and North Yorkshire combined authority will soon be receiving its share of the Labour Government's record £1.6 billion road maintenance funding. This is the biggest one-off road maintenance funding settlement that councils have ever been given. For Mayor Skaith in York and North Yorkshire, it is £62.1 million, an increase of £16.6 million. Of course, I have spoken to the Mayor about the importance of ensuring the quality of repairs in my constituency of Scarborough and Whitby.

Maple Drive in Scarborough is home to Northstead community primary school. It is a very busy road and it is littered with potholes, which are regularly reported to the council using its online tool. Workmen duly arrive to fill the potholes, but my constituents report that they soon reappear, bigger than before, leaving Maple Drive looking like a patchwork quilt—but, it has to be said, not a particularly attractive one. It is vital that we abandon the patch-and-run approach and focus on permanent and innovative repairs, especially given the cold and increasingly wet winters we encounter on the coast.

I welcome the caveat attached to the money, which means that the combined authority will need to publish annual progress reports and prove to the public that the work is being done to a high standard. After years of Conservative neglect, drivers in Scarborough, Whitby and the villages can, thanks to this Labour Government, look forward to smoother, safer local roads.

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** With the leave of the House, I call shadow Minister Jerome Mayhew.

9.18 pm

**Jerome Mayhew:** It has been an interesting debate, and one might be forgiven for thinking that there are local elections coming up. I do not know what caused me to think that, but there was something in the air; let us leave it at that. I am not going to go through everyone's contribution, insightful and interesting as each of them was in its own way. I will just pick out a few highlights of the debate.

I will start with my hon. Friend the Member for Keighley and Ilkley (Robbie Moore). Rather in the theme that I developed earlier, he referred to Bradford council's terrible performance on potholes and said that it was leading to a loss of trust in Labour. In particular, he referenced the residents of Ilkley, who went to the

trouble of having a referendum on what they should do about the state of the roads. He talked about the council's proposal to impose speed humps and a 20 mph limit, despite 98.3% of residents voting against it. They were ignored by Labour.

Then we heard from the hon. Member for Burnley (Oliver Ryan), who is in his place. He also raised the condition of his local roads, but he went on to make an interesting point when he complained of what he described as the "crumbs of levelling up". I took advantage of the length of the debate to look up what the crumbs of levelling up were, and, in fact, £19.9 million was directed to Burnley through three town centre schemes. That was an achievement of the excellent former colleague of mine, Antony Higginbotham, who was an understated but amazingly effective Member of Parliament. I will follow the career of the current Member for Burnley closely to see whether he delivers even a fraction of that for the people of Burnley.

My hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk (John Lamont) showed off about the length of his roads, which certainly put mine to shame. He was another advocate for the JCB Pothole Pro, saying that 1,889 repairs had been undertaken in six months. But what he really exposed was the repeated failure of the SNP, which has cut funding north of the border, and the lack of interest shown in this debate from SNP Members in this place, as we can see from their empty Benches.

**Peter Swallow:** The shadow Minister is making a gallant effort to rattle through the fantastic contributions that we have heard tonight. Will he take this opportunity to congratulate Bracknell Forest council and its Labour administration for the £5 million investment over four years in pothole repairs?

**Jerome Mayhew:** I am happy to commend any council, of whatever colour, that gets on top of its potholes. I am about improving the quality of life for the residents of this United Kingdom. I make no bones about it: if Bracknell Forest council is improving the potholes in its neck of the woods, that is great, and the same is true of Conservative-led councils.

In his exposure of the SNP's failure, my hon. Friend the Member for Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk was joined by the hon. Members for Glasgow West (Patricia Ferguson) and for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur). They agreed that the SNP is failing the people of Scotland. I will take this opportunity, as I was asked by the hon. Member for Edinburgh South West, to highlight the need for wheelchair access on pavements. That is a very important consideration.

The hon. Member for Bournemouth East (Tom Hayes) made a speech that reinforced the reputation he has already earned in this House. We heard contributions from the hon. Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham), for Hexham (Joe Morris) and for Bury St Edmunds and Stowmarket (Peter Prinsley), and then we heard from the hon. Member for Bathgate and Linlithgow (Kirsteen Sullivan), who, as I should have mentioned earlier, also blamed the SNP for failing motorists. I take this opportunity to pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), who made an expert intervention, levering in a reference to Romford during a speech that was entirely about Scottish issues. I

learned an important lesson: he gained the maximum impact from the minimum amount of time in the Chamber—if only the rest of us had followed his example.

There were contributions from the hon. Members for Wolverhampton North East (Mrs Brackenridge) and for Stevenage (Kevin Bonavia), as well as the hon. Member for Doncaster East and the Isle of Axholme (Lee Pitcher), who referred to the power of mayors. That gives me an opportunity to make a shameless plug for the Conservative candidate for mayor of Doncaster, Nick Fletcher, who is a former colleague and very good friend of mine. He will be the best leader for Doncaster.

There were further contributions from the hon. Member for Cramlington and Killingworth (Emma Foody) and the hon. Member for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams)—we all miss Jonathan Gullis in this place—and, finally, the hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Alison Hume).

I opened this debate for the Opposition by talking about the need for predictable long-term funding, which is a key issue. I wish to draw a quote to the House's attention:

“British people are bored of seeing their politicians aimlessly pointing at potholes with no real plan to fix them”.

That quote is not from me, but from the Prime Minister. He was right, and he identified the problem, but he has gone on to make it worse. [*Interruption.*] Well, I would love to be corrected. I will give this Minister the opportunity to confirm yesterday's calculations from the Local Government Association, which said that the Government's actions, through their national insurance contribution tax grab from local authorities, will reduce their ability to fund roads and other important matters by £1.1 billion. Does she agree with the Local Government Association, which is of course an independent organisation? Secondly, will she confirm that the Government will increase vehicle excise duty to the tune of £1.7 billion over the next five years, and whether that dwarfs the funding that Labour has so far announced for road improvements?

It is not too late. The Government could admit that they were wrong to shorten the timeframe for investment in road infrastructure. They could today commit to a 10-year funding plan. They could take this opportunity to reassure local authorities about how their funding will be received, allowing them to increase the efficiency of their pothole repair programmes. They could take this opportunity to deliver the long-term funding that our road networks need. I look forward to the imminent announcement from the Minister.

9.25 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Lilian Greenwood):** It is clear that local roads maintenance is an issue that affects every one of us, and that our constituents care about deeply. I am grateful to all hon. Members who have spoken up on behalf of their constituents. I assure them that the Government get it and are determined to do something about it. There were too many contributions for me to mention them all, but my hon. Friend the Member for Dunstable and Leighton Buzzard (Alex Mayer) highlighted why it is important that local councils are required to publish reports on their plans. We want people to know if their local council is choosing not to spend the extra funding that we are providing on fixing their cratered, potholed, pimped roads. I assure her and other members of the

Transport Committee that work is already under way on a complete review of the guidance—the code of practice on well-managed highway infrastructure, to give it its full name.

I am really pleased that my hon. Friends the Members for Stoke-on-Trent North (David Williams) and for Stoke-on-Trent South (Dr Gardner) highlighted the innovation that has been adopted by Stoke-on-Trent's Labour council and its highways department—investing in AI to properly understand and monitor its road network and using the Pothole Pro to undertake long-lasting repairs. I am really sorry to hear that Conservative Staffordshire county council is not as responsive to the concerns of my hon. Friends' constituents who are calling for investment in road safety. As my hon. Friends the Members for Stafford (Leigh Ingham) and for Cannock Chase (Josh Newbury) rightly reminded us, Staffordshire residents can do something about that problem by voting Labour on 1 May, as can residents in Derbyshire, Northumberland, Hertfordshire, Lancashire and many other parts of the country.

I am grateful to Scottish colleagues for their contributions. It is disappointing to hear that the SNP Government are not acting to tackle the state of Scotland's roads, as this Government are in England and my Labour colleagues are in Wales. The Scottish people deserve better. My hon. Friend the Member for Edinburgh South West (Dr Arthur) raised the important issue of pavement parking, as did others, and he was right to do so, because it contributes to our broken pavements, which are so unsafe for many elderly and disabled people. The previous Government promised action for almost a decade and did nothing. We plan to respond to the 2020 consultation and set out our policy in this area.

When I tell people that I am the roads Minister, I can pretty much guarantee that the first question they will ask is, “What are you doing to fix my street?” It is not surprising that this issue is so often raised with us when we are out and about in our constituencies. The appalling state of our local roads and pavements is all too visible to us every single day. As we have heard time and again in this debate, it is unsafe for pedestrians, cyclists and bikers, it makes motorists' lives a misery and it is holding back economic growth.

The shadow Minister suggested that things were worse in 2006 than under his Government, but according to the RAC pothole index, drivers were nearly 40% more likely to have a pothole-related breakdown in 2024 than they were under the last Labour Government.

**Jerome Mayhew:** Will the Minister give way?

**Lilian Greenwood:** Not right now, as the hon. Gentleman has already had an opportunity to speak on this issue.

**Jerome Mayhew:** On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Can you give me some advice? Where the Minister has misquoted me and refuses to give way, what steps can I take to correct the record?

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** I thank the hon. Member for his point of order. I think that is a matter of debate, and it is now on the record.

**Lilian Greenwood:** Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

[Lilian Greenwood]

As the Secretary of State said earlier, this Government inherited crumbling roads with local highway authorities struggling to stay on top of an ever-increasing backlog of maintenance. Of course, there are many reasons for that, including the weather and the increasing volume and weight of traffic using our roads, but it is abundantly clear that the funding provided by the previous Government was simply not enough to allow local authorities to deal with the problem.

No one knows this better than Karen Shore, our Labour candidate in Runcorn and Helsby, who served for many years as the cabinet member for highways on her local council. As she and we remember, the Tories made promises for 14 years but, in reality, any funding uplifts were short-lived and never fully materialised. It is perhaps not surprising that the Conservative Benches have been so empty during this debate.

This Government are determined to ensure that things will be different, and we will do better.

**Peter Swallow:** Does the Minister know whether any Reform MPs have constituents with pothole issues? Of course, we would not know because they are not here.

**Lilian Greenwood:** My hon. Friend makes an important point, and people can see for themselves which party is on the side of motorists and road users.

We have provided an extra £500 million in the current financial year, on top of the previous Government's funding baseline and the Network North money for 2024-25. It is a huge increase. For most authorities, it means around 36% or 37% more than last year, and of course it is just the start.

As many hon. Members have observed today, a one-off uplift will not fix all the problems—it was never going to. However, through the spending review, we are determined to secure a long-term funding settlement to allow local highway authorities to plan ahead with confidence. Strangely, the only time the previous Government promised long-term funding was nine months before the general election, knowing full well that they had not put any cash aside to pay for it.

We are determined to ensure that the extra funding we are providing genuinely leads to extra spending by local authorities, rather than simply allowing them to put less of their own funding into highway maintenance. That is exactly why we are introducing the extra reporting requirements that the Secretary of State set out.

The information that councils publish in June will shine a spotlight on this issue in a way that has not happened before. It will allow local people to see for themselves what repairs and resurfacing their council is planning, and how this compares with other local authorities. It will help the Department and the public to understand matters such as which authorities are putting their own funding into the pot, and which are doing the most to prepare their networks for the wetter winters that we are already seeing.

**Robbie Moore:** I welcome the announcement on better transparency in how local government is spending money on potholes, but the challenge I have in the Bradford district is that, according to the answer to a freedom of

information request, only 4% of highway spending over six years was spent in the Keighley and Ilkley constituency. The vast majority of the highway spending has been spent within Bradford city centre. How will the Government ensure that, across a local authority area, there is fairness in the amount of highway spending allocated across the whole district, rather than just on city centre projects?

**Lilian Greenwood:** This Government believe in devolution. It is for local councils, elected by local people, to decide their own priorities.

I know we have spent a lot of time talking about potholes this evening, and despite all the attention they get and the headlines they generate, potholes are only a small part of what local highway authorities are dealing with. Local highway authorities have to look after complex networks of pavements, cycle lanes, bridges, tunnels, lighting columns, drainage channels, culverts, retaining walls and much else besides. Potholes are just the tip of a very large iceberg, but they are the thing that is most visible to road users, whether they are in a car, on a bike, or being jarred while sitting on a bus. Yes, we are asking local authorities to give us their best estimate of the number of potholes they have filled in recent years. We also want them to tell us what they are doing to shift their focus to long-term preventive maintenance, because avoiding potholes forming in the first place is, as the Public Accounts Committee recognised, generally much better value for money than temporarily patching the same pothole again and again once it has become a safety-critical problem.

Let me move on to street works and to what we are doing to respond to the complaints that our roads often seem to be dug up again and again by utility companies in an unco-ordinated way. It is the responsibility of the highway authority to co-ordinate any works taking place on its roads. The hon. Member for Stratford-on-Avon (Manuela Perteghella) rightly described the cost of failing to do so for local people and businesses. We are committed to ensuring that the proper policy framework is in place to enable authorities to co-ordinate and plan road and street works effectively. My hon. Friends the Members for Bracknell (Peter Swallow) and for Stafford will be pleased to hear that we have recently announced that we will be doing more to hold utilities to account for disruptive works. We will be doubling fixed penalty notices to increase the level of deterrent they provide and improve compliance. Charges will also be applied at weekends and on bank holidays to reduce congestion and disruption during those times.

Lane rental can help highway authorities to reduce the impact of works taking place on the busiest roads at the busiest times. Schemes allow authorities to charge utilities up to £2,500 per day for works on those roads, encouraging companies to work smarter. We know that many more councils are developing lane rental schemes, and we plan to update our guidance to help them develop those schemes. We have announced changes that mean that highway authorities will be required to spend at least 50% of surplus funds raised from lane rental on road maintenance.

To conclude, I repeat my thanks to all hon. Members who have contributed to what has been a rich and positive debate. We all want to see an improvement to the state of our local roads, pavements and other parts of our highways networks. I doubt that this will be the



last time we discuss potholes, but this Government are determined to give local authorities the tools and resources they need to get on top of the problem. We want local councils to be more transparent about what they are doing with taxpayers' money, and we want them to follow best practice. We want councils to learn from each other and benchmark each other's performance, so that the overall standard of delivery is driven up. Getting on top of the backlog in local highway maintenance is a high priority for this Government. We recognise that there are tough choices here for councils, but getting more potholes fixed was a manifesto commitment and one we are determined to deliver. We have hit the ground running but I know that there is a lot more still to do. I will say more in a few months' time about the longer term funding outlook for all local authorities. We look forward to working with councils over the months ahead to ensure that our funding uplift is making a real difference to all our constituents.

*Question put and agreed to.*

*Resolved,*

That this House has considered road maintenance.

## Business without Debate

### HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT COMMITTEE

*Ordered,*

That Andrew Lewin be a member of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee.—(*Mark Tami, on behalf of the Committee of Selection.*)

## East Midlands: Local Authorities and Economic Growth

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

9.39 pm

**Michael Payne** (Gedling) (Lab): Thank you for the opportunity to speak in this evening's debate, Madam Deputy Speaker. I thank my hon. Friend the Minister for being here to respond to the debate. As my constituency neighbour, I know he is as passionate about Nottingham, Nottinghamshire and the east midlands as I am. I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests regarding my unpaid membership of two local authorities.

Ahead of important local elections across the east midlands, I am grateful to have this opportunity to lay out the importance of councils to our economy. Growth is this Government's No. 1 priority. It will pay for our local services, our social security, from state pensions to universal credit, and our national defence. The Government are right to focus on growth. Under the last Government, we suffered a lost decade. Growth, income and opportunity were flat, and the east midlands suffered as a result. The gap between where we should have been on growth and where we are represents billions of pounds that could have been spent on essential public services.

The east midlands has been at the forefront of that decline, as a result of Conservative mismanagement. Our economy in the east midlands used to be strong, but deindustrialisation, a lack of investment and regional disparities in public spending have left us lagging behind other parts of the United Kingdom. The midlands was the industrial heartland of this nation. We have so much potential. We are the region that is most connected to the entire UK, with a distinctive mix of engineering, manufacturing, construction and sciences, but we now struggle to find the jobs, transport and opportunity that we had before. A lot of that comes from lack of investment, including a lack of investment in our local councils.

The east midlands receives the lowest level of spending per person across the United Kingdom. We receive the lowest level of capital spending and total spending. The facts speak for themselves: over the past 14 years, the east midlands was levelled down by the Conservative party. That inequity leaves our local government, our public services and our infrastructure investment billions of pounds short.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the hon. Member for securing this debate and he is right to highlight the issues, but the growth commission set up by the mayor is key to investment and the east midlands must make the most of the freeport it enjoys, which the Chancellor announced just a few weeks ago. That gives hope and vision for the future, and it is important to underline those possibilities. With great respect to the Conservatives, they promised us a freeport in Northern Ireland but they failed to deliver it. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that it would be great if the current Government would designate a freeport for Northern Ireland? That is essential. As is shown in the east midlands, Government support is an essential component for economic growth that sows into the wealth of the whole of this great United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland.

**Michael Payne:** The hon. Gentleman is right to pay testament to the Chancellor and the Labour Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, for unlocking nearly £1 billion in growth and investment from the freeport at East Midlands airport. He knows Northern Ireland politics far better than I do, but I think my hon. Friend on the Treasury Bench will have been listening closely to his powerful argument on behalf of his constituents. I wish him well with his campaign.

Under the previous Conservative Government, we heard a lot of talk about levelling up, but certain local areas were favoured over others, while the rest of us wondered when it would be our turn at the table. I welcome this Labour Government's change to that approach: less selective, no longer pitting area against area, and with a genuine desire to grow every part of the United Kingdom. Our Labour mayor, Claire Ward, has started working with the Government to find areas to grow the local economy. In the past year, she secured £200 million of transport investment that will grow our economy by allowing people to get about our region more easily; she secured £160 million for the east midlands investment zone, to attract new investment and create jobs; and she secured the brownfield housing fund, which will build 1,400 new homes. However, she is held back by the previous Government's piecemeal approach to devolution.

**Adam Thompson** (Erewash) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend for securing this important debate. I was recently in discussion with the managing director of a local small and medium-sized enterprise based on Merlin Way in Ilkeston in my constituency. He expressed great frustration at the barriers to growth that his firm experiences with planning, high building costs and uncertainty. Does my hon. Friend agree that devolution via empowered regional mayors represents the solution to those problems and a route to prosperity through growth?

**Michael Payne:** My hon. Friend is a good friend and a powerful advocate for his constituents. He is right that devolution in the east midlands needs to go further and faster, because areas such as Greater Manchester and the west midlands are much further ahead on their journey. Giving the East Midlands mayoral authority trailblazer status would see a turbocharged approach to skills, investment and growth in our area. Giving Mayor Claire Ward an integrated funding settlement across local growth, place, transport, skills, housing and more to work with local authorities such as mine in Gedling would really get our economy moving. That approach has been proven elsewhere.

We should not need to wait any longer in the east midlands for power over our own future, but mayors and combined authorities are only one part of local government across the east midlands. Borough, county and unitary councils often do the overlooked, often-ignored hard yards that provide growth in our communities. The Government recognise that to grow the economy, they must work hand in hand with business, but they also have to work hand in hand with local government. Public services are essential for social and economic security. Vital services such as education, housing, healthcare and transport contribute to the economic productivity of the region, and local authorities provide the best investment in local areas.

The Local Government Association found that councils in the east midlands contribute directly to 20% of local GDP through projects that promote business growth, job creation and regional investment. Local authorities are key enablers for the Government's promises around transport, housing, skills and growth. The Government are rightly reforming the planning system to allow council planners to do their job, but every single one of the 1.5 million houses built under this Government will have been approved by a council planner. Local authority workers will be instrumental in the roll-out of free breakfast clubs across schools. We have seen the impact on growth and economic confidence if simple things such as our bin collections go wrong.

Our local government workers keep our communities and this country ticking. They are all heroes. My plea to the Government is simple: do not ignore local government, local government finances or local government staff, and continue to invest in those areas.

**Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): I commend the hon. Member for what he is saying. The east midlands are a vital region of our country, but I caution him slightly about wanting a regional mayor to take power upwards. In Greater London, our experience is that power in local authorities is actually better. We want local money spent on local people's priorities. With a regional mayor, the hon. Gentleman may find that the money is not spent on the priorities he hopes for, but that it goes up to one bureaucracy and the priorities of local people are often ignored. That is our experience in the London borough of Havering.

**Michael Payne:** I thank the hon. Member for sharing his view with me, but I must say that it is not a view we share in the east midlands. We have a partnership approach with our Labour Mayor of the East Midlands, Claire Ward, working with brilliant local Labour councils. I would have a slight degree of sympathy for him if he had not been coming here for the last 14 years and voting for cuts to local councils in the east midlands, taking 60p out of every £1 of their budgets.

Ultimately, where we have good, soundly managed local authorities, with boundaries that local people understand and prefer, such as in my borough of Gedling, do we really want local authority staff to be focused on a multi-year reorganisation process, or do we want them to be getting on with the job and growing their local economies? The Government have rightly pointed out that certainty is essential to economic growth, so may I be so bold as to suggest that certainty in local government—whether it is a planner knowing that they have a job in the future or a local authority knowing that it will exist in two years' time—is also essential? My constituents have told me loud and clear that they do not want to see a change to their local council. It is important to me that my constituents' voices are heard and listened to in this Chamber, including in this debate. I share their pride in having a well-run local council in Gedling borough council, with low council tax, low levels of debt and decent, delivered public services, and I will argue for that to the hilt.

It would be remiss of me to speak in this debate without highlighting some local examples of how things can go terribly wrong, and how they affect my constituents. Conservative-controlled Nottinghamshire county council might be the worst council in the country for road repairs.

Over 25% of Nottinghamshire's minor roads required repairs last year, yet Nottinghamshire county council only got around to repairing 2.3% of them. Out of every 10 potholes, Conservatives in Nottinghamshire managed to fix less than one. If we need drivers for any future moon landing, the residents of Nottinghamshire may well volunteer to be first; with the number of craters that we have to dodge on our local roads just to get about our daily lives, everyone in Nottinghamshire is an expert in dodging potholes. Navigating the pothole-ridden roads of Nottinghamshire has gone beyond a joke. It is a daily misery for the people of Gedling, who I serve, but it also impacts our economy.

**Catherine Atkinson** (Derby North) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing this debate and on his powerful comments about the potholes in Nottinghamshire, but according to the RAC, the worst area for potholes is Conservative-run Derbyshire. Does he agree that it is about time that we got councils that will work with the Government to ensure we have the roads that people need—roads that are not full of potholes?

**Michael Payne:** I thank my hon. Friend for making that powerful argument on behalf of her Derby North constituents. Having a Conservative-run county council is something we have in common, and in less than a month's time, the residents of our respective constituencies will have a chance to turn the page on that failure and elect Labour councils that will turn a corner.

Potholes on roads impact our economy, because if a trader's vehicle hits a pothole and needs to be in the repair shop for a week, that is a week in which that trader is not doing business. Their business suffers, their family suffer, and our national economy suffers too. One of my constituents, a new mother, was crossing the road with her newborn daughter in a pram when that pram snagged on a pothole, causing the mother to trip over, and her newborn baby almost ended up in the middle of a busy road. She wrote to me that people slammed on their brakes and jumped out of their cars to check whether her baby had been badly hurt. The mother and the baby had to spend the afternoon at the hospital that day, when they should have been shopping and meeting friends on the local high street. Even without the use of a car, potholes are hurting growth and, at times, physically hurting our constituents. If a parent hits a pothole in their own vehicle and suffers hundreds of pounds of damage, that is money that is not being spent in our local shops or on our local high streets.

Despite record investment by this Labour Government in fixing potholes—£1.6 billion—the Conservatives on Nottinghamshire county council cannot get a grip, and not just on potholes. The county council is also failing to issue education, health and care plans on time, with nearly 1,000 requests for an EHC plan issued late between January and October. Compared with the previous year, 6% fewer annual reviews of EHC plans were conducted. The impact of Conservative-led Nottinghamshire county council failing to deliver on special educational needs and disabilities services, and in many ways going backwards, is that some children are not getting the education they need. That is forcing some parents in my constituency and across the east midlands to stay at home to school their children, rather than going to work. That hurts their livelihoods,

it hurts their opportunity to contribute to the economy, and as a result it hurts growth, too.

In contrast, Labour-run Gedling borough council is investing in our high streets by maintaining its popular two hours' free parking policy across all high street car parks. Labour-run Gedling created the beautiful 365-acre Gedling country park, a boost to the local economy. Gedling Labour saved and refurbished the cherished Bonington theatre, and is investing in CCTV across communities to keep people safe.

The Arnold market place is an example of how to do regeneration well, led by Gedling Labour. I was proud to be part of it on Gedling borough council, and it is things like that that will boost our economy. Beyond the high street, Gedling borough council has shown that investing in our parks and green spaces, our theatres and our leisure centres and keeping our cultural centres open invites local people into the area, which supports local businesses and growth. That is why I am so proud of the hard work being done by our Labour candidates in Gedling: Sarah O'Connor and Henry Wheeler in Arnold North, John Clarke and Liz Clunie in Arnold South, Jim Creamer and Errol Henry in Carlton West, Cate Carmichael in Carlton East and Dean Wilson in Calverton.

The contrast could not be clearer. Under the Nottinghamshire Conservatives, we can have yet more failure and poorly managed services, strangling our local economy and failing to fix our broken roads. Under Gedling Labour, we can have pride restored to our communities by hard-working councillors, growing the economy, bringing back community policing, supporting our high streets and fixing the potholes. That is the choice on offer next month at the local elections, and that is the choice that residents in Gedling can make.

9.56 pm

**Natalie Fleet** (Bolsover) (Lab): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Michael Payne) for securing this debate. I can assure him that potholes are as bad in Conservative-run Derbyshire as they are in Nottinghamshire.

Our area has been shut out of the conversation around economic growth for too long. I am excited to see the change with a Labour East Midlands Mayor and a Labour Government, who recently confirmed £15 million for Bolsover district council. That will see eight projects delivered to boost business and tourism across Pinxton, Shirebrook and Bolsover.

However, one area desperately needs investment so that we can unlock our economic potential: transport. Some 80% of residents in Bolsover live in transport-related social exclusion. That compares with 18% of residents across England. It is the second-highest figure in the whole country. From South Normanton to Barlborough, transport issues affect growth and have a huge impact on everyday life. People in Clowne are desperate for a bus to Chesterfield royal hospital. Just last week, Morton was cut off completely from public transport after its bus was first cancelled and then reinstated, but with Morton taken off the route. How can people get to work if there is no bus service to take them? How do parents get their little ones to childcare? Why would a business invest in areas where people cannot get to their employer? Who is to blame?

[*Natalie Fleet*]

Derbyshire county council must take responsibility. The Conservative-run council has a bus service improvement plan, but buses continue to fail residents across Bolsover. Bus services are reduced, villages are cut off and buses are either late or do not turn up at all. Rural communities rely on buses for growth, for work and for leisure. Conservative Derbyshire county council are letting us down. Bolsover deserves better and I urge anyone who agrees to make that known at the ballot box on 1 May.

**Several hon. Members** *rose*—

**Madam Deputy Speaker (Judith Cummins):** Before I call anybody else, may I just gently remind Members that they need to have asked permission to speak from the Member in charge, the Minister and me? I know that some Members have contacted the Speaker's Office, but may I ask those who have not contacted the Member in charge and the Minister to remain seated?

9.59 pm

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Alex Norris):** I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling (Michael Payne) for securing the debate, and for raising both the economic challenges and the opportunities faced by our communities in the east midlands. He and I have been friends for a long time and have talked about these issues a great deal, as members of our council in our day and, perhaps, over a pint in town from time to time, so it is a personal thrill for me to be able to talk about them here, on the occasion of what I believe is his first Adjournment debate. I agreed with much of what he said, and I shall now say a little about the potential and some of the investment that the Government are making to change the trends that he described.

The midlands has the largest regional economy outside London, and there is plenty for us to support—

10 pm

*Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).*

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

**Alex Norris:** Our colleagues will have heard a lot from us about the primacy of growth. It is the Government's firmest belief that economic growth should reach all communities and drive a real rise in living standards throughout the country, particularly in areas that have been left behind following years of declining investment. I agreed with my hon. Friend's analysis of the lack of investment in the east midlands in recent years, but I also agreed with his analysis of our potential: our resources and our heritage, particularly our industrial heritage, as well as the benefits that our location brings. We know that there is a lot to do and a lot to back in our part of the world.

Let me now talk about some of the actions that we are taking as a Government. I was delighted and proud when last month, as a cornerstone of our plan for change, we announced our new plan for neighbourhoods, a £1.5 billion programme to ignite renewal and fight deprivation, revitalising local communities. The east midlands is at the heart of that programme, with 10 areas

selected to receive a long-term investment of up to £20 million of funding and 20 years of support to help them to reach their full potential. Recipients include Boston, Skegness and Spalding in Lincolnshire, Chesterfield in Derbyshire and, in Nottinghamshire, Worksop, Newark-on-Trent, Mansfield, Ashfield, Clifton and indeed Carlton, in my hon. Friend's constituency. They will all be worthy beneficiaries of this fund to rebuild, restore and rejuvenate neglected infrastructure and fractured communities.

We also believe that driving growth that is sustainable, innovative and green is an anchoring part of our mission to be a clean energy superpower. We in the east midlands, with our heritage in the energy realm, are poised, and brilliantly placed, to lead the green-energy revolution. In January we announced a record £410 million investment to develop cutting-edge clean energy, which will include the creation of a world-leading STEP—spherical tokamak for energy production—prototype fusion energy plant in Nottinghamshire. That investment puts the UK at the forefront of fusion delivery and firmly on the path to net zero, and recognises the east midlands region as a pioneer of the clean energy of the future.

As for housing, in October we allocated nearly £17 million of the £68 million brownfield land release funding to the east midlands. A dozen schemes in Derby, Derbyshire, Nottingham and Nottinghamshire have been identified for grants to support the construction of nearly 1,500 homes in the region. These housing developments will revitalise underused sites in our cities and communities, and work is already beginning in some locations.

One housing announcement is particularly close to my heart: I am proud to say from this Dispatch Box, as a Nottingham MP and a Minister, that following the announcement on 31 March, we are delivering a significant milestone boost to the regeneration of Nottingham city centre through the acquisition by Homes England of the Broad Marsh site. That feels good. Many people in Nottingham will say that it is overdue by years if not decades, and I would not fight that contention, but it is a huge step forward for the city.

The project will create 1,000 homes and up to 20,000 square metres of retail, office and community space, and will generate about 2,000 full-time jobs, complementing the establishment of the Nottingham college city hub next door, the opening of the central library, the bus station, the new car parks, and the completion of the Green Heart public realm. As I have said, this has taken too long, but it will be a wonderful development for our community. My hon. Friend mentioned the importance of local leadership, and I commend the leadership of Councillors Neghat Khan and Ethan Radford in driving this development forward.

My hon. Friend also mentioned the important work of the East Midlands combined county authority, and I entirely agree with him about that. As a new Government, we have made a commitment: we fundamentally believe in a new settlement in this country, and at the heart of that is the transfer of money and power from this place, and from Whitehall, to town halls. At the forefront will be our devolved Administrations and combined authorities. The anchor investment fund of £9.5 million will support key projects to break down barriers to opportunity and significantly boost economic growth in our region. The funding will be allocated to projects that invest in homes, jobs, manufacturing, clean energy and greener spaces in order to create thriving local places.

A number of specific projects are set to benefit, including the south Derbyshire growth zone. We have provided a £1.5 million investment for a new junction on the A50 trunk road, which will unlock plans to build 4,500 homes and nearly 3.5 million square feet of commercial floor space. The Trent clean energy supercluster in Bassetlaw will receive £3 million to advance the transformation of three former coal-fired power stations along the Trent into a world-leading clean energy and innovation centre—again, leaning into our past and helping us build our future. Derby will receive £3.75 million to transform priority areas in the city, creating a vibrant, sustainable and accessible urban quarter.

**Catherine Atkinson:** Derby city council is working with partners and beginning to deliver transformative regeneration. Vaillant Live, a new 3,500-capacity performance venue, has just opened. A refurbished market hall is about to open, a new university business school is nearly finished, and the Government are delivering £20 million to our two theatres. Does the Minister agree that regenerating our city centres is key to unlocking economic growth across the region, and can he outline how this Government are supporting council leaders to generate growth in their local areas?

**Alex Norris:** My hon. Friend adds a very thoughtful and well-judged counterweight to my love letter to Nottingham city centre on behalf of Derby city centre. Perhaps she knew it was just too far beyond me to overcome our traditional rivalry, but she did so better than I could have done. Derby has some very exciting days ahead because of the investments, and because of the creativity of local leaders and the local community in enhancing that space. On the final part of her question, it is important that we get them the tools and resources to do so. I will talk a little about local government finance in a second, but we want to make sure that councils have the power—whether through high street rental auctions or similar—to shape their community.

**Adam Thompson:** The Minister talks about the dichotomy between Nottingham and Derby. As the Member of Parliament for Erewash, which sits at the halfway mark between the two, I felt obliged to come in at this point. I have seen at first hand the massive improvements that the Labour administration has made at Erewash borough council in the two short years since it took control, from encouraging solar farms and helping community events to liberalising the grants programmes for businesses and introducing £2 million of new investments to Erewash. Will the Minister join me in congratulating the fantastic Erewash Labour group and Erewash borough council more broadly?

**Alex Norris:** I do not think we could litigate in the remaining 22 minutes whether Long Eaton is in Nottingham or Derby. My hon. Friend is perhaps better qualified than me to say so—but when I go to see him, I see a lot of Forest shirts. He is right to highlight the work of his council. It has not had very long in power, but it has taken a very progressive and ambitious approach to shaping place, and I am always proud to work with James and colleagues.

I will mention a couple more investments. Infinity Park in Derby will receive £1.5 million for a research and development facility within EMCCA's investment zone

to support the advanced manufacturing and nuclear sectors. North East Derbyshire will receive £1 million to create southern access to the Avenue site, improving access for vehicles and pedestrians and enabling future development. These developments show the vital role of devolution in unlocking the potential of regeneration across regions by putting investment back into the hands of local people.

EMCCA has not even had its first year, but the impact has been monumental, which gives us the perfect opportunity to recognise and reflect on the outstanding leadership of Mayor Claire Ward. She has had less than a year in post, but she has made a great impact in all the areas I have talked about. Projects are being developed on brownfield sites because of her leadership, and the reality is that decisions made in the east midlands should be taken by the people of the east midlands. That is why we will continue to back Claire.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) mentioned freeports, and that is just another sign of our wanting to get the powers and resources to EMCCA so that Claire can show that leadership and we can all collectively drive forward the region. My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling made very important points about integrated settlements. He will not be surprised to hear that Mayor Claire makes exactly the same points to me and other Ministers on a daily basis, and the points are well made.

Turning to the important contribution from my hon. Friend the Member for Bolsover (Natalie Fleet), I think the insight about transport is best played through our combined authority. Again, it is incumbent on us at this Dispatch Box to deliver the right powers and resources to do so. There is of course the age-old problem—I say that, but it is actually quite a new one—of an east midlands mayoralty that does not quite cover all of the east midlands. I am delighted that the region is on the cusp of its second devolution success, with the upcoming election in less than a month of a Mayor for the Greater Lincolnshire combined county authority. That will bring £750 million of investment over 30 years, with an initial £20 million of capital funding to drive place-based economic regeneration. That is a great step forward and part of—something we are making good on in the English devolution White Paper—our commitment to a significant shift of power and resource from this place to local communities.

**Amanda Hack** (North West Leicestershire) (Lab): When we talk about devolution, we cannot forget Leicestershire, which is in a devolution desert. My constituency of North West Leicestershire borders both Nottinghamshire and Derbyshire. We have an international airport, but, significantly, we have no passenger rail. Does the Minister agree that actual and effective public transport is key to unlocking growth across the whole east midlands?

**Alex Norris:** I very much do agree. It should be a point of great pride—and, again, it is one of our huge assets—that we have the biggest pure freight airport in the country. Frankly, our geographical location means that all journeys involving the transport of goods tend to come through our region at some point, but with the airport they do so very directly. My hon. Friend raises, as my hon. Friend the Member for Gedling did, the fact that one of our challenges in the east midlands is

[Alex Norris]

linking up our opportunities by having the right access and the right public transport. I think that is absolutely crucial, and it must be the next dimension of our efforts.

Having had exactly the same conversation with Andy Reed—formerly of this parish—who is chair of the business board in Leicester and Leicestershire, I want to reassure my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Amanda Hack) of our commitment to making sure that, although there are devolution gaps at the moment, people in Leicestershire can also secure a bright and more sustainable future for their communities. We will work with them in whatever way we can.

My hon. Friend the Member for Gedling was exactly right in saying that we cannot forget the importance of our local councils. I am very proud to be a former member of my council. Having seen how hard it has been for local authorities in recent years, I am also very proud that, at the recent Budget, we started the journey of rebuilding local finances. I think we will start to see much better services as a result—and we have to—and people will feel that change.

Before I close, I want to cover my hon. Friend's point, which he said with a degree of boldness, about local government reorganisation. Having made the case strongly for the devolution of power, as I think I did, my hon. Friends will know that my belief is that decisions are better taken locally than in this place, and we will certainly shift power in that regard. I think we must have a degree of responsibility in that where we add tiers of government, we rationalise other tiers. I am thinking of parts of my constituency that have five tiers of government: they have an elected mayor; they have me and this place; they have a county council; they have a borough council; and they have a town council.

I do not think it is unreasonable that we should want to bring forward that reorganisation, but my hon. Friend made very significant points about the importance of getting the voices of local communities into the room, and the moment for that is now. In the next few months to November, when we expect proposals to be submitted, we have an opportunity to have those conversations. We are at the proposals stage, and we are going to make sure that communities have the right insight to make the right judgments about their future, and we will facilitate and be part of those conversations.

To conclude, the thing that frustrates me about my city and our region is that we have had four really difficult decades—there is no doubt about that—and we see that in the physical and societal scars all across the area and in the memories we have lived with. For too long, we have talked about—or even worse, been talked about—in the deficit: what is wrong with us; what we do not have. I am really pleased with the spirit of this debate. The spirit of debate about our region over the past year, and certainly in the new Parliament, is one that talks about the opportunities in the east midlands, which are huge and abundant. We as a Government will back them, but most importantly it will be local leaders, the elected mayor, council leaders, local Members of Parliament and the local community who shape, deliver and drive that. I think that is the right way around and I cannot wait to see what we, collectively, can achieve.

*Question put and agreed to.*

10.14 pm

*House adjourned.*

# Written Statements

Monday 7 April 2025

## BUSINESS AND TRADE

### Package Travel Regulations: Consultation

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business and Trade (Justin Madders):** The current Package Travel and Linked Travel Arrangements Regulations 2018 set a series of requirements for organisers of package holidays and linked travel arrangements and provide bespoke protections for travellers. As the way we book holidays evolves, it is important that these regulations remain fit for purpose—for both consumers and travel providers.

The Government's previous 12-week call for evidence (18 September to 13 December 2023) targeted stakeholder engagement, and externally commissioned consumer research highlighted a number of areas within the regulations that may benefit from revision and reform. This is why we are launching this consultation.

We propose to retain the principle behind the regulations—that consumers should be offered protection when purchasing package holidays. However, there is room to improve the framework to achieve economic growth and regulatory simplification. The proposed changes to the regulations aim to facilitate growth, increase consumer choice, and simplify the existing regulations, making them easier for business to comply with and for consumers to understand.

We intend to look at the following areas as part of the consultation:

*Reforming the domestic package market* to exempt domestic (UK) holidays that do not contain a booked travel element from the regulations. Other existing consumer protections will still apply.

*Reform Linked Travel Arrangements* by either removing or simplifying the definition of LTAs.

*Examine the case for setting a time limit for third parties to provide redress to organisers* where the third party has contributed to the event but has not already provided redress directly to the consumer. This is to respond to difficulties some package organisers have in exercising their right to recoup refund moneys from suppliers.

*Further technical changes* to make clearer what services are within the scope of the regulations, and to reform measures around insolvency protection.

#### Next steps

To support these objectives, the Department for Business and Trade has published a consultation on the Package Travel and Linked Travel Arrangements Regulations 2018, which is available on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk). The consultation will be open for 12 weeks. We encourage all interested stakeholders to respond. Subject to the outcome of this consultation, the Government will make a final decision on whether and how to change the regulations. I am placing a copy of the consultation in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS577]

## ENERGY SECURITY AND NET ZERO

### Rebel Energy: Supplier of Last Resort

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Energy Security and Net Zero (Miatta Fahnbulleh):** On 1 April, Rebel Energy announced that it planned to cease trading. Following this announcement, Ofgem confirmed that it would seek to appoint a supplier of last resort to protect Rebel Energy's customers, ensuring no disruption and continuity of service for all customers.

Following a competitive process to get the best deal possible for consumers, Ofgem has appointed British Gas as the SOLR for Rebel Energy customers. British Gas will take on supplying Rebel Energy's 84,000 domestic customers and 6,000 non-domestic customers.

Customers of Rebel Energy do not need to take any action for now. There will be no disruption in energy supply, which will continue as normal following the switch over to British Gas on 6 April 2025. Funds that current and former domestic customers of the supplier have paid into their accounts will be protected and transferred, where they are in credit. Domestic customers will also be protected by the energy price cap with their new supplier.

Customers of Rebel Energy will be contacted over the coming days about the changes. Once the SOLR process is complete, customers will be able to switch providers or sign up for a new fixed tariff in the usual way, although Ofgem advises them to wait until the SOLR process has been completed. Customers will not be charged exit fees if they decide to switch to another supplier.

Since its introduction, Ofgem's SOLR process has ensured supplier exits are orderly, costs are minimised and customers experience no disruption to their energy supply as they are transferred to a new supplier. Most recently, it was successfully used to protect approximately 1.8 million customers of the 28 domestic suppliers which exited the market between August 2021 and July 2022.

[HCWS581]

## HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

### Childhood Obesity

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ashley Dalton):** Today, I am updating the House on the implementation of the TV and online advertising restrictions for less healthy food or drink that are due to come into force UK-wide on 1 October 2025. I wish to re-confirm the Government's view on how the restrictions will apply to brand advertising, and give an update on how we are working with Ofcom and the Advertising Standards Authority, as the regulators, to ensure an effective and proportionate implementation of the restrictions.

This Government have set a bold ambition to raise the healthiest generation of children ever and take action to address the childhood obesity crisis. As part of this ambition, this Government made a manifesto

commitment to implement advertising restrictions for less healthy food and drink on TV and online. These are designed to reduce children's exposure to less healthy products, based on evidence that they contribute to childhood obesity, as well as incentivise businesses to reformulate their products and help create a healthier food environment for our children. Alongside this and in support of the Government's growth mission, we want to deliver proportionate regulation that balances the health benefits with the impact on businesses.

To achieve these objectives, the Communications Act 2003—as amended by the Health and Care Act 2022—sets out that the restrictions will apply to adverts for 'identifiable' less healthy food and drink products. 'Identifiable' means if persons in the UK could reasonably be expected to be able to identify an advert as being for a less healthy product.

While it is for a court to interpret the legislation, the Government's view remains that pure brand advertising is not in scope of this policy. This is because the legislation only restricts adverts that could reasonably be considered to be for identifiable less healthy products, and not adverts that could be reasonably understood to be advertising brands. This has been the consistent position of this Government and was clearly stated to Parliament during the passage of the Health and Care Bill. We therefore expect that businesses will still have opportunities to promote their brands, provided that their adverts do not identify a less healthy product. For example, brands could promote their non-product attributes, such as corporate social responsibility commitments or customer experience, or advertise the healthier products within their portfolios. We do not expect the perception of a corporate brand, or its association with less healthy products, to automatically bring an advert into scope of the restrictions. The Government do not intend to prevent brands from advertising, but instead intend to give businesses an incentive to innovate and create healthier products.

We understand that businesses need clarity in order to plan and secure future advertising campaigns. We also recognise the considerable investment they have already made in preparing for the restrictions coming into force. The Government have been clear that, while a robust regulatory framework is needed, we expect regulators to act in a way that supports economic growth, and helps industry to make future investment decisions and innovate with confidence.

The Government and the regulators share the same aims: to offer clarity and support to businesses as these restrictions are introduced. While it is of course for the regulators to act independently, we anticipate that they will want to act quickly and firmly on any obvious breaches of the law where a less healthy product is clearly identified in an advert. However, in other instances and where the circumstances make it appropriate, in the Government's view, the law provides considerable discretion in how the available enforcement tools can be used positively to support a business to move to compliance over a period of time.

The ASA will finalise its implementation guidance following consultation. We know that the ASA is already engaging with industry and will continue to do so following publication of the final guidance later in the spring.

By implementing the advertising restrictions and taking preventative action now, the Government are beginning to fix the foundations of good health, and are protecting the next generation, so that it can become the healthiest ever.

[HCWS579]

## HOME DEPARTMENT

### Southport Inquiry

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Yvette Cooper):** On 29 July 2024, a brutal attack took place at a children's dance club in Southport. Tragically, the perpetrator murdered three young girls, Elsie Dot Stancombe, Alice da Silva Aguiar and Bebe King, and injured 10 other people. My thoughts remain with their families as they come to terms with this devastating loss, as well as with those injured, and with all those who were present that day who survived the attack but live with the serious emotional consequences. Nothing will ever take away their trauma and loss, and we will ensure they receive the support and care they need in the years to come.

It is of vital importance that there is a clear understanding of how this terrible attack was able to happen, and the lessons learnt, so that we can take all necessary steps to minimise the risk of a future tragedy. That is why I announced in my statement to the House on 21 January that the Government would establish an independent public inquiry to do this.

Today I am formally announcing the establishment of an inquiry, under the Inquiries Act 2005. It will need to be able to swiftly receive evidence from the full range of relevant organisations. After careful consideration, including the representations made by some of the families and victims of the attack, I have decided to set the inquiry up on a statutory basis from the beginning. The formal date of establishment of the inquiry is today and the inquiry will begin its work immediately.

The inquiry will be chaired by the right hon. Sir Adrian Fulford. Sir Adrian will bring an impartial and extensive legal background to the inquiry, particularly on issues related to policing, the criminal justice system and multi-agency working. In accordance with the provision of section 3(1)(a) of the Inquiries Act 2005, Sir Adrian will sit alone as chair.

The inquiry will take place in two phases. The first phase will thoroughly investigate the circumstances surrounding the attack, as well as the events leading up to it—including the perpetrator's interactions with different public bodies. I am today publishing the terms of reference for this first phase, and I will place a copy in the Libraries of both Houses. A later, second phase will examine the wider issue of young people being drawn into extreme violence and will be informed by the first phase.

The direction of the inquiry's investigation will be a matter for the chair. The Government will provide support and ensure that the inquiry has the resources needed to fulfil its terms of reference.

I had the privilege of meeting some of the victims and families last month. I would like to put on record my thanks to them for taking the time to meet with me



and the safeguarding Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham Yardley (Jess Phillips), and sharing their deeply personal experiences. Their courage and strength in recounting these painful memories is greatly appreciated. I know Sir Adrian is planning to travel to meet with them soon, as his first priority.

I also had the opportunity to discuss the public inquiry and how it could be approached to support victims and their families, to ensure they get answers they need and to minimise further distress from this terrible attack. I am grateful for their willingness to engage so constructively in this important conversation. Their input will be crucial in shaping the inquiry's approach and ensuring the voices of all victims are heard during the process.

[HCWS580]

## WOMEN AND EQUALITIES

### Equality Law: Call for Evidence

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Malhotra):** I am pleased to announce the launch of a call for evidence on equality law, an important step in this Government's missions to break down barriers and make work pay. This call for evidence aims to gather comprehensive insights from expert stakeholders in order to shape future policy development and potential legislative reform.

Equality is a key factor in delivering long-term and sustainable growth across the UK economy. It is essential that individuals can achieve according to their talents,

irrespective of their background. This not only maximises individual opportunity but enables businesses to employ the best person for the job, leading to increased productivity, innovation, and economic resilience, driving up household incomes and putting more money in working people's pockets.

Our goal is to understand how we can better remove barriers to ambition and success for everyone, to improve the lives of working people and strengthen our country as part of our plan for change.

We are seeking evidence and views on the following areas:

- the prevalence of pay discrimination on the basis of race and disability;
- making the right to equal pay effective for ethnic minority and disabled people;
- measures to ensure that outsourcing of services can no longer be used by employers to avoid paying equal pay;
- improving the enforcement of equal pay rights by establishing an equal pay regulatory and enforcement unit, with the involvement of trade unions;
- improving pay transparency;
- strengthening protections against combined discrimination;
- ensuring the public sector equality duty is met by all parties exercising public functions;
- creating and maintaining workplaces and working conditions free from sexual harassment;
- commencing the socioeconomic duty.

We invite responses from anyone with evidence in these areas. Contributions will be crucial in shaping the steps we take towards achieving a fair, prosperous and equitable society for all. A copy of the call for evidence on equality law has been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and will be available on [www.gov.uk](http://www.gov.uk).

[HCWS578]



# Petition

Monday 7 April 2025

## OBSERVATIONS

### HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

#### Potential closure of Newton Ferrers Pharmacy

*The petition of residents of South West Devon,*

Declares that the potential closure of Newton Ferrers Pharmacy is causing significant concern for the local community; further declares that the pressures placed on local pharmacies include inadequate funding, rising operating costs, the difficulty in recruiting and retaining community pharmacists, and the recent rise in National Insurance rates for employers, which is expected to cost pharmacies an additional £50 million; further notes that these closures have led to increased pressure on GP surgeries and hospitals, as patients are forced to seek alternative care options; and acknowledges that the vital role that community pharmacies play in providing accessible, convenient, and cost-effective healthcare to local populations should be recognised in the renegotiated Community Pharmacy Contractual Framework.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to take immediate action to address the challenges facing community pharmacies, including assessing the adequacy of funding in this area, providing support to reduce operating costs, addressing the impact of national insurance rises, and improving workforce retention strategies in the lead-up to the renegotiation of the community pharmacy contractual framework.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Rebecca Smith, *Official Report*, 3 March 2025; Vol. 763, c. 124.]

[P003048]

*Observations from The Minister for Care (Stephen Kinnock):*

The Government recognise that pharmacies are an integral part of the fabric of our communities, as an easily accessible “front door” to the NHS, staffed by highly trained and skilled healthcare professionals. To support patient access, pharmacies in the areas where there are fewer pharmacies, including Newton Ferrers pharmacy, receive additional funding through the pharmacy access scheme.

The Government have recently announced a record uplift to funding for community pharmacy which will see funding increase to £3.073 billion from April 2025. This deal represents the largest uplift in funding of any part of the NHS in 2025-26, and over 19% across 2024-25 and 2025-26.

In addition, we will write off £193 million debt and have confirmed an additional £215 million to grow the Pharmacy First service. This shows the Government commitment to delivering stability for the future and rebuilding the sector.

This deal will support all community pharmacies, including those located in the heart of their communities, such as the pharmacy in Newton Ferrers, as well as those providing services at a distance to patients across the country.

Whilst recruitment and retention is a matter for these private businesses, we are supporting employers, by providing a number of fully funded national training opportunities for pharmacists and pharmacy technicians to help support the delivery of quality NHS services.

In terms of pipeline supply of pharmacy students, nationally the number of students is good, but we recognise that it is regionally variable, with the main schools of pharmacy clustered in London and the midlands, with fewer schools of pharmacy in the south-west, east of England and north-east. NHS England and the General Pharmaceutical Council have been working with education providers to increase training places, including the establishment of a new school of pharmacy at Plymouth University, which will improve training opportunities and build workforce resilience in the south-west.



## Written Correction

*Monday 7 April 2025*

### Other Correction

**MOHAMMAD YASIN**

#### **Universities: Funding and Employment**

*The following extract is from the Westminster Hall debate on Universities: Funding and Employment on 2 April 2025.*

**Mohammad Yasin:** Cardiff University also plans to cut 400 academic staff, which is almost 10% of the total, and to eliminate subjects like music, modern languages,

and nursing, despite ongoing NHS workforce shortages. The University of Edinburgh has a £140 million deficit forecast over 18 months, which outstrips the £30 million deficit recorded by Cardiff University.

[*Official Report*, 2 April 2025; Vol. 765, c. 150WH.]

*Written correction submitted by the hon. Member for Bedford (Mohammad Yasin):*

**Mohammad Yasin:** Cardiff University also plans to cut 400 academic staff, which is almost 10% of the total, and to eliminate subjects like music, modern languages, and nursing, despite ongoing NHS workforce shortages. The University of Edinburgh, **although not in deficit, is looking to make £140 million of savings over the next 18 months. Cardiff University has recorded a deficit of £30 million.**



# ORAL ANSWERS

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# PETITION

Monday 7 April 2025

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# WRITTEN CORRECTION

Monday 7 April 2025

	<i>Col. No.</i>		<i>Col. No.</i>
<b>OTHER CORRECTION</b> .....	3WC	<b>OTHER CORRECTION—continued</b>	
Mohammad Yasin .....	3WC	Universities: Funding and Employment .....	3WC

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**not later than  
Monday 14 April 2025**

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